

## Resiliency Building Program for Children

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“Challenges,” which just celebrated its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary, is a confidence building summer program for children entering second through seventh grade. The three-week program offers an enrichment experience for its participants, while teaching them a variety of coping strategies. The curriculum consists of a carefully planned sequence of challenging but fun activities that focuses on personal life skills such as goal-setting, resiliency, positive self-talk and risk taking. It was designed for children who face difficult learning challenges such as a learning disability or ADHD, as well as children who have medical problems such as diabetes or cerebral palsy. As Challenges takes place in the summer, it also provides an attitudinal “jump start” for the beginning of the school year.

The program is designed to help children gain a sense of personal accomplishment. Challenging activities are designed to foster successes, and participants earn badges to signify accomplishments. Some of these badges are earned by reaching goals set by the children themselves. Others represent achievements in activities designed by the staff. Because the staff-child ratio is favorable (1 to 3), much individual work can be done with each child.

Activities such as arts and crafts, presidential fitness challenges, or participating in a talent show allow work with individual children as they face situations that may be difficult, yet rewarding. Cooperative experiences, such as working on a skit or a lip-sync performance, allow the staff to work with children on social skills. The program encourages the following social competencies: standing up for oneself, providing positive leadership, working together

on a project, and learning how to negotiate with other children. Activities are engineered so that children can practice and receive guidance in developing friendship skills.

To be successful in meeting a challenge, a person must reach inside and find the resources to deal with the situation at hand. It could be that we reassure ourselves or say something encouraging, pay more attention to the situation, try a new approach, or set a more realistic goal. The very nature of a challenge brings out uncomfortable feelings such as “butterflies,” confusion, or frustration which have to be managed. Learning how to handle these discomforts is our own personal responsibility, but the inner strengths that help us manage ourselves take years of experience and much guidance to develop. “Growing up,” in part, means learning how to adapt and be resourceful in the face of these personal discomforts. Adding to this complexity is that each new developmental stage in life brings new challenges one must face. While some children seem to have their coping skills in place at an early age, most require loving and firm guidance, not to mention patience, to develop reliable strategies.

The curriculum of the Challenges Summer Program is designed to bring an awareness of how a person feels when facing something difficult, and to teach rudimentary strategies for handling a challenging experience in positive ways. In any day of the program, children face physical, social, or academic challenges designed to be fun and allow them to learn about and practice their resourcefulness and resiliency. These are life skills, i.e. competencies that one uses over a course of a lifetime. The program is based on the assumption that these internal strengths can be fostered in childhood.

By definition, a challenge is something that does not come easily. We face small or large challenges each day. Reactions to challenges often proceed through three stages. The first is anticipating whether or not we expect ease or difficulty, success or failure. For example, before giving a speech, most of us are aware of a mixture of excitement and dread. Before writing a paper, a student may feel overwhelmed or confused. Often, we become aware of certain body sensations that go along with this first stage, such as our hearts beating more quickly or our hands sweating. There is usually a private dialogue going

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on within us, sometimes psyching us up, but sometimes psyching us out. If this dialogue is overly negative, we may retreat from the challenge. Once into the challenge, most people feel frustrated, to a greater or lesser extent, because the goal is not easily obtainable. It is not unusual in this second stage to get annoyed or to feel like giving up. If something is challenging, then some discomfort is inevitable. Children who have learned to “keep their cool” are more likely to work through uncomfortable feelings and meet the challenge. Teachers and parents encourage children to “hang in there” and not give up too early at this stage. The third stage involves handling feelings once the challenge is over. Despite our efforts, results don’t always turn out how we would like. We must learn how to keep perspective on negative outcomes and deal with disappointment. These lessons are called “The School of Hard Knocks,” and everyone takes a few courses in that school.

The internal adaptive process of facing challenges relies on the management of these uncomfortable feelings. Yet these feelings are invisible to the child. The “challenge” is within, but the emotional dynamics often are below the threshold of awareness. These reactions often generate a sense of urgency to quiet the discomfort inside and sometimes feel like an emotional 911. Our program focuses attention on this dynamic battle and helps children find positive strategies for coping. Self-esteem is at the heart of this effort. Effective coping contributes to positive self-esteem, and positive self-esteem provides us with confidence to cope. While the Challenges staff recognize that a three-week summer program may have limited impact on a child’s overall self-image, we attempt to give children a taste of mastery and a sense of effectiveness, much like trying to establish seedlings in a hot house. Challenges attempts to stimulate children’s awareness of their own resourcefulness. Parents are very involved in Challenges to help foster these budding competencies at home and at school.

## **THE CHALLENGES RESILIENCY SEQUENCE Tuning In**

Coping skills are taught using a curriculum we call the Challenges Resiliency Sequence. The two main skills emphasized are Tuning In and Reaching In. The first step in this hypothetical sequence is becoming aware of feelings that are evoked by a challenging situation. The task may be compared to the job of an air traffic controller who sees a blip entering the radar screen. That perception activates not only an awareness of the need to pay attention during an incoming flight, but also the responsibility to watch over it to assure its safety. In the same way, when we receive

a “feeling blip” from a challenging situation, it is our responsibility to watch over it and manage its course. Awareness of being in a challenging situation, and the feelings that go along with it, are essential steps in making responsible behavioral choices or in helping oneself. Some children don’t feel they made a “choice” at all because they were not aware of the challenging situation or their feelings in the first place. Their feelings may get acted out without the help of cognitive processing, or they end up feeling helpless in the situation.

**Recognition of Feelings.** Challenging situations elicit challenging feelings, like anger, frustration, confusion, butterflies, or disappointment. These and many other feelings are considered “challenging” because they are tough to manage. Our term for these kinds of feelings is “tough stuff.” If experienced individually, each would be enough to handle, but often they come in clusters, which raise the emotional ante.

As we adapt to a surge of discomfort, some form of cognitive organization is often imposed on it. That means that we begin to know the feeling rather than just experiencing it. We begin shifting from our more primitive, feeling-centered brain centers to higher levels of cortical organization, where language, forethought, learned behavior, and our “executive” skills take over. We begin to apply our intelligence and our conscience to the feeling challenge. By giving it a label or putting words to the feeling, we enhance our adaptive potential. We begin to tie our feelings to the situation in which we find ourselves, further integrating thought with feelings. Having given our feelings a label, and tied those feelings to a situation, we come close to the gathering sense of “I know what’s going on here,” which helps us in handling the situation more adaptively.

**The Signal.** The third component in the Challenge Resiliency Sequence rests on learning to use uncomfortable feelings as “signals” to cope. Much like how a fire drill signals students and teachers to stop what they are doing and go through a planned sequence of behaviors, so do we get “feeling signals” which can cue us to cope. The analogy helps us understand that we can’t ignore the signal and that having a practiced “plan of action” helps us adapt successfully. In the same way, the curriculum gives children a “plan of action” of how to respond to a challenge signal and plenty of opportunities to practice it. It also emphasizes that we need to pay attention to signals and adapt to them in a responsible manner.

Uncomfortable feeling signals often create a sense of urgency, which impel children to “put the fire out – immediately!” They may be experienced as an “emotional 911,” a situation that demands immediate

relief. Some children who are angry or frustrated “act out” the feelings, meaning that the urgency for relief impels a quick, often maladaptive response. Others, whose nervousness is too great, may be unwilling to take a positive risk. Adaptive efforts are short circuited and the journey from our lower, “emotion centered,” brain areas through circuitry that would lead to better or more thoughtful solutions never gets made. At the heart of resiliency is the ability to “hold on” to these impulses and urges long enough to bring intelligence and resourcefulness to bear on the problem. Most children who have social or behavioral problems in school are having a hard time holding on and adaptively responding. They either “act out” the discomfort or they retreat.

Signals most often come as body sensations or negative self-talk. Everyone has experienced some form of body sensations such as sweaty hands, increased heartbeat, butterflies, or clenched muscles in response to a challenging situation. These physical sensations are part of our biological inheritance in “flight or fight” situations. If we are tuned in, we can provide some cognitive organization to the body’s signals and are in a better position to respond resourcefully. Negative self-talk may also serve as a signal that we need to mobilize our adaptive efforts. Hearing oneself saying things like “I’ll be the only one who can’t get this,” “Everyone will laugh at me,” or “I’ll never do it!” are all valuable indicators that all is not well within, and signal the need to take self-corrective measures. Resilient children may have similar negative thoughts, but they have learned how to regain their emotional balance.

### Reaching In

From the moment a child tunes into any challenging feelings, the coping process has begun. Providing cognitive organization to that awareness, using body sensations as signals to mobilize adaptive efforts, and holding on to that impulse for relief set the stage for resourcefulness. “Tuning In” is followed by “Reaching In” in the Challenges Resiliency Sequence. This step implies that children reach within themselves to find ways to handle a challenging situation. Learning to apply one’s resources to solve problems is at the heart of becoming more confident and independent. Also emphasized in the curriculum is that “my feelings are mine to manage.” A challenging situation may have caused me to feel angry, but how I manage my anger is my own personal responsibility. Correspondingly, a challenging situation may evoke my anxiety, but how I handle those feelings is my responsibility. The curriculum is designed to lay more foundation upon which to build the twin pillars of independence and responsibility.

How one copes with a particular situation depends on an individual’s personal preference and style. If a child is angry about being kicked during a soccer game at recess, he may talk to the teacher, decide not to play soccer at recess for a while, talk to the person who kicked him, let off steam with a friend, or just shrug it off. The curriculum doesn’t specify a best way to handle challenging situations. On the other hand, it does provide a cognitive plan which helps children think through how to handle the problem. It also provides the teacher and student with the foundation for problem solving which encourages children’s adaptive efforts. There are three main steps in the cognitive process: Collect, Reflect, and Select. Again, there is a sequential relationship between these steps.

**Collect.** Challenging situations elicit challenging feelings. These feelings create an urgency to find relief. To respond adaptively, we need to hold on to these feelings long enough to find adaptive solutions. In the first phase of “Reaching In,” the goal is to collect ourselves, i.e., to quiet the urgency for relief to allow for problem solving. One of the Challenges activities introduces the concept of “Freeze!,” which means freeze the action, setting the stage for deciding what to do.

The curriculum skills of self-talk and learning how to take a calming breath help to slow down our responses and reflect on what to do. There are different kinds of self-talk. We emphasize the use of *calming self-talk* and *encouraging self-talk*. When using calming self-talk, a child might say something like, “Relax. This isn’t a big deal.” Encouraging self-talk helps when a child is frustrated and needs a bit of encouragement. “Hang in there” or “You’ll get it; don’t give up,” are examples. A calming breath is easy for children to learn and sometimes can help them calm down enough to think more clearly. The goal is to quiet the body and engage the mind. Combining a calming breath with either calming self-talk or encouraging self-talk often helps a person hold on long enough to bring one’s resources to the problem.

**Reflect.** Challenging situations ebb and flow during the day. Coping is often on the go. Most children don’t sit around and contemplate how to handle situations for a long time. When we talk about the second step of “Reaching In” as “Reflecting,” the picture of Rodin’s “The Thinker” is not what comes to mind. Most coping happens in moments, and the program’s goal is for children to generate some alternative responses.

Reflecting is an integrated act in the sense that we use our resources to deal with the problem at hand. We can bring forth what we have learned from the past (“The last time something like this happened, I handled it by doing so and so”). We can anticipate the

future (“if I do X, then Y may happen”). We can ask ourselves, “What would my parents want me to do?” We can talk over the problem with a friend. We can generate different alternatives and evaluate each with regard to potential consequences. The curriculum program does not specify a thought sequence, but rather the importance of using thought or reflection as a problem-solving tool.

**Select.** Selecting implies choosing. This is where the rubber meets the road, where responsibility means “response ability.” We are accountable for the choices we make. A particular situation may make us feel angry, but we are responsible for how we manage the anger. Another situation may elicit worry or anxiety, but we all must learn how to cope and comfort ourselves. We want children to take age-appropriate responsibility for their inner challenges and behavioral choices, and conversely avoid blaming, externalizing, and feeling like a helpless victim. Making choices is the final step in an internal, self-regulating sequence that involves becoming aware of being in a challenging situation, using body cues as signals to cope, and reaching in by using the resources such as “collect, reflect, and select.” Learning to be responsible involves recognizing that the responsibility for handling challenging situations and the feelings associated with them is our own. It also means we are held accountable for the choices that we make. The goal is to learn to hold on to the impulses and urges when challenging feelings emerge so that we can apply our resources to the situation at hand.

The responsibility for handling challenging situations, and the feelings associated with them, is our own. But developing the awareness of personal responsibility and utilizing internal strengths to manage challenges is a life-long, developmental process. To understand what coping means, remember some of the terms and skills that we have taught, and then applying them at the right time is no easy task. Our program does not presume that we can install coping “software” inside the minds of our campers. But we can lay a few bricks to help establish a stronger foundation for handling life’s challenges. We can also foster a feeling of accomplishment by the way activities are engineered. When children leave the program, we want them to have a vocabulary for coping, an awareness of resources they have within to cope, and the “can do” feeling that comes from accomplishment.

The reason parents are so involved in Challenges is that we know that the “seedling” skills of Challenges Resiliency must be cultivated at home and at school. The “cross-fertilization” of Challenges tools to everyday life can only be nurtured in everyday tasks such as resolving a difference with a sibling, calling a friend to spend the night, tackling an impossible-looking math problem, or reciting a poem in class. We may operate in a “hothouse” to plant certain seeds and stimulate an awareness of resiliency, but parents are on the front line to remind, reinforce, prompt, and encourage the application of these strategies in children’s daily challenges.