

Confidence and Connectedness



Building Resilience in Children

Evidence base for Nurture Works - BUZ (Build Up Zone) programs

A paper by Steve Heron (Director - Nurture Works)

With assistance of funding from
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Kids say the darndest things!

When I asked a confident six year old child recently if he ever gets picked on he said “No, not really!” When I asked him why, she said, “**Because I know who I am**”.

Stephen Fischbacher, a Glaswegian living in Edinburgh who writes many Build Up songs for kids wrote a song about bullying. In it he says “**When people are cruel, it makes all the difference, to know where you’re going and where you come from.**”

In my experience and research on promoting the social and emotional competence of children and prevention of mental health issues, including suicide, delinquent behaviour, social problems, attention difficulties and depression I have come across many prevention strategies. By far the most common factors in all of these prevention strategies include the concept of “**Resilience.**”

According to the Department of Education and Training in the Document titled “Pathways to Health and Well Being in Schools”, **resilience is the capacity for recovery following stressful life experiences, and even becoming stronger as a result of overcoming them.** ¹³

The World Health Organisation (WHO) is a strong advocate of life skills education. Life skills are defined as ‘abilities for adaptive and positive behaviour, that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life. ⁷ (i.e. Resilience)

These life skills include:

- **Decision making**
- **Creative thinking**
- **Communication**
- **Self awareness**
- **Coping with emotions**
- **Problem solving**
- **Critical thinking**
- **Interpersonal skills**
- **Empathy**
- **Coping with stress**

(Sums up much of what is covered in our BUZ programs)

I have condensed this list of “Life Skills” into two main factors or keys that build resilience in children.

CONNECTEDNESS and CONFIDENCE

Connectedness – is the ability to stay in touch with people, to make and keep friends, to know you belong, to know that someone cares, to know that your contribution matters.

I was absolutely taken aback when a nine year old child confided in me about her attempted suicide experience. Feeling totally inadequate as a counsellor I consulted a psychologist from mental health services with the view of referring the child onto more “professional help” – The psychologist told me that “I was it!” Because the child had come to me, trusted in me and confided in me then I was the one to journey with her. Somewhat perplexed I asked, “How do I do that?”

His answer was simple, “Just keep her **connected!**”

Something inside of me clicked – I knew what to do, after-all that is what I had already been doing, that’s why she trusted me in the first place.

An article titled “Getting Connected” published in the Australian Educator No 40 Summer 2003 edition indicated that the trends of suicide and self harm that peaked in the mid 1990’s in Western Australia were reduced through prevention strategies of building resilience and “connectedness” in children.

“With the trends suggesting that these strategies have reduced the incidence of suicide and serious, deliberate self-harm, there’s a strong move in government and non-government schools to look at broader prevention strategies, from the point of view of building resilience and connectedness.” Says Jenny Cugley, executive officer with the state’s ministerial council for suicide prevention. ¹²

The “**You Can Do It**” program undertaken in many schools throughout Australia identifies 5 key attributes of successful students: **confidence, organisation, getting along, persistence and resilience**. The first of these being confidence.

Confidence – is to believe in oneself, to know you can do something, to have self mastery, leading to self esteem.

One of our BUZ Life Skills Mini Posters says “**If you want someone to like you, first you have to like yourself**”. A ten year old child came to me and said “Steve, how can I like myself when I don’t know who I am?”

Martin Seligman, author of “The Optimistic Child”¹⁴ says that self esteem can’t be taught, rather it is a by-product. Self efficacy or personal mastery are the kinds of words that Seligman uses. **If kids are able to “achieve” then they will believe in themselves.**

When they believe in themselves they will like themselves and they will know who they are. Remember, “When people are cruel, it makes all the difference to know where you are going and where you come from.” and “I don’t get picked on because I know who I am.”

Helen McGrath author of BOUNCE BACK! A classroom resiliency program says that having a “Healthy Self Esteem” is linked to being resilient. She says that there are three types of self esteem:

- Students with a **low self esteem** have a pessimistic and negative view of their strengths and achievements.
- Students with a **healthy self esteem** have worked hard to achieve their goals and knowledge. When faced with failure or mistakes they stay optimistic.
- Many students have an **inflated self esteem** with poor self knowledge leading to vulnerability and disappointment, but can also lead to pride, and conceit.

Many studies confirm that in some students inflated self esteem is also related to aggression and mistreatment of others.

The ACT Government ‘Children’s Plan’ initiatives include the Canberra Social Plan; the report on the Health of School aged Children, the Report into the Rights and Wellbeing of the Child. The plan states:

*International studies of youth delinquency, drug use and juvenile crime demonstrate overwhelmingly the importance of fostering opportunities for children to learn and practice social skills, to develop positive relationships, and to increase levels of **confidence and self esteem**. The value of social support has been shown to improve academic and behavioural adjustment, reduce delinquent behaviours that correlate highly with poor school performance and build resilience in children and young people.*¹⁵

*There exists a pervasive body of evidence pointing to the cost benefits of investing in the early years. Early intervention services have been shown to produce a sustained improvement in children’s health, education and welfare. Research also indicates the early intervention services have the greatest impact when they are capable of addressing a broad range of issues and are provided as part of a coordinated network. For every dollar spent in the early years seven dollars is saved in later years.*¹⁵

Nurture Works is an organisation that is proactive and preventative in its workings. Our target is ‘all children’ not just children ‘at risk’, this makes us more prevention orientated than intervention orientated.

The Mental Health Prevention Policy from the W.A. Department of Health points to a number of factors in the promotion of community health. Three key factors from the policy adopted from the “Ottawa Charter”¹⁶ include:

- 1. Creating supportive environments** (i.e. Build Up Zones)
- 2. Strengthening Community Action** (i.e. Networking)
- 3. Developing Personal Skills** (i.e. BUZ Life Skills)

Nurture Works, through our innovative BUZ programs helps kids to be “Connected through building community and helping kids build their confidence by participating meaningfully in community, in other words a positive supportive environment, a Build-Up Zone.”

Former Australian of the Year Professor Fiona Stanley says, “**The earlier on in a child’s life you can provide a positive environment the better.**”

BUZ helps kids to believe in themselves, to be confident, to know who they are and where they are going.

Hence our aim... **“Growing confident children in a positive environment” or “Injecting kids with Hope.”**

- A confident child is a resilient child.
- A confident child grows in the social competence.
- A confident child makes more sense of their life; they know where they are going and where they come from.
- A child makes better choices as an adolescent when they make more sense of their journey

THE NEED IN SCHOOLS

Quotes from “Pathways to Mental Health and Well-being in Schools”.¹³

So why is there a need for a particular focus on promoting mental health and well-being in schools?

Three main factors have contributed to this need:

- 1. Increasing community concern about the complexity and extent of social and emotional problems experienced by children and young people today and the very serious implications these have for their future life prospects.**
- 2. Research evidence has confirmed that mental health promotion and illness prevention do make a difference and lead to long-term social and financial benefits for individuals, families, communities and Government.**
- 3. A recognition that schools, in collaboration with parents and the wider community, provide key settings for implementing strategies that enhance mental health and well-being.**

The *WA Child Health Survey*³ reported that as many as **one in five students (aged 4 to 16 years) may be experiencing a mental health problem** such as **delinquent behaviour, thought problems, social problems, attention difficulties, aggressive behaviour, anxiety, depression, withdrawn behaviour or a somatic complaint**. Of these students almost half have three or more types of problems.

Several findings of the *WA Child Health Survey*³ are of specific interest to schools. The first is that students with mental health problems were five times more likely to have low levels of academic achievement. The association between social and attention problems and low levels of achievement is well documented.⁶

The more we reduce risk and increase protective factors in a child’s life the more social and emotional development is enhanced.⁶

THE BROAD EVIDENCE

The *WA Child Health Survey*³ recommends that, for the long term and in order to reduce mental health problems, a combination of promotion and prevention approaches is necessary. It cites strong evidence for schools providing effective preventive interventions such as life-skills education, health education, supportive learning environments and parent education programs.

There is strong evidence that supports targeting these prevention approaches to the child and adolescent population. **Such interventions have resulted in improved mental health outcomes^{5, 8}, improved school achievement⁵, greater attachment to school, a reduction in bullying, less anti-social behaviour¹⁰ and less delinquency.⁴**

Again I quote from “Pathways to Mental Health and Well-being in Schools”.¹³

There is now a substantial amount of evidence for the effectiveness of promotion and prevention strategies. By implementing evidence-based approaches during the formative years, mental health and well-being is enhanced, social problems are reduced and financial savings are made.

Schools are important settings for these strategies. School staff foster resilience and reduce mental health problems in students through building healthy relationships, encouraging a sense of belonging, promoting meaningful participation and teaching life skills.

Teachers and administrators have always recognised the links between the mental health and well-being of children and their academic achievement and subsequent life experiences. Children’s levels of social and emotional competence – for example their ability to get along with peers, communicate needs and ideas, solve problems, recognise and manage their emotions, empathise with others, respond to conflict appropriately and seek help if needed – will dictate the extent to which they will participate productively in classroom and playground activities. Children experiencing stress will often have difficulty concentrating on school work.

Current research from Let's Live... Suicide Prevention Australia lends support to school programs which deal with positive mental health strategies such as communication, problem solving and coping strategies, caring behaviours and self help.

Recent research suggests that **factors associated with good mental health may be crucial to the prevention of crime**.⁶ The content of daily newspapers, talk-back radio programs and news broadcasts is evidence of the community's concern with crime and the plight of victims. They also question the adequacy of laws and penalties in the prevention of crime. In a climate in which some sections of the community are calling for tougher penalties for juveniles involved in crime it is important to understand the 'developmental pathways' leading to criminal behaviour.⁶

There is considerable scientific evidence that **promotion and prevention strategies implemented during the formative years can reduce crime and other social problems** in the long term.⁶

The BUZ programs are based on the broad evidence that Social skills training covering: social competence and sense of belonging, the presence of supportive caring parents, community attachment (connectedness), and a supportive learning environment, i.e. Build-Up Zone, have a positive effect in developing improved mental health outcomes, improved school achievement, greater attachment to school, a reduction in bullying, less anti-social behaviour and less delinquency. **Building Confidence and Connectedness.**

OUR OWN EVIDENCE

With the help of some funding from the **Federal Government Department of Transport and Regional Services "Regional Partnerships Program"** over the last 12 months we have conducted a number of surveys to gauge the impact of our work in the community.

We conducted 5 surveys:

- **The BUZ Family survey** - surveying families whose children have been involved in BUZ programs. 87 surveys were returned.
- **The BUZ Kids Survey** - surveying children who have participated in BUZ programs (mostly Life Skills Workshops) 143 surveys returned
- **The BUZ Friendship Survey** - surveying students in classes pre and post BUZ Programs in their class. - Over 540 students.
- **THE BUZ Skills Class Survey** - Surveying students about the skills learnt in BUZ Class programs - over 130 students
- **BUZ Teacher Survey** - Surveying teachers after BUZ Program in their class. 11 teachers

A volunteer collating the surveys related a comment as she was nearing the end of entering the data. She simply said, **"It seems that the more children are involved in BUZ programs the more positive the outcomes."**

The statistics from the surveys provide evidence that the BUZ programs are making a difference in at least two main areas - Friendship Skills (Connectedness) and Confidence.

- **In the BUZ Kids Survey:**

Children say that since being involved in BUZ programs: (responses over 65%)

☺	"I am more confident now"	78%
☺	"I help others more"	78%
☺	"I am more caring"	69%
☺	"I am now a happier person"	71%
☺	"I now have more friends"	68%
☺	"I like myself more"	68%

They have used the skills learnt in BUZ Programs to:

- ☺ **“Keep friends”** 75%
- ☺ **“Build Up my own self confidence”** 72%
- ☺ “Manage anger” 69%
- ☺ “Make friends” 68%
- ☺ “Handle Problems better” 68%

(The lowest percentage was “Less fights at home” with 41%, still significant that 41% of children say that they are now having less fights at home since involvement in BUZ programs)

• **In the Nurture Works Family Survey**

Parents have indicated because of involvement in BUZ programs their children:

- ☺ **“Have more self confidence”** Huge or lots - 67% Somewhat - 29% (96%)
- ☺ **“Are generally happier”** Huge or lots - 58% Somewhat - 38% (96%)
- ☺ **“Are able to make more friends”** Huge or lots - 52% Somewhat - 40% (92%)
- ☺ “Consider others more” Huge or lots - 52% Somewhat - 36% (88%)
- ☺ “Stand up for themselves” Huge or lots - 52% Somewhat - 40% (92%)

The lowest percentages were: Our children.....

- ☺ “Now get along better” Huge or lots - 36% Somewhat 44% (80%)
- ☺ “Are able to sort out their conflicts” Huge or lots - 34% Somewhat 51% (85%)

In the family section it is interesting to note:

- ☺ “Our family enjoy each other’s company more” Huge or lots - 57% Somewhat 29% (86%)
- ☺ “As parents we are less stressed” Huge or lots - 37% Somewhat 35% (73%)

• **In the BUZ class teachers survey**

Teachers have indicated that after a BUZ program in the class the children have had significant or moderate improvement of more than 70% in the following areas:

- ☺ **“Increase in self esteem”** 82%
- ☺ “Better understanding of their feelings” 82%
- ☺ **“Improvement in friendship Skills”** 73%
- ☺ “Expressing feelings more appropriately” 73%
- ☺ “Work better in groups” 73%
- ☺ “Get on better” 73%
- ☺ “Talk more about their problems and worries” 73%
- ☺ “More assertive and able stand up for themselves” 73%

Other questions form the Teacher’s Survey

- ☺ Has the program had a positive effect on you class? 82%
- ☺ **Has the program given you a useful framework to continue building the social skills, virtues and values and self esteem of the children in your class?** 100%

• **In the BUZ Skills Class surveys:**

The children have indicated the ways that the BUZ program has helped them with life skills (Over 75% results in the Always or often areas)

- ☺ **“I am now a happier person”** 85%
- ☺ **“I am more confident now”** 82%
- ☺ “My behaviour at school has improved” 81%
- ☺ **“I like myself more”** 78%

I have used the skills learnt in the BUZ program to:

- ☺ **“Keep friends”** 89%
- ☺ **“Build up my self confidence”** 84%
- ☺ “Handle problems better” 83%
- ☺ “Manage my anger” 78%
- ☺ “Handle my feelings” 75%

Lowest percentage in this area was “I have less fights at home” with 45%

The BUZ Friendship surveys that we conduct pre and post program in classes are provide a window to how the children view friendship and socialization issues from their point of view.

It is interesting to note that over with over 550 children surveyed the results of pre and post program are practically static. There has been little change in the perceptions of friendships skills in the eyes of the children.

Therefore the results of this survey are inconclusive; however there are some interesting observations in relation to the surveys and the effect of the BUZ programs on classes.

1. The surveys conducted in the first two weeks of the school year tend to have more escalated results. This could be because the children are in the “honeymoon period” of their new classroom. The social intricacies have not come fully into play and children are generally happy to be back at school.
2. Conducting the surveys at the end of the term or early next term after the program in term 1 generally shows a slight negative swing. This could be because of the factor mentioned in 1.
3. There is no significant difference in most areas for girls or boys answers. However it is interesting to note that boys tend to share their feelings less and girls tend to be less positive in their ability to say nice things to each other.
4. Our observations with the surveys and class programs is that where a class teacher is more involved in the program with support, follow up, reinforcement, follow-up worksheets and practicing the skills learnt in the class then there is a tendency for a more positive swing in the results of the Friendship Survey.
5. On the other hand when a class teacher is in and out of the lessons, not as supportive or focussed on the program with less attention on follow up and practice then there is a tendency for the results to show a slight negative swing.
6. One of the other observations is that when there is a change of teacher or illness of a teacher midstream or towards the end of a program then there is usually a significant swing toward the negative of most questions. We believe this is mostly associated with the grief and change factor. When children’s “Supportive Environment” is changed then there is a tendency for unsettledness in relationships between the children.
7. Children in the junior years of school tend to be more black and white or (Polarised) in their answers (i.e. more “Always and Never” answers. This is not surprising as it fits with associated developmental traits.
8. Conducting the survey’s directly or a few weeks after a program is not the most effective means of determining effect, especially related to social skills. It takes a long time for social intricacies and relationships to change and be positively affected.
9. It is interesting to note that where children have been exposed to more BUZ initiative and programs they tend to be more positive in their other surveys.
10. An observation of one particular class of year 1’s in a school that marked reasonably lowly in the pre program survey showed significant swing towards the positive. This particular class was a focus that needed intervention. A collaborative plan was put in place with a year 2 class. The three teachers involved heavily supported the program and followed up with a complimentary “generic” program running in conjunction with the BUZ program.

In conclusion

Broad evidence of the conducting of “social skills” programs that aim at building children’s self confidence and connectedness and developing resilience are effective in bringing about positive outcomes of healthier and more socially competent children, therefore reducing the risk of mental illness, suicide, anti social behaviour, drug abuse, juvenile delinquency, behaviour problems and depression.

Nurture Works doesn’t have the resources to conduct long term, scientific research. Therefore we are relying on the broader evidence of these kinds of programs to **“Evidence Base”** our initiatives.

Nurture Works surveys demonstrates evidence that the BUZ programs are having a positive effect of children through the eyes of their parents, their teachers and the children themselves.

The social skills learnt in the BUZ programs take some time to become congruent in a child’s development, therefore surveying for results directly after a program has limitations. This is also a good argument for the programs to be ongoing - developing on the learning that is already taking place.

Recently, the Department of Education and Training Social Outcomes Interest Group identified the following major clusters of social outcomes as being explicit and implicit in the Learning Outcomes described in the *Curriculum Framework*.

These clusters are consistent with the mental health indicators described in the research and include:






- interpersonal skills including conflict resolution, collaboration and communication skills;
- autonomy, independence and enterprise including intrapersonal skills, emotional expression and regulation, critical thinking and problem solving skills; and
- social, moral and ethical development including respecting and valuing others, working towards equality, harmony and peace, ethical behaviour, viewing self as a member of a group, accepting responsibility and respecting the environment.

A ‘limited time’ program on its own will not bring about these outcomes. It is the ongoing development of an environment of respect and the countless daily conversations and encounters, stories, experiences, opportunities for learning in life itself, together with good role modelling from teachers and parents that will make a difference in the long run.

What Nurture Works offers through the BUZ (Build-Up Zone) initiatives is something to hang all this on, or an umbrella to cover the invaluable social skills, virtues, values, emotional intelligence education.

BUZ offers a number of programs, initiatives, resources, merchandise and ideas that than enable a school to have a “Whole School” approach that children will not only relate to, but will take to with enthusiasm and integrity. BUZ has the potential to make significant breakthroughs that will help create an environment of respect, where all members of the school community feel that they are treasured.

The are 5 principles that we hold to that make a Build Up Zone.

-  **Each person is treasured and encouraged to contribute.**
-  **We build one another up, there is no place for put downs.**
-  **We look for peaceful ways to solve conflicts.**
-  **Negatives are turned to positives - we focus on the good.**
-  **Feelings are acknowledged and allowed to be expressed in healthy ways.**

BUZ is making a difference, a difference a price tag can’t be put on.

International research estimates that for every dollar spent on early intervention, between \$5 and \$7 is saved.

Nurture Works is an organization working at the top of the cliff, not just preventing children from falling off, but building such a strong sense of community and connectedness that children don’t venture near the cliff edge in the first place.

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