



Opinion piece

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A healthy environment will help our kids thrive

A normal, healthy life during adolescence will involve being confronted with a range of challenging and stressful situations.

The teenage years are a time of significant change and an increasing desire for independence. It is inevitable young people will at some time find themselves in situations which place them at risk of emotional, social or psychological harm.

So how do our children grow up to be well-balanced, mature and contributing members of society?

What can we as a community do to help children develop the skills necessary to cope with the normal challenges of growing up?

These are important questions that I and many of my colleagues will discuss with visiting Canadian child resilience expert Dr Michael Ungar who is the 2014 Thinker in Residence.

Research has identified the importance of establishing an environment across the community which enhances children and young people's coping mechanisms and strengthens their resilience.

Coping mechanisms are ways we deal with stress. Stress affects everybody differently and does not discriminate. Regardless of who you are, where you come from and what your experiences have been, at some point you will experience stress.

The challenge is to learn coping mechanisms which enable us to deal with stress and continue to function normally, including succeeding at school or work, sustaining our relationships and looking after our own health and wellbeing.

International research has found that children and young people can lessen or avoid stressful situations by learning how to cope emotionally (emotion-focused coping) and cognitively (problem-focused coping).

Emotion-focused coping is when we use ways to control our negative emotions to reduce stress and avoid negative consequences. An example is when a young person experiences bullying and tries to ignore its impact. They may do this by saying to themselves, "it's just words", or "he/she doesn't know me".

Problem-focused coping is a positive action which attempts to reduce stress before it becomes a major problem. For this to work, a person needs to understand what is bothering them, think of ways to solve the problem, choose the best approach that works for them and then go for it!

An example of this approach would be for a young person to identify the bullying behaviour, list ways to solve the problem such as developing new friendship networks, avoiding contact with bullies or speaking to a school counsellor, teacher or parent, and then implementing and sticking to that plan.

Research I did at a WA primary school involved developing and implementing a program to enhance resilience of young people. We worked with the same small groups of children for five years from the age of 7 to 12.

The program focused on teaching coping skills, developing positive social interaction and enhancing confidence and self-esteem. It was successful in increasing the self-esteem and coping mechanisms of many students, while at the same time reducing their anxiety and depression.

This result indicates that children who develop positive coping skills generally grow up to be more resilient. Their higher levels of self-esteem and emotional stability provide better prospects for a positive and constructive life, into adulthood.

Part of strengthening resilience is helping children and young people to be more aware of their emotions and the consequences of overreaction, or responding impulsively. There is much debate about increased violence in our community.

We can address this by helping young people become more self-aware, not only of themselves but of others around them, and develop a more tolerant, understanding society.

This does not always mean that everything we do will turn out perfectly. Sometimes we fail. Sometimes we do not reach our goals or meet expectations, and that is okay. To build confidence and grow emotionally, we need to persevere and keep on trying without losing focus.

This applies to adults as much as children, but if we encourage young people to develop skills in managing emotions, dealing with failure and goal setting, they are more likely to persist when confronted with challenges and eventually succeed.

There is an abundance of evidence to suggest that when we collaborate, work in teams, join communities and generally reach out, we do much better than trying to go it alone.

Western Australia has many resources available to our children and young people which will help them develop into resilient adults.

These include local sporting clubs, school psychologists, youth groups and skills-based training organisations.

We also need to encourage and inspire young people to see themselves as positive, contributing members of our community.

Professor Lynne Cohen is the pro-vice-Chancellor at Edith Cowan University. The Thinker in Residence is run by the WA Commissioner for Children and Young People. The 2014 thinker, Michael Ungar, is in WA for the next two weeks.