



**Key points:**

- **Resist urge to 'shield' students with disabilities from failure, difficult tasks**
- **Use validation techniques to acknowledge students' feelings, perspective**
- **Teach students to reframe failures as learning opportunities**

**7 steps to building resilience in students with disabilities**

Controlling or restricting a student's choices in an attempt to minimize the likelihood that she will experience failure may be well-intended, but it can have long-lasting negative effects, said David Parker, a postsecondary disability specialist and ADD/life coach with [Children's Resource Group](#).

"When well-meaning adults view *any* form of failure as unacceptable and impose too much control over students' ability to make choices and learn from negative outcomes, the results can backfire," Parker said. "Young people transition into adulthood with limited resilience."

Resilience -- or the ability to "bounce back" after a traumatic event or persistent failure -- becomes increasingly important as a student with a disability transitions to post-school life. A poor ability to bounce back can lead to underemployment, high college dropout rates, depression, anxiety, and other mental health challenges, Parker said.

Below, find strategies to build **resilience in students with disabilities**:

**1. Promote self-determination:** Provide specific instruction in skills such as values clarification, problem-solving, planning, monitoring progress toward goals, assessing when and how to redirect efforts, and, most importantly, how to learn from different types of outcomes, Parker recommended.

**2. Help students reframe thinking:** Teach students about the effects of negative self-talk and how to redirect self-defeating thoughts to more productive thoughts such as self-reassurance and problem-solving, Parker said. He said he often recommends the book [Taming Your Gremlin](#), which provides practical strategies to reframe thinking.

**3. Encourage students to view failures as meaningful opportunities:** Consider starting a schoolwide or class-based initiative that lets students and staff share one of their biggest disappointments that, over time, turned out to be a valuable turning point, Parker suggested. Hearing how others have learned from difficult situations can help students place greater value on effort, regardless of outcome, he said.

**4. Resist urge to swoop in and fix issues; instead, use validation techniques:** Although it can be difficult for an educator to hear a student tearfully describe how frustrating it is to get a poor test grade after spending hours studying, it's most helpful to listen gently and let the student know you understand, Parker said.

"I find that using validation techniques -- simply listening, acknowledging, and honoring a person's feelings and perspectives without trying to minimize or 'fix' what they are telling us -- can be enormously effective in helping

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students cope," he said. "When students feel validated, they are often freed up emotionally to move onto their own problem-solving."

Difficult tasks are also an opportunity to teach students that sometimes, at work and in life, they'll need to do things they don't like or want to do, said Scott Garbini, owner and consultant at [Garbini Education and Career Consulting LLC](#). Help students realize why such tasks may be necessary, he said.

**5. Connect students with college mentors:** "Any opportunity schools can create to help college students with disabilities talk with high school students with disabilities promotes hope and resilience," Parker said.

For example, consider hosting a panel discussion where high school students and college students can discuss their disabilities and college students can elaborate on their transition-related challenges and successes.

**6. Elevate postsecondary options besides four-year colleges:** Trade schools, two-year colleges, and other vocational programs are good options that help students with disabilities move from hands-on learning to meaningful employment, Parker said. Taking a structured gap year is another option to help students strengthen their independent living skills, he said.

"We need to revisit the huge focus placed on four-year colleges as the only postsecondary outcome of value," Parker said. "One size does not fit all."

**7. Let students take the lead during college, job search:** For example, help students learn how to call the disability services office at their desired college to schedule an appointment, Parker suggested. Help the student prepare for any such appointments, but maintain the expectation that he will take the lead throughout the process, he said.

As an academic strategy that will help prepare college-bound students for college classes, teach students how to make their own study guides rather than relying on the teacher's, Parker suggested.

See also:

- [Help prepare college-bound students for new, unfamiliar social situations](#) (March 13)
- [Connect transition-age students with college mentors](#) (Feb. 1)
- [Promote high expectations in transition planning](#) (Aug. 3)

*For more stories and guidance on this topic, see the [Postsecondary Transition Roundup](#).*

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