Core Character Competencies and Positive Youth Development

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Resiliency Initiatives

Their Potential. Our Passion.

Modelling isn't one way of influencing people. It's the only way.

— Albert Einstein

For many children, the transition through early childhood towards the teenage years can be challenging with increased involvement in what have been called risk behaviours or problem behaviours, including school failure, truancy at school, substance abuse, violence and negative peer involvement. As a result, the tendency of community interventions has been a focus on trying to understand "what goes wrong" in so called troubled children and the development of problem-specific programs. But a risk-focused approach tends to neglect the fact that childhood years are a critical period of time where a child starts to develop the ability to navigate and negotiate life's challenges through exploring their unique talents, strengths, skills and interests. This emphasis on the positive and adaptive aspects of child and youth development is often referred to as "positive youth development". From this perspective, positive childhood health is not identified as the absence of risk or challenges. Rather, it is the presence of positive core social and emotional

character traits that enable a child to reach their full potential and successfully transition through the various developmental stages of the teenage years towards adulthood.

Don't worry that children never listen to you; worry that they are always watching you.
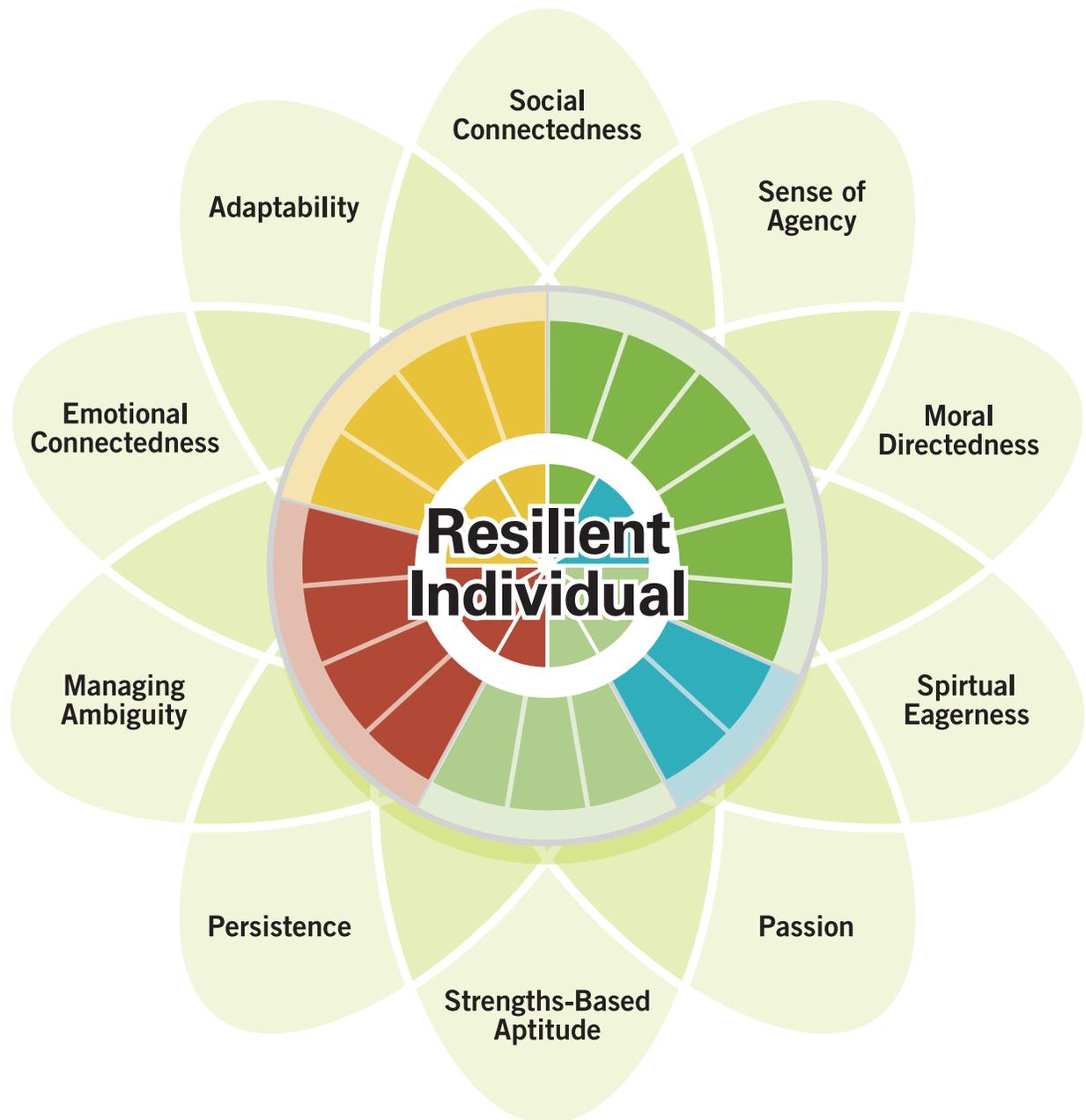
— Robert Fulghum

Although there is not a universally agreed-on list of key character traits of positive childhood development, the following have been forwarded by Resiliency Initiatives as proposed working framework. These core character competencies are the foundational attitudes, skills and knowledge that are directly related to social capacity, well-being and success:

1 Social Connectedness (Positive Social Skills) – Knows how to develop and maintain strong, supportive, and healthy relationships.

2 Managing Ambiguity (Positive Coping Skills) – An ability to cope with stressful situations or experiences in positive ways.

3 Adaptability (Positive Adaptability) – Has good problem solving skills and knows that making mistakes is part of life and a way to learn.

4 Sense of Agency (Positive Group Membership Skills) – Knows the importance of being responsible and committed in positive ways when part of a group or social situation (e.g. member of a school, family or group of friends, etc.).

5 Moral Directedness (Positive Values and Principles) – Knows that there are basic values of "right" and "wrong" and uses them in their decisions making and coping behaviour.

6 Strengths-Based Aptitude (Positive Self-Esteem) – Has a positive view of the future and a clear understanding of what their strengths are as well as how to use them in purposeful ways.

7 Emotional Connectedness (Positive Emotional Awareness) – Knows how to accurately identify, understand and express emotions in constructive ways.

8 Persistence (Positive Hardiness) – Has the steadfastness, courage and motivation to do the hard, strategic work of turning challenging or stressful situations into growth opportunities.

9 Passion (Positive Spark) – Have a clear sense and understanding of what motivates them to achieve and to accomplish their goals.

10 Spiritual Eagerness (Positive Spiritual Awareness) – Is engaged in a curious exploration of their spiritual sense of self and its implications for one's purpose and meaning in life.

Resilience & Core Character Competencies Framework

Social Connectedness

Adaptability

Sense of Agency

Emotional Connectedness

Moral Directedness

Managing Ambiguity

Resilient Individual

Spirtual Eagerness

Persistence

Passion

Strengths-Based Aptitude

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If character is a key aspect to healthy development in children and youth, one must ask what are the essential traits to focus on and how are they best developed. Research is clear that an individual develops positive character traits primarily based upon imitating the character qualities of the significant relational influences in their lives. It is about purposefully modeling the desired character traits by showing a child or youth what kind of person they should be, by being that kind of person yourself. Children do not develop their values and character by being told how to think and act, rather it is through their desire to be like and imitate the qualities of someone they value and respect. Providing knowledge and skill building opportunities is important, but a person's purposeful use of knowledge and skill acquisition is based on the quality of a supporting relationship, the meaningfulness of the interactions and activities that occur and the overall approach that is used. People talk about the many ways of instilling or fostering good character traits, but the most basic and powerful method of them all is by demonstrating those traits in yourself as a coach, mentor, parent, etc.

Essential traits of significant adults who nurture those core character competencies in children are:

- Are empathetic
- Communicate effectively and listen actively
- Understand the need to change "negative scripts"
- Care in ways that youth feel special and appreciated
- Accept youth for who they are and help them to set realistic expectations and goals
- Help youth experience success by identifying and reinforcing their "islands of competence"

- Help youth realize that mistakes are experiences from which to learn
- Support the development of responsibility, compassion and a social conscience by providing youth with opportunities to contribute
- Teach youth to solve problems and make decisions
- Set boundaries and expectations in ways that promotes self-discipline and self-worth

Character cannot be developed in ease and quiet. Only through experience of trial and suffering can the soul be strengthened, ambition inspired, and success achieved.

— Helen Keller