

Owen & Mzee



Cultivating Resiliency:

A Guide for Parents and School Personnel

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This guide was created by staff of the New York University Child Study Center to help parents and teachers better understand the importance of resiliency in children, and has been developed with tools that will help foster resilience. The accompanying book, *Owen and Mzee*, written by Isabella Hatkoff, Craig Hatkoff, and Paula Kahumbu is based on a true story of resiliency that resulted from the tsunami of December, 2004. Along with this guide, *Owen and Mzee* can be used to increase youths' knowledge of resiliency, help youth gain an understanding of the importance of resiliency, and facilitate the development of resiliency. We expect the entirety of this manual to be useful to the full spectrum of caregivers for children; however, some sections are denoted as particularly prepared for parents or school personnel.

Introduction to Resiliency

While observing children in any environment – at home, on the playground, or in the classroom – it is apparent that different children respond to the ups and downs of childhood in vastly different manners. Some children seem to quickly bounce back from major stressors with grace and ease, while others have a difficult time recovering from even the most minor negative events, such as a brief argument with a peer. The ability of some children to effectively recover from life stressors more quickly and fully than others has become an area of great exploration. This ability is called “resiliency” and is generally defined as “good adaptation in the context of high-risk exposure or significant threats to development.” In more manageable terms, resiliency can be defined as the ability to bounce back after a traumatic event. Resiliency implies two factors: 1) the person has experienced adversity and 2) that they have “bounced back” or recovered and are once again functioning in a manner that is similar to how they functioning prior to the trauma. It is important that their level of functioning be observed in a number of areas, including positive functioning in the social and academic realms, as well as positive behavioral and emotional functioning.

Several internal and external factors have been found to mediate the process of resilience. Children have been found to be more resilient if they are intelligent, competent, independent, have an easy temperament, and possess an internal locus of control. Further, possessing a high level of self-esteem has also been related to resiliency in children, while, low levels of self-esteem have been related to increased levels of daily stress and depression.

Resilience is also affected by levels of family, teacher, and peer social support. Youth who live in a family environment characterized by support, closeness, and low levels of conflict have been found to be protected from stressors and exposure to violence. In addition, feelings of closeness and support by caregivers are some of the most powerful predictors of children's adaptive response to exposure to extreme traumas, such as war or natural disasters. If, however, parents or caregivers are unable to provide support, responsive peers and teachers can offer social support and validate feelings of self-worth, competence, and personal control during stressful times.

When faced with a stressor, resilient children are proactive. They retreat to an area of safety, take needed time to recuperate, and cognitively come to terms with the event or

events that took place. In doing so, resilient individuals are able to recover from the traumatic event. In addition, this process often increases personal feelings of self-worth and of belonging to the greater community with whom they experienced the events and recovered.

Resiliency benefits children in many ways. First, resilient children are able to function at a higher level on a daily basis, as they more easily navigate the daily minor stressors that accompany school, family, and peer relations, such as having a difficult homework assignment, being required to complete family chores, or dealing with peer pressure. Further, resilient children are highly equipped to deal with major stressors on multiple levels. The resilient child will be able to handle the stressor more appropriately as it occurs, as well as be able to recover more quickly and completely once it has ended.

Owen and Mzee, Resiliency exemplified

As noted above, there are many characteristics that resilient children embody. A number of these traits present themselves in the story of Owen and Mzee. Below, themes of resilient traits from the story are noted, defined, and examples are given. In reading the book with children, it will be beneficial to talk about these themes and how they helped Owen and Mzee. By children learning about how others are resilient, they, themselves, are able to begin to lay groundwork for their own resiliency, or further develop their resilience. This list begins with “Response to Trauma,” as it is this type of experience that allows us to show resilience.

Response to Trauma

“Owen was scared and confused.” (Chapter 3)

People have many different responses to trauma, including emotional reactions (i.e. fear, shock, and guilt), cognitive reactions (i.e. confusion, concentration problems, and bad memories) and physical reactions (i.e. feeling tense, being easily startled, and pain).

Throughout his journey, Owen has a number of emotional reactions:

- Owen hides behind Mzee as a baby hippo does to his mother .
- Owen experiences fear when he and his family lose their home, are swept into the ocean, and struggle to make their way back to shore
- When the tsunami hits, Owen is scared and confused because he is separated from his family and fears that the villagers are trying to hurt him
- Owen’s rescue is emotionally traumatic and physically painful .
- After being rescued, Owen is scared, hungry, thirsty, and angry.
- Safe from sea, Owen does not understand what is going on and he is scared and mad.
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Acceptance of Diversity (also reference the following section on diversity)

“If kids saw Owen and Mzee – who couldn’t be more different – get along then maybe people should all get along.” (Epilogue)

It is important to recognize and appreciate differences in people, ideas, and situations. Children must learn that while they are unique and special individuals, they also have many things in common with others in the world. In this story, the multiple relationships between humans, Owen, and Mzee exemplify the importance of caring for others who may not be similar to ourselves.

- The villagers put themselves at risk to rescue a hippo, even though they have no connection to this animal
- Steven develops a special relationship with the animals at Haller Park. He even becomes friends with Mzee, an unfriendly tortoise who usually stays away from others
- Mzee, a grumpy, very old tortoise, accepts Owen, a young, scared and abandoned hippo, as a companion

Self-Care

“Owen needed someone to be with. And he would not give up.” (Epilogue)

Through Owen’s experiences, the reader is made aware of the importance of personal responsibility to physical and mental health, as well as the utility of making choices that protect our needs and promote our development.

- Even though the villagers try to rescue Owen, he is cautious of their actions and tries to protect himself by escaping from their nets
- After being stolen by pirates, Mzee escapes and saves his own life
- Owen is persistent in getting Mzee to accept and comfort him when he arrives at Haller Park

Connectedness

“He needed a place to live and he needed someone to take care of him.” (Chapter 7)

An important aspect of resiliency is that following a difficult experience it is vital to find, help, and feel connected to others. Through these relationships we gain needed support to heal and grow stronger. Illustrations of connectedness are prevalent throughout *Owen and Mzee*.

- Mzee returns the signs of affection after he becomes accustomed to Owen. Despite their obvious and innate differences, a strong and affectionate bond develops between the two animals
- Owen is connected to his family and community, experiences that probably influence his decision to become friends with Mzee
- The community offers support by rescuing Owen and keeping him safe
- On the first night in Haller Park, Owen snuggles up right beside Mzee to find comfort and safety
- Owen follows Mzee around wherever he goes

Protective Factors

“Mzee was showing human kindness.” (Epilogue)

It is important that parents, teachers, and other caregivers be protective factors in the lives of children. This will make it easier for children to cope with difficult experiences.

Protection can result from the experience of having positive relationships and support, as well as from individual characteristics, such as high self-esteem and healthy coping skills.

Luckily for Owen, following the trauma of losing his family he receives protection from multiple sources.

- Despite the storms, Owen’s family stuck together in the ocean
- The villagers are very scared for Owen and they risk their own lives to save him

- Many people, including Dr. Paula and Steven, show kindness and compassion in bringing Owen to Haller Park
- Both Owen and Mzee had early experiences of being taken care of by their families. These memories may help them cope during the trauma, as well as enable them to develop a relationship with one another

General Resiliency

“What happened next was something they never expected.” (Chapter 5)

In its entirety, *Owen and Mzee* is a story of great resilience. Owen is faced with a terrible tragedy and then takes appropriate steps and is successful in returning to pre-trauma levels of functioning.

- Eventually Mzee accepts Owen and grows very protective of him. Despite the difficult experiences they each had, Owen and Mzee never give up hope and grow stronger as a result.
- By rescuing Owen from the tsunami, the villagers demonstrate tremendous competence in the face of adversity.
- Even though hippos usually stay with their mothers for four years, baby Owen survives on his own after he was separated from his family.
- Mzee was also separated from his family and he also survived.
- Mzee hisses at Owen, but Owen does not give up.

Acceptance of Diversity

One of the ways to teach tolerance and promote diversity acceptance is to provide children with meaningful stories of others who have overcome oppression and trauma and adapted successfully. The friendship of Owen and Mzee is a wonderful example of such a story. Throughout Owen’s journey, we learn many things about tolerance and diversity, including: the importance of caring for one another and ourselves, the need to respect others’ differences, as well as their similarities, and the power of behavior in the absence of words. The very unlikely pairing of Mzee, a grumpy 130 year old tortoise, and Owen, a young, scared and abandoned hippo, is a wonderful example for children and adults of what can happen when we look past our differences and embrace our basic need to feel safe and connected.

Differences do exist and it is important that we recognize and accept the natural diversity of our world. In order to appreciate concepts of tolerance and diversity, however, it is important to understand how identity impacts these constructs. As children, we begin the process of comparing our own identity with that of other people. The differences we see in ourselves and in other people enable us to make sense of the world and determine our place within it. Everyone has the ability to define themselves through a series of characteristics which make them similar to some individuals, but also to differentiate them from others. As well as being individually different, people may also be culturally different. Hence, when we come across a person from another part of the world or from a different cultural background, we are likely to take note of how this person differs from us.

Unfortunately, a common result of trauma and tragedy is a tendency to become suspicious of both individual and cultural differences. When faced with a threatening or difficult experience, the instinct for protection and self-care often leads us to mistrust that with which we are unfamiliar and drives us to seek comfort in the safety of what we know. During times of trauma and stress, in particular, individuals become more insular and are likely to hold negative or contradictory feelings towards others who are different. Children who observe these subtle, and sometimes overt, messages may then feel authorized to align themselves with similar others, while excluding and stigmatizing diversity. While such behaviors are driven by the need for self-preservation, intolerance siphons valuable human capital resources and further increases the risk of violence in our communities.

Research suggests that traumatized people benefit greatly when they are members of a supportive community and have access to help from a greater circle of people. Encouraging and promoting a culture of individual and community responsibility facilitates the healing process for victims of trauma as they are able to benefit from multiple systems of recovery. Through formal and informal education, children must be taught the importance of treating all people with dignity and not passing judgment on many, based on the actions of a few. In addition to strengthening the provision of recovery resources, an enhanced sense of community is likely to evolve as a result.

Fostering Resiliency

Parents, teachers, and other caregivers for children can play an important role in the development of resiliency in children. Below is a suggested list of techniques to foster resiliency in children.

Help children develop relationships with a caring adult: A relationship with a caring adult is a powerful buffer against stressful life situations. Having a relationship with an adult who not only listens and is supportive, but spends time with them, offers guidance, discipline, and information helps children cope with even the most difficult situations. Caring adults can come in all shapes and sizes, and need not necessarily be a parent or caregiver.

Maintain routines and consistency: Setting consistent rules and routines, such as regular meal and bedtimes helps create a sense of stability and predictability. When a child knows the rules and what events to expect in their day, they are often less anxious and have a greater sense of security. Maintaining consistent routines after a traumatic event can help children re-establish a feeling of normalcy and be able to cope with other aspects of the trauma.

Help children find support, belonging, and role-models: Encourage children to join activities and clubs with positive role models and peers. Positive groups and activities can help children feel like they belong and can offer them increased social support. In addition, it can also offer children another outlet for coping with their feelings.

Help children find ways to relax and calm themselves: Having methods of calming one's self helps children cope and adjust better to stressful situations. For children, playing can naturally reduce stress. In addition, many children find exercise, listening to music, or taking a warm bath relaxing. Other techniques can include deep breathing or focusing on pleasant thoughts or images. Teens who don't have positive methods of reducing stress are much more likely to use destructive methods such as smoking, drinking, or using drugs. Mental health professionals can help both young children and teenagers find additional techniques of reducing their stress.

Help children understand the real likelihood of a tragedy occurring: After a tragedy, we are often left with the feeling that the event has a much higher likelihood of happening again than it really does. Children especially tend to personalize events and believe that the event will happen to them or someone they love. Helping children understand how unlikely an event (such as the tsunami that struck in December, 2004) will happen to them or their family decreases anxiety. Pointing out that while many people were hurt, many more people in the world were alright helps give children a sense of perspective.

Help children develop positive values: Parents can make known to children their beliefs about life and culture. In addition, parents can help children develop a personal set of values to guide their own behavior. Developing prosocial values can help children feel a greater sense of community and social support and engage in more positive coping behaviors.

Positive outlook for the future: Parents can help their children develop a positive outlook for the future by providing them with reassurance and encouragement that negative events are temporary, and that steps can be taken to make their future better. Parents can also share positive survival stories with their children, highlighting triumph over aversive circumstances. This will help children feel hopeful that bad situations can change.

Help children increase their self-esteem: Opportunities for children to be successful are very important in helping them deal with stressful situations. It increases children's belief in their own ability to cope and handle difficult situations and gives them a feeling of control. Adults can encourage children's success by breaking larger problems down into smaller, more manageable steps. Celebrating a child's successes, be they in school, at home, or somewhere else encourages children to recognize their own strengths.

Help children gain mastery and control of their environment: Adults can also allow children to participate in a democracy, by allowing them to choose between two acceptable or positive choices. Getting children involved in an age appropriate volunteer project also helps give them a sense of control over difficult situations. For example, many children held penny drives or lemonade stands to raise money for victims of the tsunami. Children can also write letters to those in need or participate in a toy drive. This gives children the feeling of being able to control the outcome of a difficult trauma or situation.

Take care of yourself: Taking care of you is especially important. Children need adults who are physically and emotionally available and supportive. If you make sure you are safe, as calm as possible, rested, and in good mental health then children can gain strength and comfort from your presence. In addition, getting support, assistance, and rest for yourself models for children how they should take care of themselves and also gives you the strength you need to take care of them.

Tips for Parents, Schools, and Teachers

Unfortunately, traumatic and tragic events are not a rare occurrence. Considering local, national, and international events, children are often faced with situations in which resiliency would be beneficial. Below are guidelines parents, schools, and teachers may want to follow when interacting with children following a traumatic event.

Guidelines for parents

Youth look to their parents and other caregivers for reassurance and guidance. Below is a list of actions that will likely help children who have been effected by a traumatic event.

- Children are affected by their caregivers' moods. It is important for a caregiver to stay calm so children will do the same.
- Express the emotions that you are feeling. This helps children to understand and be able to express their own emotions.
- Encourage children to talk about what they are feeling and what they have heard.
- Don't be afraid to talk about tragedy and related emotions. Find out what a child is thinking or feeling and help reassure them that you are there for them and that they will be protected.
- Be honest in your answers and use language children can understand. If it seems to a child that you are holding something back they will likely be reluctant to ask for help in the future.
- Reassure children that adults and other professionals are working very hard to protect them.
- Have multiple conversations with children. Attitudes change over time so it is important to have an open dialogue. Be patient with children as they try to figure out and express what they are feeling.
- Maintain as much routine as possible; keeping things familiar keeps things comfortable.
- Monitor a child's exposure to media events and limit access, if necessary.
- Don't be surprised if a child's mood fluctuates or if they become clingier. Respond by letting youngsters know that you are there for them physically and emotionally.
- Be aware that children's reactions will be different depending on their age.
 - *Young children* tend to bring their fears close to home – if they see something in the media happening far away they may worry that it could happen to them.
 - *School-aged children* can experience very specific fears and related avoidant behaviors. They, therefore, will greatly benefit from added support at home and school.

- *Adolescents* may feel a desire to take action to protect themselves or their family. They also may engage in more reckless behavior.

Guidelines for schools

Schools must sometimes face tragic situations within their walls or communities. This may include the death of a student or staff member, being witness to gang violence or warfare in the neighborhood, and natural or manmade disasters. It is important that schools be aware that there are steps that can be taken after the event that will enable students and faculty recover more quickly and with greater ease. Because children spend a large portion of their time in school and develop very close bonds with their teachers, as well as other school personnel, it is likely that children experiencing distress will express their feelings in the school setting. It is important that teachers be aware of the emotional reactions of their students and that they respond appropriately. It is particularly important that school personnel respond to students who show distress.

Those who are left behind after a traumatic event are faced with the sadness and anger of loss – loss of a community member, loss of safety, loss of possessions. They may feel guilty that they did not act in a manner to protect those around them. Reminders of the tragedy, such as walking through the school's hallways or entering the classroom where they were when the event took place may trigger memories and cause the child to feel like the event is happening again. Students, teachers, and others may experience feelings of numbness or may try to avoid feelings and thoughts related to the tragedy and may become fearful, have mood swings, and experience nightmares. They may also notice changes in their sleeping and eating patterns.

The school community plays an important part of helping survivors heal after a tragedy. The school crisis team and community leaders can educate students, teachers, and staff on the common reactions to a traumatic event, create opportunities for students and staff to talk to crisis counselors one on one, and hold memorial services and other culturally appropriate activities. Teachers and school staff may want to involve students in activities such as planting a tree, writing poems, or creating cards for those most affected. This enables students to have a sense of control over their lives and the event. In the classroom, it's important for teachers or other staff members to let students know that everyone reacts differently to traumatic events. Some may feel sad, angry, or scared. Others may not know how to deal with the situation and tell jokes to help themselves feel better. Educating students about the different reactions people may have can help them understand others' behavior and prevent a fight from breaking out when tension is high.

After activities concerning the tragedy have taken place, it is generally advisable for teachers to return to the regular classroom activities and structure as soon as possible. This helps give students a feeling of safety and security. It is a good idea not to introduce new material immediately, but spend a few days to a week reviewing old material since many students will be distracted.

Through the mass media, including television, print, and the internet, children have extensive access to current events. In doing so, children can be a party to the trauma and

tragedy that is experienced across the globe. This includes war, terrorism, natural disaster, as well as many other events that involve human trauma. Depending on age, developmental level, and disposition, children are likely to have different questions and reactions to occurrences. While some children may have little response, others may question if such an experience could happen to them or may feel sadness resulting from extensive human suffering or loss. Even though a traumatic event may occur far away, it is important that school personnel be sensitive to the effect that this may have on their students.

Helping distressed students in the classroom

If a distressed student is observed in your classroom, it is important to evaluate whether they require immediate intervention, or if it seems appropriate for the child to remain in your room and to receive support from you, as his/her teacher. If immediate attention is needed, i.e. the child is uncontrollably crying or significantly disturbing the classroom, direct the child to an appropriate school professional, such as a school psychologist, guidance counselor, or nurse. It is important to keep track of the child in distress. Do not send him/her off by him/herself; send another child to with him/her or have the child picked up from your classroom by an adult.

In most cases, however, you will likely keep the distressed child in you classroom. In these situations, use the following guidelines to care for the child:

- Find time to touch base with the child either during or after class. Depending on your lesson plan you may be able to sit down with the child while others are doing independent work.
- Do not avoid talking with the child. Doing so will likely only exacerbate the child's distress.
- Ask the child what is causing their reaction and ask open ended questions – let the child lead the discussion and express what he/she is feeling – do not direct the child with directive questions.
- Be sure to let the child know that you are taking his/her feelings seriously and that you care about what he/she is experiencing. This can be done both verbally and nonverbally.
- Let the child know that the emotions they are experiencing are understandable. It is normal for someone to respond in this way to such a catastrophic event.
- Let the student know if such events are highly unusual and if it is highly unlikely that they will happen again.
- Brainstorm with the child actions that he/she can take that may be helpful to the victims. This could include making a small monetary donation, sending a letter to a victim, volunteering time to an organization such as the Red Cross, or organizing a fundraising effort. Some of the child's distress is likely due to a feeling of loss of control. Figuring out a positive activity and then executing it will help the student regain some sense of control.
- If, after speaking with the student, it seems that addition services are needed make sure that the child connects with an appropriate school staff member.

- Later in the day or during the following day, check in with the child to see how he/she is faring. This will reinforce the child's feeling that you were listening and that adults care about his/her experience.
- Speak with other teachers about this student to determine if they saw the same reactions in the child. If the child was only distressed for 15 minutes during your class, support from a teacher may be adequate. If the child has been distressed in every class, a referral to the mental health team at the school is likely useful.

When to Get Help

Developing resilience is an important part of growing up. Children acquire varying abilities to manage difficult situations and, while some kids seem to not be slowed by traumatic events, others require more direct guidance and support. In certain situations, a child may have higher risk factors, which may impede recovery. It is expected that children who directly experience any type of trauma will experience some stress reactions. These responses include: 1) *emotional reactions* of shock, numbness, guilt, resentment, anger, and hopelessness; 2) *cognitive reactions* of disorientation, confusion, worry, indecisiveness, difficulty concentrating, and unwanted memories; 3) *physical reactions* of difficulty sleeping, tension, fatigue, easy startle response, increased heart rate, and change of appetite; and 4) *interpersonal reactions* at school/work/in friendships/family of conflict, isolation, being distant, over-controlling, and distrust.

In most cases, the aforementioned symptoms will be short-lived and can promote personal growth as children work through them, strengthen relationships, and in turn, develop resiliency. Some children, however, develop more severe stress symptoms which can lead to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, other anxiety disorders, or depression. In general, if a person is experiencing intense or frequent symptoms, if symptoms persist for long periods of time, or if symptoms interfere with daily activities, such as a deterioration in school functioning or interpersonal relationships, the individual may need to be evaluated by a mental health professional. The more severe symptoms include intrusive re-experiencing of the event, avoidance of stimuli associated with the event, increased arousal, frequent nightmares about the event, severe anxiety, and severe depression. If you suspect your child is having a difficult time managing the stress of a traumatic event it is important that appropriate steps are taken. A mental health professional will be able to evaluate the underlying causes and triggers of your child's symptoms and can provide appropriate services and teach your child specialized skills. Guidance and support can also be provided to parents and teachers. Although quite small in number, some children have such a difficult time dealing with traumatic events that they engage in self-harming behaviors (cutting, suicidal gestures, drug/alcohol use). Children who engage in these behaviors require immediate attention.

Appendix

Owen and Mzee – Lesson Plan

This lesson plan has been developed for use with the e-book, *Owen and Mzee*, and is intended for 5th grade students. It, however, may be modified for students in adjacent grades. It is estimated that this plan will cover two class periods, depending on class length.

The goals for this lesson plan include:

- Enabling students to define resilience
- Initiating understanding of the importance of resilience
- Laying groundwork for the development of resilience
- Encouragement of group efforts
- Encouragement of presentation in front of class
- Improvement of sense of community
- Nurturing creative pursuits

Other benefits may include:

- Learning about recent current events
- Increased knowledge of geography
- Increased knowledge of meteorological events

Class Content

1. Define resilience with class
 - a. Ask class for possible definitions
 - b. Write definition “The ability to bounce back from a difficult event”
 - c. Brainstorm with students what this means and why it is a good trait to have
2. Read *Owen and Mzee* as a class
 - a. Students should read aloud, alternating readers
3. Themes
 - a. Ask students for one or two examples of themes from the story, i.e., helping others, friendship, community
 - c. Note where these themes present themselves in story
 - b. Discuss if these themes relate to resiliency
4. Individual work
 - a. Students work individually to come up with two or more themes that the class did not identify
 - b. Students document themes and examples
5. Group work
 - a. Students work in small groups and discuss themes they discovered individually
 - b. Each group creates collective set of themes

6. Presentations

- a. Each group presents to the class their list of themes, as well as examples from the text

7. Creative activity

- a. Students chose which of the following activities they would like to engage in:
 - Write a continuation to the story - what happens next to Owen and Mzee?
 - Draw an illustration for the story
 - Write a poem about the story or an emotion that it evoked
- b. If time is available, students may share projects with class

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