Fostering Resiliency in Underserved Youth Through Physical Activity

Thomas J. Martinek and Donald R. Hellison

Millions of children and youth in our country live in poverty. And yet despite the overwhelming adversity associated with poverty, many of these youngsters are able to bounce back. The purpose of this article is to describe social and psychological factors that help them defy the risks associated with being poor. We suggest ways in which resiliency can be fostered through school and community programs. Included in this are ways in which physical activity serves as an effective medium for promoting growth and renewed optimism. Guidelines for delivering physical activity programs for increasing resiliency are proposed. In these guidelines are personal requirements necessary for successfully working with underserved children and youth.

It’s 7:30 on a frigid February morning in Chicago. We are on our way to Jackson School¹ hoping to get there by 8:00. Jackson School is located in the Englewood District on the south side of Chicago. Englewood has the highest crime rate in the city. Because there are no longer any businesses that can safely operate, the people who live in Englewood are virtually cut off from the rest of the city. In essence, Englewood has become an embattled island plagued by gang violence, drug trafficking, prostitution, and dysfunctional families. The population at Jackson is 100% African American. Many of the students are budding “gang bangers” who have succumbed to the protection and stability offered by gangs of the neighborhood. And yet, the school doors of Jackson open daily, teachers arrive to teach, and somehow kids get to school to be taught.

It is a trip we have made frequently. As we maneuver our way along the Dan Ryan Expressway, we talk about “our kids” of the basketball club. Much of the discussion centers on their struggles, whether they will all show up at the club, and what type of “attitude” they will bring into the gym that morning. It is a discussion we have had before, one that always reminds us how incredible the lives of these kids are and how miraculous it is that they are able to get to school at all.

Thomas J. Martinek is with the Department of Exercise and Sport Science at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, Greensboro, NC 27412. Donald R. Hellison is with the School of Kinesiology at the University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago, IL 60608.
As we arrive, a few of the kids are waiting to get into the gym. The rest will straggle in later. Most all of them show up on a regular basis. They look forward to shooting around and having us work with them on “moves to the basket” and shooting “the threes.”

The basketball club includes approximately 15 hard-core youngsters who come to learn personal and social responsibility and basketball. With their futures so limited, our goal for the program is to increase their resiliency against the high-risk conditions of their neighborhood. We have learned, though, that fostering resiliency becomes illusive without a clear understanding of all its caveats. Some youngsters respond well, while others appear to remain vulnerable and easy prey to adverse conditions. What are the personal characteristics that make individuals more vulnerable or resilient than others? And how can schools and other community agencies create environments that support the qualities to be resilient? These questions have pushed us beyond merely looking at at-risk factors. Rather, they have forced us to examine ways to enhance a child’s self-worth and dignity.

The purpose of this article is to help clarify our thinking about resiliency and vulnerability in underserved youth. Special attention is given to social and psychological factors that affect a youngster’s response to adversity. We also suggest ways in which resiliency can be fostered through educational and community programs. Included in this are ways in which physical activity can provide opportunities for growth and renewed optimism for a better future. Guidelines for developing physical activity programs for increasing resiliency are proposed. Reflected in these are personal requirements necessary for successfully working with underserved youth. At the heart of these guidelines is the belief that long-term commitment is tantamount to planting seeds of hope.

While political pundits often feel that a get-tough crime bill will cure the evils of crime in America, we believe that a preventive approach makes more economic sense. Improving the resilience in our youth will eventually rule out the installation of metal detectors in schools, policemen in hallways, and the building of more jails. We are reminded of this axiom from a snippet from Joseph Malin’s (1936) poem, A Fence or an Ambulance:

\[
\text{... Better guide well the young} \\
\text{than reclaim them when they are old,} \\
\text{For the voice of true wisdom is calling,} \\
\text{“To rescue the fallen is good, but ‘tis best} \\
\text{To prevent other people from falling.”} \\
\text{Better close up the source of} \\
\text{temptation and crime} \\
\text{Than deliver from dungeon or galley;} \\
\text{Better put a strong fence ‘round} \\
\text{the top of the cliff} \\
\text{Than an ambulance down in the valley. (pp. 273-274)}
\]

Malin’s fence undoubtedly becomes the metaphor for resiliency and hope for youngsters facing an uncertain future. For the youngsters at Jackson and others who live at the edge of the cliff, it is more reasonable to build fences than have ambulances at the bottom awaiting their fall.
What Does It Mean to Be Resilient?

Bonnie Benard (1993) defines a resilient child as one who has the ability to bounce back successfully despite exposure to severe risks (p. 44). Gordon and Song (1994) refer to these individuals as “risk defiers,” “abuse survivors,” or “super kids.” In other words, they have beaten the odds against good development and have demonstrated the self-righting nature of the human condition. In all likelihood, they have used protective factors in themselves, their family, school, and community to rebuff life stressors.

Several studies have repeatedly documented “resiliency” in numerous populations. For example, Michael Rutter’s research (Rutter, 1985) with disadvantaged children from inner cities found that half of the children growing up in adverse conditions did not repeat that pattern in later adult life. Emma Werner’s longitudinal investigations (Werner, 1989; Werner & Smith, 1992) with Kauai children found that one-third of the children having four or more risk factors during childhood were doing well during adolescence. During adulthood, she found that two-thirds of the children who were having problems during adolescence were experiencing successful adult lives.

Another population that has been studied is teenage mothers. The Baltimore Study by Furstenberg and his colleagues (1987) was one of the first attempts to look at the longitudinal impact of early pregnancy on the mothers’ life styles and the lives of their children. After following a cohort group of 300 mothers older than 17 for 12 years, they found varied results. Mothers whose parents were on welfare and had not completed the 10th grade were found to be more likely to be on welfare. Educational attainment (how far the parent went in school) seemed to be a main predictor of educational advancement. The children of parents who completed high school did better in school than those whose parents dropped out at an early age. The children also were less likely to become pregnant during their school years.

Probably one of the most significant contributions to the understanding of resilience came from Elder and his associates (Elder, 1974, 1979; Elder, Caspi, & van Nguyen, 1986; Elder, van Nguyen, & Caspi, 1985). Their findings reinforced the importance of families in combating the hardships of poverty. They found that both the mother and father each played differential roles. Vulnerable fathers, who were more affected by economic loss, were found to be more harsh in their approach to parenting. Mothers also were shown to be a significant buffer for the children exposed to the harsh parenting of their fathers. In addition, adolescents who were prone to temper outbursts and other behavioral problems also were more vulnerable to harsh parenting.

The constructs of resiliency and vulnerability have their roots in the field of developmental psychopathology (Cicchetti, 1990). From this perspective, resiliency and vulnerability are thought to be socially and psychologically determined. Bernard (1993) suggests that resilient youth usually possess three main attributes: social competence, autonomy, and optimism and hope.

Social Competence

The ability to interact socially with others appears to be a very strong trait characterizing resilient children. Responsiveness to others by being flexible, empathetic, caring, communicative, and possessing a sense of humor are examples
of these social qualities. Having these also ensures positive responses from others. Studies by Rutter (1990) and Chess and Thomas (1990) have shown that from early childhood on, resilient children tend to establish positive relationships with adults and peers. This helps to bond them to family members, classmates and teachers, and community leaders. This creates a strong social support system for dealing with adversity.

A major social quality distinguishing resilient from vulnerable youth is the ability to negotiate confrontation and challenge from others. In our past work with underserved children and youth, we have found, for example, that many of them are more inclined to settle disputes through verbal and physical confrontation. Ronald Taylor’s (1994) comprehensive literature review of resiliency in African American youth link this type of behavior to the actions of family members. He has found that children and adolescents of parents experiencing economic hardship are more likely to be exposed to power-assertive and punitive discipline practices. Parents using these practices more than likely learned them from their parents. These practices are quickly learned by children, affecting how they interact with classmates. Such behavior is unpopular and results in rejection and isolation by their classmates.

The importance for underserved youth to acquire positive social skills is underscored by Albert Bandura (1990). His research on self-efficacy suggests that developing a positive social network can become cyclical. He believes that individuals who can begin to engender trust from others will create a valuable resource for nurturing self-respect. This will help to establish and perpetuate future social ties.

**Autonomy**

Resilient children also are autonomous. That is, they have a clear sense of who they are and can act independently (Bernard, 1993). Most importantly, they have the ability to exert some control over their environment. Yale University researchers Gordon and Song (1994) found the “maverick” type is more likely to overcome at-risk conditions than more conservative and conforming personalities. According to the researchers, they are particularly able to swim upstream. One interesting aspect of their findings was that some individuals were able to reject the peer pressure of gangs. For example, some members were able to withdraw from gang activity at appropriate times to attend more healthy activities, such as visiting museums, going to baseball games, and joining friends at a local swimming pool. They concluded that being goal-directed helped the “autonomous loner” separate him or herself to pursue personal achievement. This capacity to “march to a different drummer” appears to be a main component of those who defy negative patterns of behavior (Witkin, Moore, Goodenough, & Cox, 1977).

Gordon and Song (1994) temper this conclusion somewhat by emphasizing the importance of having a meaningful relationship with some significant other. They underscore the important role that the significant other plays in modeling, guiding, providing, and mentoring those who try to defy the odds against them. We also believe that while being autonomous is helpful, it may not be enough to inoculate oneself against the enormity of problems; support from others is needed. Gordon and Song are right in stating, “The experience of accountability to, or identification with, another person is viewed as a universal factor in human development” (p. 36). This, we have found, is no less true for youth who are underserved and at risk of failure.
Autonomy also is helpful in dealing with stressful events. Chess (1989) has referred to this process as “adaptive distancing,” whereby children can separate themselves from dysfunctional family life. Berlin and Davis’ (1989) investigation on families with alcoholism and mental illness found that resilient children were capable of detaching themselves enough to maintain outside pursuits and challenges. Such distancing set them apart from those children who had difficulty in maintaining positive relationships with peers and other adults.

A Word of Caution About Autonomy. Thus far, we have argued that if underserved youth are to acquire some degree of resiliency, a sense of autonomy must be enhanced. However, we have found that for some children and youth, gaining a sense of autonomy (control) can lead to undesirable behaviors. Strategies such as intimidation and abusive behavior, confrontations with authority figures, and selling drugs are a few examples of the ways children and youth have tried to gain mastery over their environment. We believe that urban and rural poverty represents a culture separate from the outside world with its own a set of values, language, and rituals. For most individuals living in poverty, being autonomous and in control have a much different meaning.

John Ogbu (Solomon, 1992) expands this thinking to the school setting. He contends that while most underserved children, especially African American, affirm the importance of schooling, they behave in a way that gets them into trouble. Their cultural values lead them to buck the system. Understanding the values of the underserved has important implication for those attempting to deliver programs for enhancing resiliency. We feel that this is a requirement for teaching mastery skills, such as goal-setting and decision-making, to children and youth who don’t fit.

For example, one of the middle school students that we worked with from the Coaching Club felt that he was quite in control of things. Skipping classes, being disruptive, ignoring homework, and not paying attention were daily occurrences for him. He felt that simply getting to school, playing basketball, and just “doing his thing” were critical autonomous behaviors that legitimized his status in school and the neighborhood. In his mind, he had “mastered” the appropriate strategies of his culture. Peer pressure and gang values prevailed in his life. Consequently, getting him to set goals for better behavior and academic work was an impossible task. We found that it was important to teach him ways to accommodate (getting to class on time or not sleeping in class) without disconnecting him from his culture.

Optimism and Hope

Another critical feature of resiliency is a sense of optimism and hope. These qualities enable the individual to set goals, persist, and believe that a bright future lies ahead. To understand the importance of optimism and hope, we refer to Martin Seligman’s work on the concept of learned helplessness. Learned helpless children feel they have little, or no control over social and academic outcomes (Seligman, 1990). They will quickly give up when faced with a challenge or temporary setback.

Many of the studies on learned helplessness have compared learned helpless individuals to those who possess a strong sense of optimism (Dweck, 1975; Dweck
& Licht, 1980; Finchum, Hakoda, & Sanders, 1989; Martinek & Griffith, 1993, 1994; Martinek & Williams, in press; Stipek & Kowalski, 1989). Unlike their learned helpless counterparts, hopeful youth focus their energies on figuring out ways of overcoming challenges. For them, setbacks are only temporary—they see effort and success inextricably tied together. According to Bernard (1991), resilient children possess this optimism and seldom demonstrate the passive behaviors associated with learned helplessness. They are able to apply alternative solutions to social and cognitive problems. Tied to this problem-solving ability is their knack for using outside resources for help. The Boys and Girls Clubs, community recreation centers, churches, community colleges, nonprofit outreach groups, Big Brother/Sisters organizations, and alternative school programs are but a few of the sources that have been accessed by young people seeking assistance.

Sources of Vulnerability and Hopelessness

We have described how social competence, autonomy, and optimism and hope characterize resilient children and youth. Bernard (1991) believes that of these three factors, it is the lack of hope that has the greatest impact on an individual’s vulnerability to at-risk conditions. Without hope, she says, the drive to change one’s circumstance is diluted. It is important, therefore, to look at the causes of hopelessness and its link to vulnerability in underserved youth. Hopelessness has been found to be related to two main factors: influence of significant others and environmental conditions. Both of these have a profound impact on their perceptions of control and resiliency (Martinek, 1996).

Influence of Significant Others

Children raised in impoverished conditions are exposed to a multitude of behaviors that reflect hopelessness and indifference. One major source of these behaviors is parents or caregivers. Children are adept at observing how they respond to their own life circumstances (Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990). All children, served or underserved, look to adults for guidance. They will frequently ask “why?” in order to understand their world around them. Interacting with adults allows children to mature intellectually and to develop problem-solving capacity. For underserved children, where parents or caregivers struggle with their own problems, this question is seldom answered.

Seligman (1990) believes that when this happens, children will observe and listen. They use what they see and hear from adults to assess ways in which they should respond to similar situations. For children in poverty, the response of adults to impossible living conditions is viewed daily. We only have to travel through the neighborhoods of our cities and depressed rural pockets to see the devastating impact of poverty on adult life. In Chicago, for example, a trip down West Roosevelt Road along the Hawthorne housing projects portrays human misery and hopelessness. Scores of African American adults, mostly male, roam back and forth along the street. Some seek order to their day by conferring with friends while others duck into adjacent vacated buildings, trying to buy or sell drugs. Others mostly look aimlessly among the broken bottles, garbage, and boarded buildings.

Amid all of this, youngsters stroll, sometimes with a mother or brother or sister, either going to school or trying to get to a nearby bus stop. For these young-
sters, seeing this scenario day after day eventually becomes the norm. At home, this modeling effect continues. The mother, father or caregiver, who is often seeking refuge from a hopeless situation by turning to drugs, alcohol, or prostitution, continues to convey to the child negative behaviors.

Research by Rutter (1990) has further substantiated the relationship between adult behavior and resiliency. He found that children from discordant families were more apt to have low self-concept and little attachment to a positive social network. Similarly, Masten, Best, and Garmezy (1990) reported that adult family members were key figures in predicting school disruptiveness of their children. Children whose family life was unstable with little positive interaction with adults were more often rated as disruptive by peers and teachers.

A Word About Gangs. An unfortunate by-product of dysfunctional family life is gang involvement. For those who are caught in urban blight, the gang becomes the family; it is a source of stability and identity. For many underserved kids, therefore, affiliation with gangs is common. They are quickly taught that fighting is the only way to survive on the streets. Leon Bing’s poignant and provocative exposé on the world of gangs in South Central Los Angeles (Do or Die, 1991) depicts kids at war with themselves. She portrays a world where the most potent feelings of self-worth come from murder and power over other gang members. Drive-by shootings, gang rape, torture, and indifference toward killing become the status quo. The gang banger’s attempt to reclaim membership in the “civil world” is, therefore, difficult if not impossible.

It would appear then that the protective mechanisms for underserved youth can be enhanced by stability, self-direction, and problem-solving ability of significant adults. It is imperative, therefore, that intervention programs help foster understanding of and support from family members. Reconnecting the prime caregivers with children who are at risk will fortify the chances for increasing resiliency.

Environmental Conditions

Another factor increasing hopelessness is the environmental conditions in which children and youth of poverty live (Martinek, 1996). For these individuals, the war zone condition of neighborhoods contributes to a helpless condition. The will to change things is significantly undermined when these elements prevail throughout a child’s developmental years. Jonathan Kozol’s Savage Inequalities (1991) provides a provocative account of children raised in our nation’s cities. For these youngsters, the notion of having control over life circumstances is a central factor for surviving the “mean streets” of places like Chicago, East St. Louis, Los Angeles, and New York City. Kozol continually reminds us that for most underserved children, little hope is seen for changing their social and economic position. In many of our cities, more than 60% of the students do not continue with schooling beyond middle school years—a testament to the debilitating effects of hopelessness.

Much of this doom and gloom can be explained by the conditions of the schools in impoverished neighborhoods. Kozol described how teachers in these schools struggle to provide the necessary support for their students. Like their students, they too, lose hope. In Chicago, for example, we found many teachers (and principals) feeling disenfranchised from their counterparts in more affluent parts of the city and suburbs. Lack of special services, resources, provisions for
safety, and parental and public interest in schooling contributed to low teacher morale and expectations for their students. Ultimately, these low expectations will have a profound effect on student motivation. Research by the first author has shown that low teacher expectations reduces the quality of teacher-student communication (Martinek, 1991, 1995, 1996, in press), lowers self-concept and performance expectations (Martinek & Johnson, 1979), and diminishes task persistence (Martinek & Karper, 1986). For the youngsters in Chicago, low teacher expectations place them in a “no win” situation—both their environment and teachers give little hope for success.

Enhancing Resiliency Through Physical Activity

Understanding the factors that affect resilience can have important implications for program developers and teachers. The challenge for youth agencies and schools is to provide the types of activities that will promote and cultivate the traits associated with resiliency. We believe that physical activity is an excellent medium for doing this. Social competence, autonomy, and optimism and hope are all potential products of good physical activity programs. Restoring these qualities for underserved youth will be contingent on how clearly we can formulate ideas about what works and doesn’t work. Numerous well-intended programs for addressing the problems of the poor have failed because of ill-defined goals and a fragile commitment to a philosophy undergirding the program. Prototypes are needed along with a set of assumptions that will guide the direction and evaluation of these programs.

Programs for Underserved Youth

How do programs for children and youth go about fostering resiliency? What can they do to promote self-worth and dignity, social competence, autonomy, and hope among underserved children and youth? And what role can physical activity play in these programs?

Extended Day Programs. For these answers, we first turn to the literature on inner-city extended day programs. Available attendance figures for inner-city extended day programs suggest an immediate problem: Extended day programs fail to attract very many participants older than the age of 12 (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1992), yet McLaughlin and her associates estimate that 75% of these individuals want to participate in programs that address their needs (McLaughlin, Irby, & Langman, 1994). The problem is that policies intended to guide inner-city extended day programs do not address their needs (McLaughlin & Heath, 1993). Youth are not interested in programs that:

- “Blame the victim” by attributing inner-city problems to the youth themselves rather than to the current system (e.g., ineffective schools and social services, meager economic opportunities, unresponsive government).
- Focus on fixing participants’ deficiencies instead of building on their strengths.
- Attempt to control deviant behavior, for example, by program goals such as keeping youth off the streets.
- Promote White, middle-class nuclear family values.
If programs are to address the needs of underserved youth, they must be based on a different set of assumptions and principles. The following guidelines for developing such programs were drawn from McLaughlin’s several-year investigation of more than 60 programs with 24,000 members in three major cities (McLaughlin, Irby, & Langman, 1994) as well as the work of other scholars and policy experts (Cappel, 1995; Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1992; Heath & McLaughlin, 1993; Ianni, 1993; Villarruel & Lerner, 1994; Youth Employment, 1994):

1. Treat youth as resources to be developed rather than problems to be managed. Work from their strengths rather than their weaknesses and emphasize their competence and mastery, thereby building their self-confidence, self-worth, and ability to contribute. Don’t label them as at-risk but as “at promise” (Swadener & Lubeck, 1995).

2. Focus on their emotional, social, educational, and economic needs—in other words, on the whole person rather than on a single issue such as reading skills or basketball. A single issue can provide an organizational focus for the program, but to be effective, the whole person must be addressed. Programs that are just recreational or fun are not effective!

3. Respect their individuality, including cultural differences, developmental needs, and behavioral fluctuations due to intense pressures encountered in their daily lives. While cultural differences are important, both Weiner (1993) and Heath and McLaughlin (1993) argue that there is much more to young people than their race or ethnicity (or gender for that matter). Ethnic labels not only mask subtle ethnic differences, but “students who are demographically identical may be psychologically quite different” (Weiner, 1993, p. 111). Moreover, “in the end, everyone’s culture is different because everyone’s experience is different” (Kennedy, 1989, p. 21). It is, therefore, crucial to be sensitive to each participant’s individuality as well as more generic cultural differences.

4. Empower them; encourage a perception of independence and control over their own lives through active participation, a voice in the program, and leadership responsibilities. Despite the recent popularity of authoritarian boot camps for juvenile offenders, this approach is “demeaning and punitive” (McLaughlin, Irby, & Langman, 1994, p. 8).

5. Build into the program a strong, explicit set of values with clear expectations into the program. Despite the battle being waged in public education over the teaching of specific values, inner-city programs must teach values to offset the values of “the street.” As John Gardner put it:

   Absence of instruction in values is the least of our problems. What is a problem is that the values taught may be destructive. The young person is bombarded by value instruction, for good or evil, every waking hour. . . . No one escapes. (cited in McLaughlin, Irby, & Langman, 1994, p. x)

6. Help them to envision possible futures for themselves, especially future vocational and avocational activities which they may not see as relevant to their lives, and ways to get there. According to two psychologists, the
"possible selves" of youth play a pivotal role in their future activities (Oyserman & Markus, 1990).

7. Provide a psychologically as well as physically safe environment. It is one thing to ensure freedom from physical harm; it is quite another to detect and control emotional abuse and ridicule which are often disguised as humor, gesture, or innuendo.

8. Keep program numbers small and encourage participation over several years in order to create a sense of belonging and membership, encourage the development of close personal relationships, and reduce the need for management so that program goals can be addressed.

9. Maintain a local (e.g., community) connection. Forge linkages with people in the neighborhood—parents, teachers, youth workers, ministers, business leaders. Seek to enrich the community rather than disparage it.

10. Provide the kind of courageous and persistent leadership that makes the program work despite systemic obstacles. Haberman (1995) argued that effective urban teachers “learn how to gain the widest discretion for themselves and their students without incurring the wrath of the systems” (p. 780).

11. Provide significant contact with an adult who cares and offers support. This is perhaps the most significant finding in the resiliency literature (Ianni, 1993; Gordon & Song, 1994). As inner-city Oakland physician Barbara Staggers observed:

   With all the kids I know who make it, there’s one thing in common: an individual contact with an adult who cared and who kept hanging in with the teen through his hardest moments . . . People talk programs and that’s important. But when it comes down to it, individual person-to-person connections make the difference . . . Every kid I know who made it through the teenage years has at least one adult in his life who made the effort. (Foster, 1994, pp. 53-54)

**Alternative Schools.** Next we turn to the characteristic of exemplary alternative schools. These specialized programs attempt to serve so-called at-risk youth who have not functioned very well, fit in very well, or been served very well by public schools (Raywid, 1994). These characteristics parallel several of the above extended day program guidelines:

- Build upon strengths.
- Be first and foremost student-centered rather than subject matter specialists.
- Empower students (and faculty).
- Keep the school and classes small.
- Develop local connection.
- Operate separate from the system (which is one way to avoid systemic obstacles and counter ineffective policies).

The existence of alternative schools suggests that public schools are not meeting the needs of their students. This is especially true in underserved areas where youngsters often do not get much academic and social support outside of
school. Weiner (1993) argues that it is the inner-city schools that are at-risk, not the kids, and that they need to change in fundamental ways if they are to truly meet kids' needs. Comer (1987) agrees: “The sources of risk are in the schools, as well as in societal and family conditions outside the school” (p. 14). Many school reform efforts are currently under way, such as Comer’s (1987), as well as those of Stevens and Slavin (1995), Sizer (1989), Solomon, Watson, Delucchi, Schnaps, and Battistich (1988), and others. Such reform efforts embrace many of the extended day guidelines.

One urban education reform plan in Wisconsin specifically targets small class size—15 students per teacher (Cohen, 1995), which is also a central principle of state of the art extended day and alternative school programs. DeCharms (1976) demonstrated that inner-city school students could be empowered, and Mary Bredemeier’s (1988) study of effective urban teachers shows that successful teachers have a strong commitment to help their students make “choices and . . . deal with the consequences,” develop a “sense of control over one’s own behavior,” and accept “responsibility for one’s act” (p. 223).

Support for some of these guidelines also can be found in the resiliency literature (e.g., Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1994). For example:

- Provide training and experiences in self-motivation and autonomy, and emphasizing a personal sense of purpose.
- Provide opportunities for success, task mastery, and problem-solving.
- Build on prior cultural knowledge rather than exploiting their weaknesses.
- Create an atmosphere of belonging and involvement which emphasizes positive social interactions and peer support.

**Physical Activity Programs**

Physical activity programs, both in and outside of the school, provide many opportunities for implementation of the above guidelines. Character development claims, while often exaggerated and unsupported by evidence, suggest that such programs could address the whole person and teach specific values. The nature of physical activity—active, interactive, highly emotional—certainly provides the possibility of exploring and practicing values, teamwork, goal-setting, peer-teaching, conflict resolution, and so on. Sport programs often keep numbers reasonably small, retain youngsters in the program over several years (as do elementary school physical education programs), and maintain a local connection. All programs could provide contact with an adult who cares about children and youth, although the program numbers in school and recreation programs reduce the contacts to most participants. Other guidelines—building on strengths, respecting individuality, providing a safe environment, confronting systemic obstacles (such as the professional sport model)—could certainly be integrated into physical activity programs. Moreover, activity is attractive to many kids, even in the inner-city school physical education programs that are highly regimented, offered once a week, and where kids don’t get many turns (Cutforth, 1994).

Both of us have been involved in the development, implementation, and evaluation of such programs (Hellison, Martinek, & Cutforth, 1996), and the relationship of these programs to the above guidelines has been illustrated in two
descriptions of specific programs (Hellison & Cutforth, 1996). One of the articles in this issue describes such a program (Cutforth, 1997).

Although this program model has been used in school physical education (Hellison, 1996), extended day programs provide more opportunities for fully implementing the above guidelines (Hellison, 1995). For example, programs can: (a) operate as clubs before and after school and in the summer, (b) serve small groups of participants over multiyear periods, (c) focus on individual kids and their strengths and differences, (d) provide significant contact with an adult who cares, and (e) more easily ensure a psychologically safe environment.

These programs use taking responsibility as the theme for teaching a variety of physical activities (e.g., basketball or martial arts club). Program participants are taught to take self-responsibility for their effort and goals and social responsibility for respecting the rights of others, for being sensitive and responsive to the needs of others, and for the group’s welfare. Instructional strategies include awareness of these responsibilities, experiences in becoming responsible, and individual and group reflection and decision-making (empowerment).

These ideas and strategies are augmented by a summer “apprentice teacher” program for participants who desire to assume the advanced responsibility of teaching younger children and by an academic mentoring program for selected participants in order to extend program goals into the classroom. Both of these programs help participants envision possible futures for themselves.

Recent quotes from interviews with participating inner-city youth in two different programs indicate the holistic nature of these programs.

- “The program teaches you the main points about life!”
- “In here, we’re treated like people!”
- “I have learned to make goals and do them!”
- “This program taught me responsibility.”

**Final Thoughts About Improving Resiliency**

*Washington Post* columnist William Rasberry (1995) laments that many people will continue to argue that ambulances are needed to tend to those children who have already fallen from the cliff. After all, the ones playing at the edge are not yet a social or budgetary problem. In fact, they see little connection between physical activity and crime prevention. Law enforcement people know better. This is why police departments across America are involved with youth athletic leagues (i.e., Midnight Basketball) and other community youth programs.

We initially argued that to improve the resiliency of underserved youth against the high-risk conditions of their neighborhoods, their self-worth and dignity, social competence, autonomy, and hope need to be advanced. Program guidelines drawn from several sources support the development of these qualities and suggest more specific implementation ideas. Our own work, along with that of some of our colleagues, has transformed these ideas so that they can guide physical activity programs for underserved youth. We will continue our collaborative efforts to improve these programs, but if we really want to build a fence rather than call 911, more of us need to get involved in this kind of work.
References


RESILIENCY AND THE UNDERSERVED


Notes

1 For anonymity purposes, the name of the school has been changed.
2 For anonymity purposes, the name of the public housing complex has been changed.

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