

# EVERYDAY STRONG SCHOOL RESILIENCE

A new approach to anxiety and depression



Tools for parents, teachers, neighbors and  
other trusted adults



United Way of Utah County



## YOU CAN START BUILDING EVERYDAY RESILIENCE BY FOSTERING SAFETY, CONNECTION AND CONFIDENCE IN THE CHILDREN AROUND YOU.

We're on a mission to build resilient kids and strong communities.

United Way has collaborated with a group of experts on anxiety, depression and psychological well-being to develop these activities for you.

The EveryDay Strong panel of experts includes medical professionals, educators, social workers, and mental health specialists.

Find more information on our panel of experts at [www.EveryDayStrong.org](http://www.EveryDayStrong.org).

Try these everyday activities

This guide outlines easy and fun activities, developed by the United Way EveryDay Strong panel of experts, that you can do with the child in your classroom to build their resilience.

### Featured Experts



Matt Swenson, MD,  
Child Psychiatrist



Catherine Johnson,  
Licensed Clinical  
Social Worker



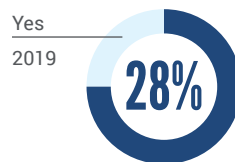
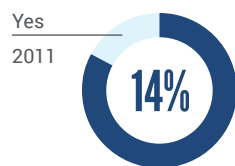
Kyle Reyes, PhD,  
Vice President of  
Student Affairs, Utah  
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## MORE KIDS ARE EXPERIENCING DEPRESSION AND ANXIETY THAN EVER BEFORE.

Every year, kids in Utah schools are asked:

During the past 12 months, did you ever feel so sad or hopeless almost every day for two weeks or more in a row that you stopped doing some usual activities?\*

More kids than ever before are answering yes.



You don't have to be an expert to build resilient kids.

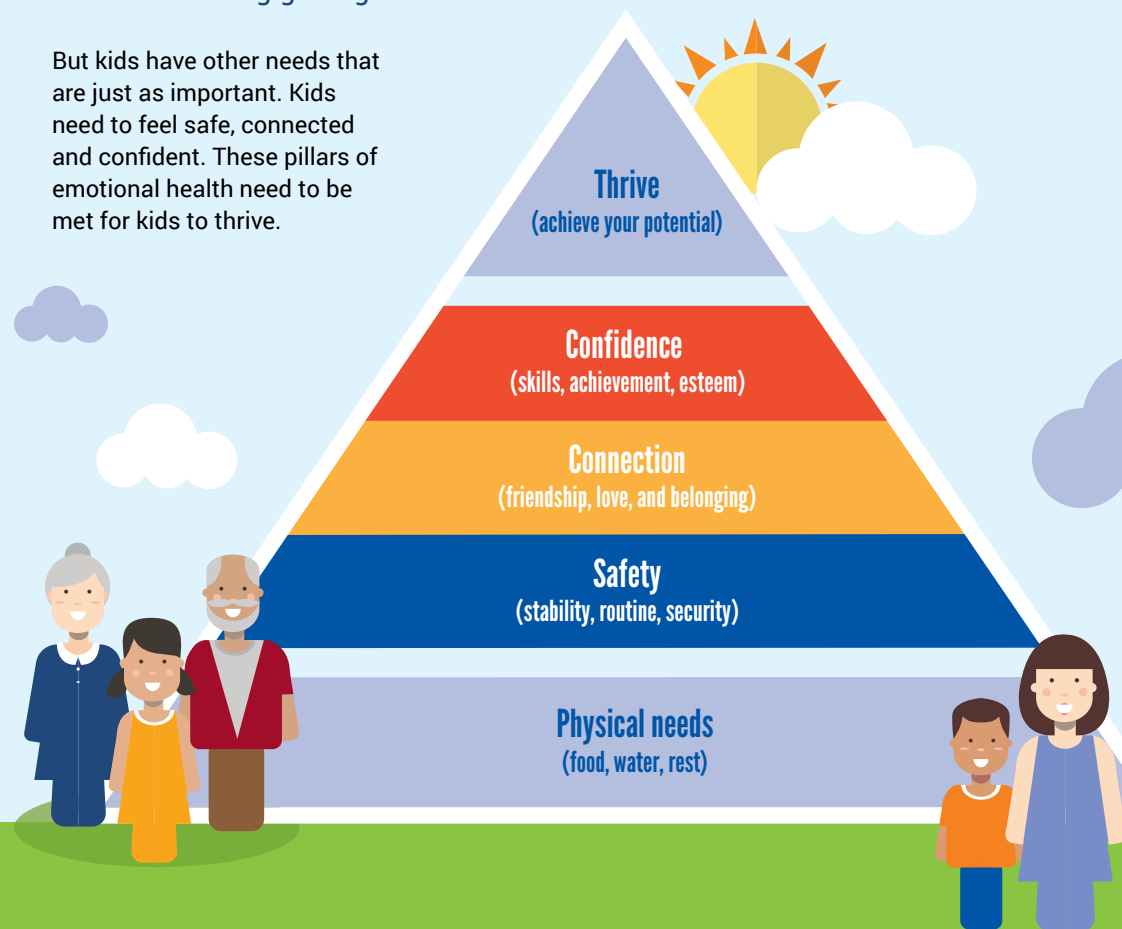
You don't need a degree or specialized training. Teachers and other trusted adults in a child's life (including parents, grandparents, friends, and neighbors) are often uniquely equipped to problem solve because they experience a child intimately over a long period of time. This guide will help you learn how to start building everyday resilience in the kids around you!

\*This question comes from the Utah Student Health and Risk Protection (SHARP) survey data. You can learn more at: <https://dsamh.utah.gov/reports/sharp-survey>

## A NEW FRAMEWORK FOR EMOTIONAL HEALTH

We know that food, sleep, and shelter are critical to kids' wellbeing. A tired, hungry kid can't focus on making good grades!

But kids have other needs that are just as important. Kids need to feel safe, connected and confident. These pillars of emotional health need to be met for kids to thrive.





# ATTENDING TO NEEDS AS A PRIMARY TEACHING STRATEGY

As a teacher, one of the best ways you can build your student’s resilience is to ask every day, “What can I do to support their needs—physical, safety, connection, and confidence?” This handbook can help you get started.

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## PHYSICAL



Students have energy and movement needs (exercise, rest when tired, calming practice when overexcited), sensory needs (more or less stimulus, vision or hearing differences, relief from pain) and cognitive needs (differences in processing speed, memory or learning abilities).

Examples of caring for physical needs include:

• **Make a point of helping children be more in touch with their bodies.** Try checking in with a body area or taking a deep breath as a transition activity. For example, say, “Before we move on to math, let’s check in with our shoulders/jaws/feet/stomach while taking five slow, deep breaths.”

If you as an adult think this sounds kind of silly, you might consider experimenting with a mindful, physical check-in

for yourself! Its good for your physical and emotional health.

• **Sensory snack:** Pass out a cracker or other school-appropriate snack and spend one minute mindfully eating. Consider its taste, texture, flavor, smell, sound, and appearance. Invite students to share what stood out to them to emphasize that we all have different sensory sensitivities.

• **Movement:** Get students up to move! Try pacing back and forth while reading. Throw a soft ball around to memorize facts. March while memorizing. This is even appropriate with older kids.

They may think it is silly, but that’s okay. Sometimes you need to lose your dignity to find your students!

• **Snacks or food during quiet work time**

• **Allowing freedom for students to move** to different places in the classroom to help moderate visual or auditory needs, or find space to take a sensory break.





# SAFETY



Feeling emotionally and psychologically safe is an important prerequisite to learning and creativity. Feeling safe reduces frustration, embarrassment, and other emotional barriers to doing our best work.

### Examples of caring for safety needs include:

• **Safe to talk:** A teacher might take time at the beginning of the year to invite students who may be struggling with fatigue, stress, or other mental or emotional problems to please come talk to him or her. Students often have the impression that the teacher ‘wouldn’t care’ about stress or depression. An explicit invitation to open up can create safety. (And remember: when they do come to talk...LISTEN!)

• **Safe to fail:** Cultivate a growth mindset in students by emphasizing that progress and growth are more highly valued than performance. Failure is an essential ingredient to growth. Teachers may share difficulties that they had the first time they had to learn this subject, or a dumb question or misunderstanding they once had.

• **Safe to be themselves:** Learn to see strengths in students in the face of the very human temptation to focus on others’

weaknesses or short-comings. Praise creativity or innovation when a student thinks of something in a different way or has an unusual way of solving problems.

• **Safe to separate:** Some kids are nervous to be away from home or parents. Try supporting them during that change with a transitional object from home, a “special assignment” when they first arrive, or an activity and project that serves as a creative outlet for the anxiety (such as drawing or writing something for mom or dad).



## CONNECTION



Students will be most likely to remain motivated, practice skills, and master material under the care of adults who really see them, love them, and delight in having a relationship with them. As they say, “People don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.”

### Examples of caring for connection needs include:

- **See them:** Make an effort to notice interesting details about each student and find an opportunity to comment on them. For example, you could say, “I see headphones around your neck a lot. Music must be a pretty big part of your life.” Or, “You must do your best thinking while you doodle.”
- **Love them:** Share more often or more deliberately why you love being a teacher, and how much you love your students.

Consider sharing how much you appreciate long-term relationships with them long after the semester ends.

- **Delight in them:** Give students your full attention when they make comments or share perspectives in class. Then, rather than commenting on what they shared, let them know how much you enjoy watching them think and their unique way of addressing the question.

- **Share memories:** Students know that they are only one member of an often large

class. They likely wonder at some level whether a teacher ever thinks about them specifically or uniquely. Try sharing with a student a specific memory you have of her to communicate that she “stuck” with you in some small way.





## CONFIDENCE



Students need to feel a sense of mastery and growth. Having the skills required to learn, manage emotions, self-motivate, make friends, and solve problems will build confidence, and so will reassurance from caring adults.

### Examples of caring for confidence needs include:

• **Only use rewards or consequences as part of a collaborative plan** developed with a student or parent to improve a skill. For example, a student could receive a sticker or prize every time she raises her hand, because this is a *specific* skill you are working on. This is very different from giving a consequence for talking out of turn

because you assume that consequences will improve a student's motivation or will make her try harder. In a collaborative plan, the child feels safe, has a good connection with the teacher, and gives input toward the external rewards/motivators that will aid her in practicing a new, discrete skill. (The teacher may also feel more patient with the process of learning, rather than irritated by the perceived lack of "trying.")

• **Remind students of their growth**, including the

personal or emotional growth that may happen when things may not be going as well academically. (This will only be helpful if it feels authentic and you really do convey your admiration toward them.)

• **Convey confidence:** Try communicating, "I will love whatever you put your heart into, because I know you," or, "I think you will figure this out, but do let me know if you need help," or, "You are going to do just fine," or, "Be patient with yourself, you don't need to have all of this figured out right now."





# COMMON SITUATIONS

EveryDay Strong is a needs-based approach to the education, growth, and resilience of all students. Its lens can also guide strategies for students who may struggle with specific challenges, ranging from cognitive limitations that impair a child's ability to focus to emotional sensitivities like excess worry.

No matter what seems to be the barrier for a student, it's important for teachers, administrators, and parents to think carefully about the most effective way to help. Remember, each child needs what we all need—to feel safe, connected, and confident.

Sometimes our well-meaning attempts to

help struggling students can inadvertently focus more on the tools available (diagnoses, medications, therapy, etc.) than on the student herself. It's important to not lose sight of the student's personal and individual needs. Table 1 explains further some of the risks that come from over-reliance on these tools. Then, the following pages provide suggestions of how to implement a "needs based" approach.



**Table 1. Risks associated with over reliance on formal diagnoses, treatments, or accommodations:**

- 1) **Inaccurate assumption that a problem is mostly genetic or biological.** We often focus on “brain chemicals” to emphasize that there is no shame or blame for the individual and to give hope for a potential chemical fix. However, recent research has shown that when you focus exclusively on the biology of mental health, many people feel less empathy and support. Biological treatments alone are often less effective than comprehensive, psycho-social supports.
- 2) **Diagnostic labels can create relationship barriers.** A young person who declares that he has ‘Social Anxiety Disorder’ will likely not experience the same level of support and connection as someone who more vulnerably confesses feeling ‘painfully shy.’ You might find more success in getting help if you support your third grader as she expresses to her teacher that she finds school boring and that she doesn’t feel as smart as the other kids, rather than simply dropping off a letter that says she “has ADHD.”
- 3) **If tools are applied without thoughtfulness about the individual child’s needs, they may undermine safety, connection, and confidence.** Some students feel more “broken” (decreased confidence) by having to take a daily medication or receive school accommodations. Or, when the family and school don’t agree on the use of accommodations, relationship problems (decreased connection) can result. Lastly, too many interventions may contribute to a feeling that the student’s personality, feelings, or efforts are somehow unacceptable (not safe to be, or feel, or fail).

## WORRY, SHYNESS, OR SCHOOL AVOIDANCE

Perhaps more than other emotions, worry and fear are felt in the body and the brain can't always talk the body into calming down. Spend extra time on physical needs and pay close attention to helping a child feel safe.



Consider the following ways to care for needs:



Physical

Designate a nurse or trusted adult at school whom the student can visit if she is having stomach pain or tiredness at school and who will take the complaint at face value (not accuse the student of lying, etc.). Together, student and adult can practice deep breathing or muscle relaxation. Consider arranging a schedule for movement or sensory breaks, perhaps including drinks or snacks.



Safety

Parent and student meet with the teacher to discuss fears related to school or separations. The teacher listens with empathy to convey that it is safe to talk, safe to ask for help, and safe to have big feelings. Parents also listen without interrupting.



Connection

Teachers make an extra effort to meaningfully connect through encouraging notes, simple gifts, lunch hour check ins, and other small but deliberate acts. Teachers notice and comment on the student's good work wherever possible. Consider adjusting classes or seating chart to facilitate more opportunities for the child to be around identified friends.



Confidence

Give the student special responsibilities; for example, to help the librarian for the first 15 minutes of school each day. Together, parents, teacher and student learn to talk about how "worry" makes things difficult: "It looks like worry is really screaming right now; what are *you* able to do?" This helps the student gradually feel more power over worry. Lastly, accept that progress may be slow, but also expect growth: "it doesn't look like you can go back to class right now, but what something you could do to push back against worry?"

## SADNESS, APATHY, WITHDRAWAL

The first sign of sadness or depression might be an uncharacteristic change such as poorer academic performance, withdrawal from friends, or seeming less productive or engaged. The student may say she "just doesn't care anymore."



Consider the following ways to care for needs:



Physical

Together, educators and the student's family may agree to drop an early morning class or minimize homework loads in order to promote adequate sleep. Schedule a short daily walk around the campus to get sunshine and movement, and a weekly meeting with the counselor or school social worker over lunch for a check-in on physical wellness.



Safety

The student and her parents meet with her teachers to discuss her feelings of apathy and sadness, and the teacher listens with empathy to convey that it is safe to talk, to feel, and to ask for help. If suicidal ideation is a concern, work with a school counselor or social worker to create a "safety plan" that includes identifying a trusted person with whom she can discuss hopeless feelings or suicidal thoughts.



Connection

Teachers make extra effort to meaningfully connect, especially by being a caring witness to their suffering. Supportive words like, "I can see how hard you are trying," "you've really got a lot you are dealing with," or "be patient with yourself," can help students feel seen. The teacher may even thank the student for trusting her with very personal feelings and experiences.



Confidence

Parents and teachers work with the student to set small, manageable goals to rebuild a sense of power and mastery and to model patience. The shared goal is to improve the student's functioning, not necessarily to improve feelings. (Feelings – even sad ones – are OK and normal and important.) Some classes could be graded on a pass/fail basis to take some pressure off, and the school could provide temporary tutoring to help the student keep up with basic competencies.

## SOCIAL/PEER DIFFICULTIES

Social deficits often contribute to behavior and academic problems. Students may be shy, have communication deficits, misread social cues, or perhaps overwhelm others with impulsive behavior or a rigid or controlling temperament.



Consider the following ways to care for needs:



Physical

A school counselor and parent may need to work with the student on attention to basic grooming, including giving direct education about norms. An evaluation by a speech therapist or school psychologist may be helpful. In some cases, medication or an evaluation by a pediatrician to improve symptoms may be helpful.



Safety

The student and her parents meet with her teachers to discuss communication or peer difficulties. Regular check-ins with a school counselor are scheduled to monitor for signs of bullying, or other situations or behaviors that might make the student feel unsafe. Teachers may also agree to minimize group work for the student, since these complex social situations tend to highlight social deficits.



Connection

Her teacher could make extra effort to meaningfully connect (see other sections for ideas). Make a plan to facilitate peer social opportunities that are (1) short, (2) structured, (3) supervised, and (4) one-on-one with carefully selected partners. The school might also coordinate a lunch “club” or after-school “lego group” for a select group of students.



Confidence

The student, his parents, and teachers agree on 2-3 social skills to deliberately work on at home and at school. Goals might include asking the teacher about his day once per week, earning points for avoiding inappropriate comments, or receiving simple feedback on conversation skills like eye contact or turn taking.

## ORGANIZATION, INATTENTION, IMPULSE CONTROL, TASK COMPLETION

The clinical term “ADHD” is more broadly an “executive function” disorder, which includes the skills of planning, task completion, attention, impulse-control, and self-motivation. Even students without a diagnosis may struggle here.



Consider the following ways to care for needs:



Physical

Students who exhibit behaviors in this category may be more physically oriented than average. They need to move, fidget, eat, and rest, so look for opportunities to allow them to do so (for example, marching in place while memorizing times tables).



Safety

The student and his parents meet with teachers to calm any fears he may have of being “labeled” or treated unfairly (but avoid holding this meeting during recess so that the student can still get outside!). Agree on a plan for monitoring and communication, which will help the parent feel safe to voice concerns, the teacher feel safe to provide feedback, and the student feel safe to make mistakes or ask for help.



Connection

Teachers and parents make extra effort to maintain a positive relationship with the student, especially considering the amount of correction, redirection, discipline, or negative feedback that these students typically encounter. Work to “connect before you redirect” by prioritizing love and admiration for the student, despite the inevitable need to correct, remind, or set limits.



Confidence

Confidence is a common problem here! Adults should keep in mind that “executive functioning” is a skill to practice and not a sign of an undermotivated, lazy, or defiant student. Focus on a growth mindset and work to create reasonable, obtainable expectations. Also work on specific supports and rewards for the student’s efforts to practice attention, organizational skills, self-motivation, and task completion.

We're not going to stop until every child in every neighborhood feels safe, connected, and confident. We can't do it without you.

For more help, dial 2-1-1 at any time from any phone and talk directly to a community resource specialist, who can connect you with free or low-cost counseling services, support groups, or crisis services.

For more information and resources on anxiety and depression, visit [www.EveryDayStrong.org](http://www.EveryDayStrong.org).

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