Staying Strong

Classroom Activities to Support Student Resilience

Red Sox Foundation and Massachusetts General Hospital
Home Base Program

RED SOX FOUNDATION

MASSACHUSETTS GENERAL HOSPITAL

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES TO SUPPORT STUDENT RESILIENCE

> *"Resilience [depends on] having caring and supportive relationships within and outside the family. . . Relationships that create love and trust, provide role models and offer encouragement and reassurance help bolster a person's resilience." **

In the spring of 2012, nearly 200 Massachusetts teachers, guidance counselors, and school nurses previewed and evaluated a documentary for educators, *Staying Strong: How Schools Build Resilience in Military Families.* In their feedback, they requested suggestions for classroom activities to support the resilience of military-connected students. Likely, most teachers already utilize activities that promote healthy coping skills, but may not recognize them as such. The *Staying Strong Classroom Activities Guide* is designed to be a starting point. We hope you will use your creativity and imagination to modify them or design completely new ones, and share those you feel work especially well with us.

The activities for grades K-3 and grades 4-6 are organized around eight familiar values. They are key ones for creating a supportive community of learners, and for strengthening the network of caring relationships that sustains a student's resilience at times of family stress.

Caring Connections between Children and Adults
Caring Connections between Children and Their Peers
Personal Courage
Respectful Listening
Responsibility to Oneself and to Others
Leadership
Teamwork
Personal Best

Popular picture books and literature are a great way to illustrate these eight values, e. g., *Frog and Toad, Tyrone, the No Good, Horrible Cheater*, *George and Martha*, *Stone Soup* for early elementary students; *Charlotte's Web*, *Holes,* and the *Harry Potter* series for upper elementary students.

*American Psychological Association, 2012

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES TO SUPPORT STUDENT RESILIENCE

CARING CONNECTIONS BETWEEN CHILDREN AND ADULTS

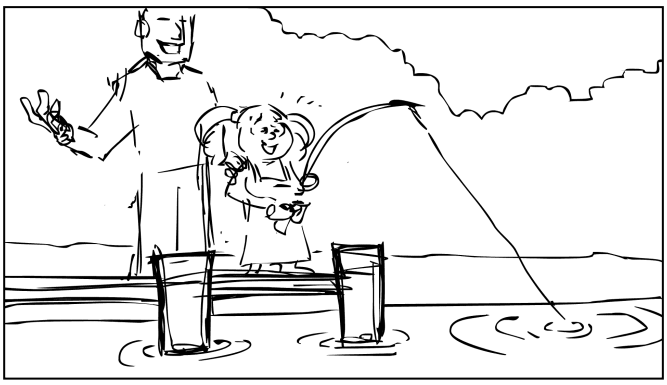
Kindergarten through Grade 3

- **Draw a picture of a caring adult.** Students draw a picture of a caring adult in their life showing what that adult does best. Ask students to write a caption about how they feel about this important person in their life. For kindergarteners, have students dictate to you or an aide a sentence they would like to express. Have each student give their picture as a gift to their caring adult.

- **Create an Acrostic Poem.** Students make an Acrostic Poem for an important adult in their life using the letters from the adult's name. Students decorate each letter of the adult's name using images that are associated with adjective. For example, the letter L in Laura could stand for "Loving" and it could be decorated with hearts. For kindergarteners, use a template so students come up with a word for just the first letter of the caring adult's name. Students give their illustrations as gifts to their caring adult friend.

Grade 4 through Grade 6

- **Interview a caring adult.** Student interviews a caring adult friend about their life experiences. If possible, use audio tools or video so your student plays the role of a journalist. Student selects the characteristic they most admire and hope to emulate to present to their classmates. The student's presentation--regardless of the media he or she uses for the interview--should be accompanied by a photograph of his or her adult friend and student together.



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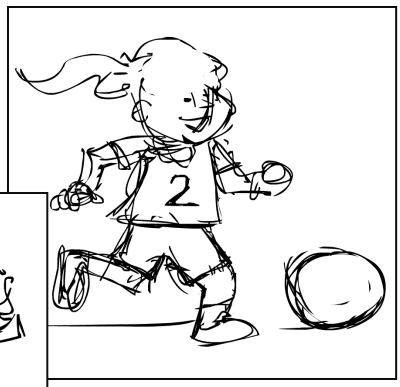
CARING CONNECTIONS BETWEEN CHILDREN AND THEIR PEERS

Kindergarten through Grade 3



- **Make a book of fun.** Student draws a picture of what they do with their friends to have fun and be happy. Compile all drawings made by the class into a booklet that each student shares with their family at home. If you would like to, add in the front of the book, a Comments Page for parents to share what they enjoyed about the project.

- **Make a flipbook.** Student makes a flipbook of an activity they do with their friends for fun and demonstrates it to everyone in their class.

Grade 4 through Grade 6

- **Play the compliment game.** Each student decorates an envelope and writes his or her name on the front. Next, have students write a nice comment about the personality (or character) of each of their classmates on individual strips of paper. Have students deliver their compliments to each other's envelopes. At the end of the activity, each student will have an envelope full of compliments about their character from their classmates. Have student hang envelope in his or her cubby, desk, or locker for added encouragement at times of stress, e.g., standardized testing, or dips in confidence.

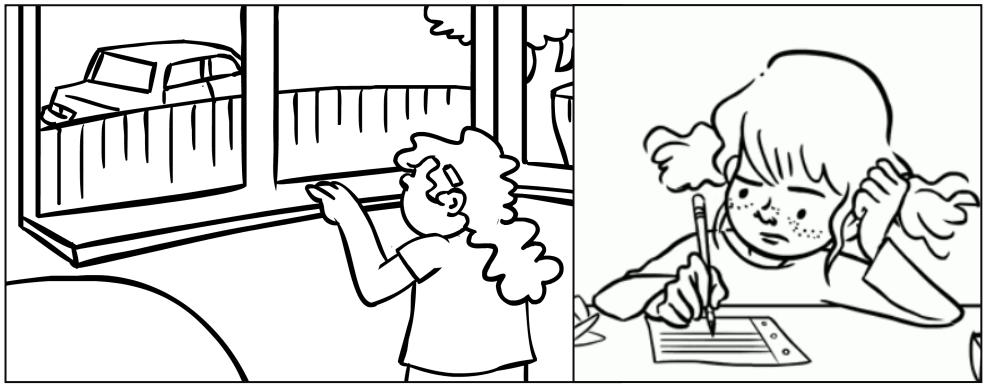
- **Make a word search puzzle.** Assign students a partner. Each member of the pair makes a Word Search Puzzle about the other, using words that describe positive qualities of their partner. Have partners trade their puzzles with one another to solve.

PERSONAL COURAGE

Kindergarten through Grade 3

- **Create a personal courage journal.** Student writes a daily personal courage journal. List at least two courageous things that they did each day. Each courageous activity should be a simple drawing with caption or longer description accompanied by a simple drawing. This will help them expand their definition of courage as well as recognize their own capacity to be courageous in their everyday lives.

- **Weathering a personal challenge drawing**. Student selects an experience that was difficult for them, and draws a picture of themselves on one-half of the drawing paper showing the challenge, then draws a picture of themselves on the second half of the paper, showing themselves when they had gotten through the tough time and were feeling better. The drawing should be accompanied by a caption describing how they made it through the tough time.



Grade 4 through Grade 6

- **Explore the definition of courage.** Student writes the definition of courage in the traditional sense from the dictionary. Ask them to expand the definition to include traits or behaviors that are not usually appreciated as courageous. Student then writes a story about him or herself that illustrates "quiet courage" or a non-traditional act of courage.

- **Write a courage poem.** Student writes a poem about a family member past or present who has been courageous and why.

- **Weathering a personal challenge**. Student selects an experience that was difficult for them, and writes a letter to their teacher describing it and what he or she did to get through this tough time. Teacher writes a brief letter in response that emphasizes the student's courage, resourcefulness, and resilience.

RESPECTFUL LISTENING

Kindergarten through Grade 3

- **Assemble a musical band.** Divide the class into two. Each half is a musical band with the teacher as conductor. Have each student create a unique noise that they will "play" in the band. When signaled by the conductor, the student makes his or her sound. Have each band perform for the other half of the class. Students will learn to respect when to play their sound and when to listen. If available, students can use simple instruments like the triangle or tambourine instead of noises. Record the song that is made so that students can hear what they have produced.

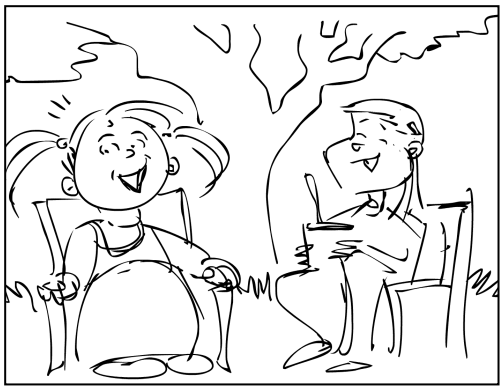
Grade 4 through Grade 6

- **Play the listening game.** Students sit in a circle. If the class is large, organize students into groups to sit in smaller circles. Ask students to listen very carefully because they will be asked to recall what their classmates say about themselves. Have each student say two facts about themselves that are surprising and not known by most of their classmates. Call on students to recall what they heard about one another so they can appreciate the importance of listening carefully.

RESPONSIBILITY TO ONESELF AND TO OTHERS

Kindergarten through Grade 3

- **Tell about your best friend.** Ask students to pick who their best friend is. Discuss with students why they picked them as a best friend—what did he or she do to be a best friend? Ask students to share about a time they acted like a best friend and a time they did not.



Grade 4 through Grade 6

Write about a friendship. Students select a favorite friendship duo from a book, movie, or TV. Ask the student to write a description of events that happened between the two friends that highlight the supportive elements of a friendship. The description should answer the question, "What makes their friendship strong or not?" There should be an accompanying visual to illustrate a meaningful interaction between the two friends. As a follow-up, students can describe and illustrate a comparable example from their own lives.

LEADERSHIP

Kindergarten through Grade 3

- **Draw a leader.** Student draws a picture of their favorite leader and writes a short caption to explain why this individual is an effective leader. All pictures can be displayed together in the classroom as a Leadership Quilt.

- **Empower a leader for the day.** Each student in the class fulfills the role of "Leader for the Day. " This is not a privilege that a student earns, but a set of expectations that the student must live up to, specifically, respectful listening, responsibility for oneself and others, demonstration of caring about peers and adults, personal courage, and leadership. The Leader of the Day is designated by a special badge. The Leader of the Day fills the role of "expert" about these values in the classroom and it becomes his or her role to choose the next leader of the day. Provide concrete examples to the class of how to honor each value in the classroom.

Grade 4 through Grade 6

- **Hold a debate.** Have students brainstorm the qualities that define a good leader. Then divide the class in half and have them debate the question, "Are leaders born or created?"

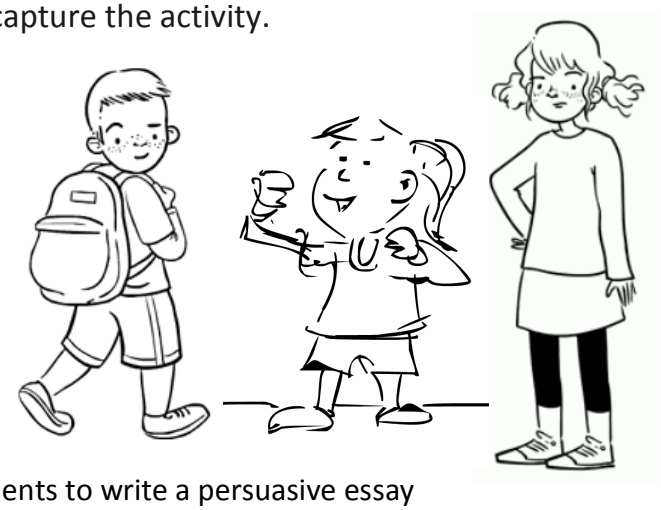
TEAMWORK

Kindergarten through Grade 3

- **Play the relay drawing game.** Split the class into two parts in preparation to play a "relay drawing" game. From a box that has suggestions, the first team selects something to draw, e.g., a rabbit, and like a relay team, students take turns going up to the board to draw one element of the picture. The other half of the class guesses what the other team is drawing. For kindergarteners, consider directing the class do a drawing, such as a zoo or a city, together; each student contributes some element to complete the picture.

- **Act out teamwork.** Read a book with the class such as *The Big Great Enormous Turnip*. Use the story line of the book, in this case, all the people and animals needed to pull the turnip out of the ground, to discuss teamwork. Have students act out pulling the vegetable out of the garden and take a series of pictures to capture the activity.

Grade 4 through Grade 6



- **Write about a team.** Ask students to write an essay about their favorite team (e. g., sports, dance troupe, band or orchestra, drama group, circus) discussing what elements are essential for that team to work well together.

- **Write a persuasive essay.** Ask students to write a persuasive essay that addresses the questions, "What would they value more, being a star at an individual activity or being a member of a team? What would you learn in each scenario?"

- **Birthday line up**. The goal of this activity is to have students line up in order according to their birthdays, but without speaking to one another. They have 5 minutes to form their line. Once formed, the students say their birthdates out loud to see how successfully they met the challenge. Afterwards, have them discuss what it was like to communicate without using words and how teamwork requires both leading and following.

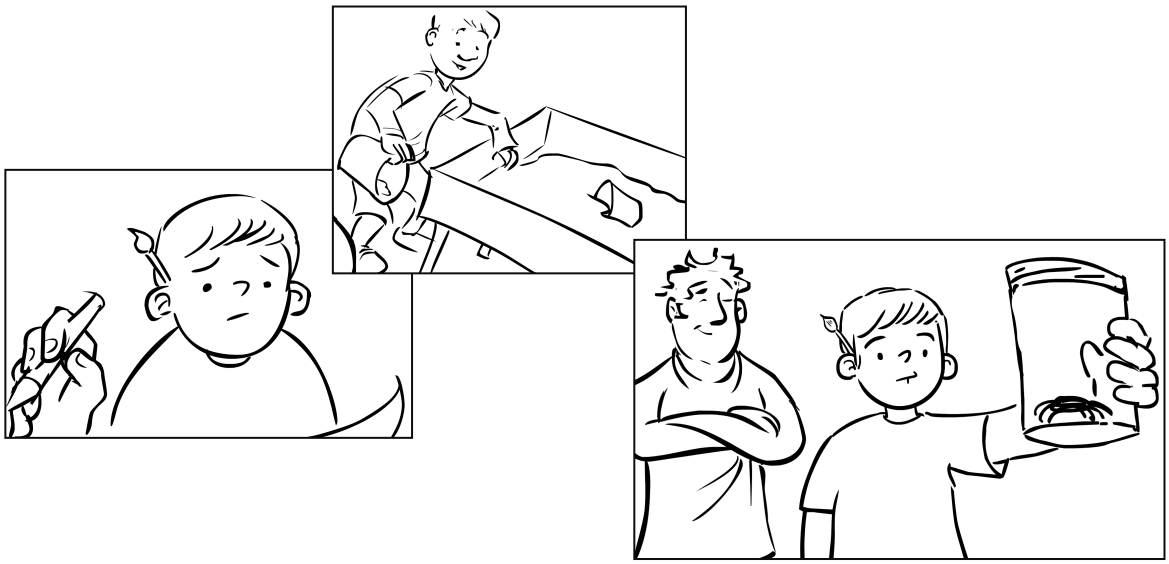
PERSONAL BEST

Kindergarten through Grade 3

- **Write a personal best journal.** Each student chooses an area where doing his or her personal best matters to him or her. (e.g., home or school, etc.) Student writes a daily 'personal best' journal. It should include at least three things they are proud of that they did each day. Each activity should be a simple drawing with caption or a longer description accompanied by a simple drawing.

Grade 4 through Grade 6

- **Graph progress towards a personal goal.** Students create a project where they choose an individualized goal, setting benchmarks along the way to reach that goal. Have students track their progress by creating a "graph of progress" to visually chart their experience over time. For example, a student may aim to improve their reading, learn to bake a cake, or to run a mile.



CAPSTONE PROJECT ON
BUILDING A RESILIENCE SUPPORTING CLASSROOM

Kindergarten through Grade 3

- **Watch a movie clip and make a group drawing.** For kindergartners, pick one of the values to highlight like *teamwork*; for grades 1-3, you may want to select two or three values for them to focus on. Choose a clip from a movie like *A Bug's Life*, *A Toy Story,* or *Finding Nemo* to discuss the values reflected in the scene. Before showing the movie have a short discussion to define the value(s). Tell the students this is what they should keep their eyes and ears open for while watching the movie. Students then illustrate a scene from the movie that reflects the value(s); and write a caption to describe the scene. Display their drawings together in a quilt-like presentation.

Grade 4 through Grade 6

- **Watch and reflect about resilience.** Select a movie that you feel highlights some of the resilience-building principles. One example is the basketball documentary *More Than A Game*. Two other films that lend themselves to this exercise are *The Mighty Ducks* and *The Goonies*. 1) Have students discuss how personal best, friendship, and teamwork are woven in as themes in this story, and then assign a two-part paper. Part one would be an analysis of the values that made this team successful. Part two would be a personal reflection about how they could incorporate one of the values into their own approach to life, relationships, and/or activities. 2) Divide the class in thirds – students may choose whether to write about/discuss 'personal best', 'friendship; or 'teamwork' as a group. Each group selects a spokesperson to report the group's ideas to the whole class. Their report should offer examples of how to incorporate the values in the classroom.

CREDITS AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This guide is one of a set of tools designed to build awareness and understanding within communities that can support the resilience of military children and their families. These tools are part of the *Staying Strong* initiative and are available on-line, including a

- Documentary style video *Staying Strong: How Schools Build Resilience in Military Families*
- Website for military parents, family members, and professionals www.stayingstrong.org
- Toolkit for Educators to increase awareness and support for military children in schools.

The Home Base Program serves Iraq and Afghanistan veterans and their families through clinical care, research and community education.

For more information or to receive any of these tools, please visit
www.homebaseprogram.org

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Illustrations by Fablevision.

The Home Base Program thanks the Bristol-Myers Squibb Foundation for sharing our commitment to the Families of those who serve our nation.

Teachers Karen Tagawa, Marie Wilson, and Craig Wilson, for lending their guidance and expertise.

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