

The Ethics of Risk and Resilience

Human beings, like all living things, need resilience—the ability to roll with the punches and bounce back from adversity. Resilience is the capacity to return to a desired condition after experiencing an undesired event. As such, resilience is a basic human protective system. It develops as we become more confident in our skills and abilities, and learn to feel safe and secure in our relationships with family, friends and others in the community. But resilience develops in the context of risk. Risk can be defined as the product of the probability of an undesired event and the event's adverse effect.

$$\text{probability} \times \text{adverse effect} = \text{risk}$$

School policy can impact risk both in terms of probability and effect, and can thus influence the development of resilience. This raises important ethical questions, and this brief seeks to explore some of the implications.

What the Evidence Tells Us

Students who are well connected to teachers and peers within the learning environment develop better mental health, have reduced involvement in health risk behaviours, and are more motivated to learn and achieve higher academic performance. In fact, teacher connectedness can offset the effects of poor social connections. Students with multiple risk factors who feel connected to their school and teachers are less likely to become involved in harmful substance use or other problem behaviours. Likewise, positive peer connections, in an inclusive school culture, help young people develop positive attitudes and behaviours. All of this suggests that a sense of connectedness is critical to the development of resilience. Punitive policies often leave young people less connected and more vulnerable than they were at the outset. Attempts to justify such policies are usually based on an argument of deterrence. By introducing punitive consequences, the policy increases the negative effect and thereby increases the risk. The intent is to offset this increase through a greater decrease in probability by making the behaviour less desirable. However, the evidence demonstrates that this deterrent intention does not always translate into real deterrence. Punitive policies that result in weakened school connectedness, particularly for students with low resilience (few other healthy networks of connectedness), can, and often do, result in increased harm and, therefore, can be seen as a failure to exercise the duty of care.

Using Policy to Build Resilience

Schools can—and should—support and help build resilience in children and youth who, for one reason or another, do not have the same protective factors as others. This is especially important for young people who do not have a positive home environment or are dealing with physical or mental challenges, sexual identity questions, or a family with limited economic resources. Schools can help young people develop resilience by providing them with positive environments in which to learn and grow. Building resilience in students involves building healthy, meaningful relational networks—between school staff members, between staff and students, between staff and parents, between the school community and the wider community. School substance use policies can contribute to building resilience in two ways. Policies that focus on reducing the probability of risk events can seek to maximize the opportunities and rewards for school involvement. Policies designed to impact adverse effect need to avoid introducing unintended consequences.

