Children come to school with intervening factors weighing heavily on their ability to become learners as they walk through the school door each morning. Reasons for the increased stressors are manifold. Families relocate and people pass away. These are the familiar losses and adjustments of children. Now, according to Kids Count, 35% of children under the age of 18 live in single-parent households. The stress and demands a one-parent household places on both the parent and the children are significant. They struggle together to manage roles, relationships, and issues that in other cases are shared between two parents. Nearly 25% of children are living in poverty. There are disrupted families: students with relatives who are incarcerated or are deployed in the armed forces or a parent who is working multiple jobs to keep a family afloat. There are students who are questioning their sexual orientation or gender identity. Violence and fear are part of neighborhoods and families. Shootings happen in schools, movie theatres, shopping malls, army bases, and clinics. A spotlight is finally being turned to police officers’ shooting young black men. The world holds crises and terrorism.

With these factors all rising, it is not possible for a classroom to have no students affected by one or more of these factors. Aside from the troubles in the world, and the troubles in the home, in the course of a day, students can have a run-in with another student or a teacher, or a lunch monitor, or a bus driver. A student can be disappointed about a grade in one class and be expected to move right along to learn in another. Even adults need adjustment periods. There is a level of emotional flexibility needed in order to maneuver through and around the stressors we are confronted with daily.

Teaching children to make sense of and handle their emotions and go on to learn even though there are stressors/distractors in their lives is a herculean task. Yet it is one we have chosen as our work. Too often, adults, with the best of intentions, ask children to attend to learning tasks and expect them to forget about, or move beyond or around what is troubling them. Denying that there is a problem is the first step away from reinforcing an emotionally safe environment for a child. The response to a student who has been called a name used to be "sticks and stones can break my bones, but names will never hurt me." We learned long ago that name-calling does hurt. There are laws to reinforce that truth. But name-calling is oft ignored or expected to be brushed off. It does not work.

Adults Deal With The Same Issues

While we focus these conversations on children, adults in our systems are dealing with the same issues. Adults in schools experience divorce, the loss of parents or siblings or friends. They have medical issues, financial crises, and emotional challenges that are personal. There are professional stressors for them just like the demands for learning we place on children. Teachers are leaving the field. The standards or assessments are causing educators to feel pressured to unwillingly focus on test preparation. We are a human business, we choose to lead workplaces purposefully concerned with the growth and development and learning of children. Because of this high calling, our system itself needs to become resilient and our people, too, one by one. Spirits get broken and need to heal for the work to prosper.

The American Psychological Association describes resilience as:

1. Make connections
2. Help children help others
3. Maintain a daily routine
4. Take a break
5. Teach self-care
6. Move toward your goals
7. Nurture a positive self-view
8. Keep things in perspective and maintain a hopeful outlook

http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/leadership_360/2015/12/leaders_take_note_resilience_is_not_just_for_kids.html
9. Look for opportunities for self-discovery
10. Accept that change is part of living

A Call to Leaders

But, this is a call to the leaders. We cannot expect children to learn any better than they are now unless the school culture is one of respectful acknowledgement of the social and emotional well-being of others, adults and children alike.

An excerpt from "Becoming Conscious: The Science of Mindfulness" featuring Steve Paulson, Richard Davidson, Jon Kabat-Zinn, and Amishi Jha offers insight into how stress affects the brain. As you watch, consider what we are asking students to do throughout their day, every day. Without teaching the skills that help children move through their emotions, we are truly asking them to do the impossible, each and every day.

Can Mindfulness Increase Our Resilience to Stress...

Mindfulness is one route that is scientifically successful in developing the ability of people, children and adults, to work through their emotions. Our point is not to recommend this as the answer, but to raise the questions:

"Does our organization

- reflect shared values that acknowledge the feelings of others
- have methods or routines that encourage empathy and recovery
- allow for the time and space needed for development and practice of resilience?"

We cannot allow schools to be places where the rush to the finish line negates life along the way. And, we cannot afford to make the mistake of thinking only some children or only some adults are stressed. Demands on individual lives and families are and will continue to change daily. Schools must include changes in the way each member of the organization, children and adults, are treated and taught. Two things are certain in our lives and our systems: Change will continue and adversities will present themselves. We must lead in a manner that helps all to thrive in this environment. This calls for emotionally and spiritually healthy leaders who, themselves, are resilient and who can create and lead healthy, resilient educational systems.

Resources:

On single-parent households: KidsCount.org

On resilience: APA

Connect with Ann and Jill on Twitter or by Email.

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