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# Transitions: Resiliency Through Change

*A Reflection Guide for Parents of Transitioning Youth*



David A. Songco, Psy.D.  
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THE  
CHARLES E. KUBLY  
FOUNDATION



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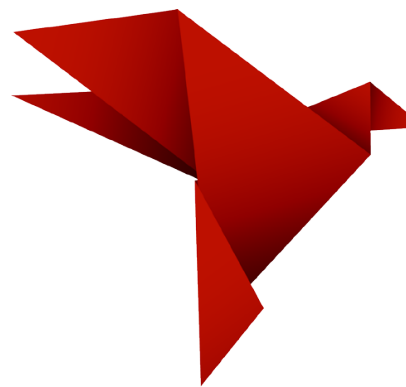
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We wish that we did not have to tell this story. We wish that this story would not resonate with so many parents and so many youth across our community and our nation. The story we share is unique because it is about a young girl who touched so many people by her presence, her struggle, and her legacy.

Abby was born on May 31, 2000, the youngest of three children. Her older brother, Jacob, is a state champion in Track and Field and soon to be a Division I athlete, and her older sister Sarah is an all around confident, academic, and athletic young woman. Abby had her own achievements as an A student, talented swimmer and musician.

Abby was an individual and a leader with a unique personality and a mind of her own. She was compassionate and had a sense of being “real.” She also had the ability to immediately identify and call out false gestures. She was a thirteen year old who would tell it like it was in a very articulate manner and often with dry sense of humor. She always appeared confident and did not hesitate to befriend the underdog, align with those who may have been vulnerable, and stood up for what she believed.

No one knows when Abby’s struggles began, but in the Fall of 2012 Abby began middle school and many things started to change. While Abby had friendships in elementary school and a close knit group from swimming, she struggled to find her place during this transition. Despite being a strong and fast swimmer, Abby saw herself as overweight and slow. She believed that if she was thinner she would be faster. With this mistaken belief, Abby would begin her struggle with bulimia. Despite exhibiting a confident personality, Abby was experiencing internal suffering. The struggles and pain that she felt manifested through cutting.



Despite her family’s and professionals’ best efforts to help her, Abby’s struggle overwhelmed her. On July 7th, 2013, Abby took her own life.

Suicide causes pain and often invites survivors into secrecy. Abby’s parents chose openness. It is through their willingness to share their love of Abby in celebration of her life that we are able to share her story with you.

## Who we are: REDgen

The tragic loss of Abby along with her parents' willingness to share her story mobilized the community to grieve and work together. Sadly, as a community, we recognized that Abby's story was not uncommon. Our small group conversations highlighted the need for honest, courageous conversations throughout the larger community as we recognized how much our youth struggle with success, stress, and transitions and how often their struggles are kept secret or misunderstood. REDgen was created to change and challenge what has historically been hidden and make sense of what has been misunderstood. We invite members of the community into courageous dialog to encourage personal insight and promote resiliency and growth in our youth and families.

REDgen is working to develop new generations of resilient youth with a healthy understanding of what success means.



## The Purpose of this Booklet

This is not an instructional book on how to raise your children. Rather, this booklet is meant to empower parents to thoughtfully reflect in order to engage in a courageous conversation with themselves and with their children.

**Transitions are constant. Resilience is necessary. Success can be redefined.**

# Transitions and Transitional Stress

We have all been there and experienced transitions in our own lives. Do you remember what it was like growing up and having to move? Or perhaps your first experience moving out of state for school or moving away from home? How about the loss of a family member or friend? Transitions impact all of us and we experience them throughout our lives. Transition is often described as a process or period of change, and often is not a singular, finite measurement of time. For example, moving from one neighborhood to another might be described as one event such as “we moved.” Transitions speak to so much more than simply the move. In that example some transitions would be adapting and settling into that neighborhood, establishing relationships with neighbors, and setting up your children with their local school and creating opportunities to make friends. As we can see from this, often times one transition can lead to many others (the changing in schools, establishing new relationships, mourning the loss of old relationships, making new friends, navigating the new area etc.). These transitions can cause significant stress.

**“I’m so stressed out.”**

There is a strong relationship in Western culture between the amount of stress that one experiences and perception of success. Think about our work. We sometimes feel like we are working hard when we feel stressed, almost at that tipping point of it being “too much.” Many managers and bosses evaluate employee performance often times by the amount of stress they experience. The presumption is that if employees seem “too relaxed” then they are not working hard enough. The same can be said for how children experience stress and how they define how much they are working. For example, a child may have a lesson “come easy” or may understand the material the first time around.

## *Examples of Life Transitions*

- *Illness or Death in the family*
- *Changing schools*
- *Moving*
- *Divorce*
- *New step-parent(s)*
- *Puberty*
- *Coming out as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender*
- *First sexual experience*
- *Changing peer groups*
- *Employment/first job*

Since the teacher or parent sees that the child isn't "stressed" or "struggling," the assumption might be they aren't working hard enough, are not being challenged enough, which may lead to a mistaken belief that "the child isn't learning."

### *School Related Transitions*

- *Starting school*
- *Changing schools*
- *Moving to a new teacher/classroom*
- *Multiple teachers/classrooms*
- *Progress reports*
- *Report cards*
- *Conferences*
- *Standardized tests (MAP, WKCE, Smarter Balanced, ACT, etc.)*
- *Disability diagnosis*
- *First exams*
- *Merging of multiple student populations*

The fact is that while stress is natural and common, too much stress can cause significant negative effects on a young person's mind and body. Stress, by classic definition, is a "state of emotional or mental strain or tension resulting from demanding circumstances" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary) or more simply stated, stress is the body's natural reaction to change. Stress is functional and useful - it helps us to adapt to situations, be hyper aware when something is not going right, and produces energy and motivation to move towards a goal. Optimal stress provides simultaneous feelings of motivation with a targeted, achievable goal in sight. Optimal stress is time limited in nature and when that stress subsides, feelings of celebration and accomplishment can ensue.

### **Take a Deep Breathe to Reduce Stress**

1. Place one hand on the chest and other on the belly.
2. Take a deep breathe in through the nose, ensuring the diaphragm (not the chest) inflates with enough air to create a stretch in the lungs - only your lower hand on your belly should move.
3. Exhale slowly through your mouth in a controlled manner.
4. Repeat. Six to ten deep, slow breaths per minute for 10 minutes each day to experience immediate reductions in heart rate and blood pressure.



# Transitional Stress

Transitions are periods in which we are more susceptible and likely to experience stress. Since stress occurs as a response to change, major life events often correlate to the amount of stress experienced. A child, for example, is likely to experience more stress transitioning from elementary school to middle school as opposed to transitioning from second grade to third grade. Some of the possible reasons for this are the number of variables associated with the transition. As you can see from the tables on the following page, there are many unknown or unfamiliar variables that require a child to adapt to this change. The stress that a child experiences in response to these variables during this time of change is known as transitional stress.

## But My Child Can Handle It

Common Warning Signs During Major Transitions
Absenteeism
Tardiness
Missing homework
Lack of preparation
Diminished interest in usual activities
Disengagement
Falling grades
Trouble with sleep
Anxiety
Depression
Aggressiveness
Disruptive behavior
Bullying Behavior

Table 2.1 Common Warning Signs During Major Transitions

Yes, your child might be able to “handle” it, but is being able to barely work through it the best possible approach? We have to remember that when we view our children, we see them through the lens of the proud parent. There is often this innate desire (whether conscious or unconscious) that our children are just like us, if not better. In that way, it is easy to view our children with a “superhero” filter, and may not always see the world the way our children see it. **Accurate empathy from an adult to a child is essential for connection and understanding.**

### Think about it -

Kids often do not want to burden stressed out adults. They will work hard to hide their own stress to not add to yours.

Take care of yourself.

2nd to 3rd Grade Variables	Elementary School to Middle School Variables
Different teacher	Different teachers / Multiple teachers
Different classroom	Different classroom / Multiple classrooms
Different class material	Different class material
New classmates	Different school building
	New classmates
	Friends attending different school
	New choices and expectations for extra-curricular involvement (i.e. band, sports, clubs)
	New demands for managing time effectively
	Increased expectations (parents/teachers) of independence for students
	Hormonal changes (puberty)
	Online access to assignments and grades
	Increased screen time, socially and academically

*Think About It...*

*This is not an exhaustive list of variables experienced during school transitions. Can you remember what transitions you experienced? Write your reflections below.*

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Middle School to High School Variables	High School to College/University Variables
Different teachers / Multiple teachers	Different professors / Multiple professors
Different classroom / Multiple classrooms	Leaving home
Different class material	Living with a roommate
Different school building(s)	Managing money and finances
New classmates from other schools	Increased independence
Friends attending different school	Increased personal responsibility
College prep stress	Increased class sizes - changing teacher-student dynamic
Increased relational challenges (i.e. cliques, dating)	Increased personal accountability (i.e. choosing to go to class)
Increased pressure within competitive extra-curriculars	Friendship overhaul - need to make new support group
Shifting friend groups	Personal time management (ie: studying, meals, class, extra-curriculars)
Increased exposure to alcohol and drugs	Pressure for deciding on major and career
Managing heightened expectations from adults	Distance from safety net of home environment
Online access to assignments and grades	Increased exposure and access to alcohol and drugs
	Needing to independently navigate resources for self-care (i.e. mental health, physical health, tutoring)
	Loss of status (i.e. no longer starter on team, homecoming queen etc.)

**Table 2.2: Example of Variables Encountered in School Transitions**

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# Resiliency

## *Characteristics of Resilient Students*

- Know that being "right" is not the only goal*
- Are able to solve problems in different ways*
- Work with others, who may not be trusted friends*
- Welcome new experiences both inside and outside the classroom environment*
- Share thoughts and ideas freely, actively participate and contribute to classroom dialog*
- Are able and willing to question their own understanding*
- Value and expect others to disagree and challenge their understanding*

While our discussion to this point has been focused on stress and transitions, it is important to recognize that human development is extremely robust, and continues in the face of adversity. Many use the term "resiliency" to describe the robustness and ability to survive adversity. Resiliency is not a trait it is a process. It is the ability to recover or "bounce back" quickly and independently from difficulties or set-backs. Resilience is "the ability to become strong, healthy, or successful again after something bad happens" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary).

Children who are healthy risk takers are able to do so because they feel safe and protected. They see themselves as competent and able, continually striving to meet and exceed expectations. Resiliency allows independent decision making; the ability to see and weigh choices and to recognize and own one's role in the outcomes. Resilient children know they can bounce back from social, emotional and/or academic adversity.

## Fostering Resiliency

Resiliency is a process that is impacted by one's life experiences. Typically when children are connected at home, school and in their community with trusted adults, the capacity to grow and practice resiliency expands.

Caring adults help children see different perspectives and scaffold their learning, especially through missteps or mistakes. Adults who are able to see their own difficult experiences through a different lens can positively impact a child's ability to see a challenge as something to learn from. When children are over-protected and shielded by well-meaning adults from making mistakes or learning from those made, a child's resiliency can be stunted.

### *A Point to Reflect On*

*Think of a time when you had a setback or felt like you failed.*

- How did you demonstrate resiliency?*
- What might your child learn from your approach?*
- Sharing your own personal mistakes may help normalize a future mistake*

A set of blue horizontal lines for writing, with a red vertical margin line on the left and a small circle at the start of the first line.

## **Building Resilience: Reflection and Activities**

Often as parents and caregivers, we look for tangible ways to help and to fix. There are thousands of parenting books and we are always looking for the next technique, or the “7 steps to a happy child.” The truth is that if parenting were reduced to simply seven steps, there would not be a book of 5 steps, 10 steps, or 20 steps to raising a child being sold right next to it. While parenting manuals might offer insights into child development, it's important to acknowledge that parenting and building resilience is a creative process, one that is co-created in a space shared by you and your child. On the following pages are a few prompts to spark a creative reflection for yourself to have mindful interactions with your child.

## Presence not presents

*“Too much love never spoils children. Children become spoiled when we substitute presents for presence.”*

*-- Anthony Witham*



Expressing love to your child can take many forms. However, in our current culture of “work more get more,” we often express love in the form of “stuff.”

Sometimes what children need or want more than anything is “presence” and not “presents.” Simply “being there” is often harder than it sounds, because it also requires us to be fully present with ourselves as well as our children. Turn off the TV, iPad, and silence all phones, and simply try to be there. Have a conversation that does not take place over texting or iMessage, replace Skype and FaceTime with actual people time. And if you feel so inclined, maybe let your child take the lead in what to do, you may find yourself surprised at their imagination and capacity for connection.

*Task: Be there. Let them lead and explore your imaginations together.*

## Don't forget to play

*“It is in playing and only in playing that the individual child or adult is able to be creative and to use the whole personality, and it is only in being creative that the individual discovers the self.”*

*--Donald Woods Winnicott*



Often times as adults, we forget what it is like to play. We are so serious about working hard and paying bills, tuition, etc. Instead of a casual bike ride we are training for a triathlon to feel “accomplished.” Weekends are spent doing chores, yard work, and catching up with “life stuff.” The only time

that we relax are those two weeks that are “given to us” as vacation. Imagine what this might look like from your child’s eyes. What might we be teaching them if we no longer have fun or play? Much like Peter Pan and the Lost Boys, it might give us unwarranted anxiety knowing that we have to grow up and no longer play. The most healthy thing parents can do is to get on the floor with your kids, and play. Access your imagination and creativity with your child as your guide, and see what they are telling you with their play.

*Task: Be a child again.*

### **Listen with space**

*“It is in the space between inner and outer world, which is also the space between people—the transitional space—that intimate relationships and creativity occur.”*

*--Donald Woods Winnicott*

We believe that you all listen to your children, but this challenge and recommendation goes beyond just listening – it’s about listening effectively to what they are trying to say. While we all are great at listening to content, “I don’t want to go to the sleepover,” we often miss what they might be trying to say: “the boys at the sleepover pick on me and I don’t feel safe.” Effective listening means not settling with the answer of “good” or “fine” when we ask how their day was. Effective listening means truly inquiring and expressing care about their day, “what did you learn about today?” or “tell me about a moment when you laughed today.” You might also find yourself surprised at everything they experienced that day once you get past the “good” or “fine.”

*Task: Don’t settle, engage. Listen with your heart, mind and ears open and your mouth closed.*

### **No more blame**

*“The most aggressive and therefore the most dangerous words in the languages of the world are to be found in the assertion I AM.”*

*--Donald Woods Winnicott*

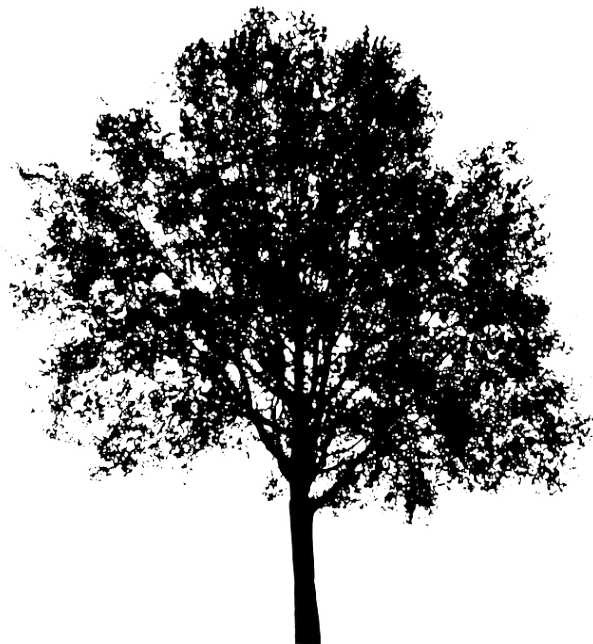
Parents often express “it’s my fault that my child is this way” and often they blame themselves for the struggles that their children are

are experiencing. The simple truth is that blame does not help your child or yourself. What does help is to switch blame and regret into loving kindness, both towards yourself and to your child. Practicing loving kindness means to release negative judgement against yourself as a parent and a person, and accepting yourself for who you are. Often times when a child is exposed to parents and adults who are accepting of themselves as both flawed and beautiful, this in turn can increase the child's own self-esteem.

*Task: Release negative self-judgement, embrace vulnerability, and live authentically.*

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We support and guide our children when we work along-side them to notice, practice and foster resiliency. So much in a child's life is new, things they are attempting or experiencing for the first time (think of all of those transitions). They are continually learning, facing new situations, and developing their independence. We need to remember to grant them the space needed to try new things, to listen to worries or fears, and to discuss probable outcomes ahead of events when possible. We need to do this while expecting a level of frustration and limited success along the way. Adults play an active role in helping the children in our life become resilient individuals.





# Success



As parents we all want the best for our children. What makes someone successful? Is it the right college degree? The right social connections? Is it the right zip code or make of a car? How does life satisfaction and marital/relational happiness factor into your perception of what makes someone “successful”? What about values, meaning, and purpose in our daily endeavors?

Stanford University’s Graduate School of Education is committed to helping contemporary parents raise children who will thrive in this competitive culture. They promote the concept of challenging our usual assumptions about success and ask us to fully explore some other perspectives that we can encourage in our children.

Does success require cognitive abilities or non cognitive skills, like perseverance, curiosity, self control and conscientiousness? These themes are hot topics among education and child development researchers currently. Paul Tough, in his best selling book, *How Children Succeed*, writes that neuroscientists and research social psychologists are compiling compelling evidence that our children need character more than high ACT scores. Moreover, he reports that character is created by encountering set-backs and failures and overcoming such adversity.

Check out their research and resources at [www.challengesuccess.org](http://www.challengesuccess.org)

## *An Interesting Thought*

*Experts in medicine and health are looking at this conundrum in regard to our immune system and bacteria with the widespread use of antibiotics. By getting rid of the smaller bacteria, we invite more powerful bacteria. Our immune systems need to be challenged to be strong. Could it be that we create bigger problems for our children by working so diligently to eliminate or minimize struggles?*

In suburban life, we hope to minimize adversity for our kids. We tend to protect our children fiercely and attempt to pave a smoother road for them in order to ensure “success.” Could it be that this is a disadvantage to our children? Are we unwittingly setting our children up for a lack of resilience?

While poverty and hardship, at one end of the socioeconomic spectrum, is dense with low odds of success, new research is uncovering a not-so-hidden darkness at the other end of the economic spectrum. Children of affluence as well as children from families who are stretching their resources (if not over-extending) to plant themselves in suburban, affluent settings in the attempt to increase their children’s “success” in life, are scoring high in distressing psychological vulnerabilities; anxiety, depression and substance abuse. (Luthar, 2005)

Tough examines the issues that predict children’s maladjustment, whether poor or rich. He explains that research shows the combination of low levels of maternal attachment, high levels of parental criticism and minimal after school adult supervision turn out to be the predictors of high risk behaviors. Among the suburban youth, researchers found that the main cause of distress was ‘excessive achievement pressures and isolation from parents - both physical and emotional.’ (Luthar, 2005)

So, who seems to be succeeding in the most robust sense of the word? Those who exhibit resiliency or “grit”.

## **Expectations**

Let’s talk expectations. Does rethinking success mean lowering expectations? Not at all. It means rethinking expectations also. Optimal rewards from high expectations occur when those expectations are well aligned to the child’s innate strengths and “next best steps.” Scaffolding those next steps into a process of several steps through solid mentoring or coaching will reap great rewards. To develop optimal expectations and reap great rewards we need to start with attuning to the child. What is the child “saying” through her abilities, her natural motivations, and what is expected in her developmental “ballpark?”

Think about this: a six month old baby who is expending all her energy on sitting upright, delighting in this new feat catches her father’s admiring gaze and they share this “success.” He then sees she can reach over and pick up a toy, he places a toy a couple inches further... she does it!

She stays sitting upright AND reaches out and grasps the toy... a feat never done before! They share in this triumph with giggles and clapping, a spontaneous bonding over her success.

Same baby, same situation. Imagine the same father who is now eager to see his daughter walk. He believes that high expectations are motivating and good for her development and is determined to have her experience this next success. This may seem silly, but keep reading. She is sitting upright, successfully... she delights in this and looks to her father for affirmation. He quickly gives her an “atta-girl” but he is determined to get her to walk. He then starts to verbally encourage her to get up, get going... “walk! walk!” He shows her how. He helps her to her feet. She face-plants. You get the picture, it’s a frustrating experience for both and a great disconnection.

There is this beautiful and mysterious impetus of growth that occurs organically, without any help or encouragement or carrots or “atta-boys.” It is called human development. It is relatively predictable and has stages and milestones all throughout life. Sometimes our healthy parental conscientiousness gets neurotic and we feel over responsible, therefore too responsible for failures or successes. We start generating an unhealthy investment in our kids and an unhelpful anxiety.

As parents we can beautifully enhance the natural human development of our children by cultivating a balance between trusting the natural unfolding of development and noticing that next best optimal step for our kids. To do this we need to attune ourselves to them. That is about observing, listening, being engaged and responsive.



## Expectations vs Authentic Living

Rita is a natural wordsmith, quick witted and in her free time journals ferociously. She is known to write out witty cards of encouragement to her friends. She won an essay contest and dreams of writing a series like Harry Potter someday. Rita would greatly benefit from adults who can affirm her ability, her interest and link that interest to a varied array of potential uses, potential life paths. Writers are needed in all types of situations and within many occupations, as well as going down the path of a poet or novelist.



Rita's mom doesn't notice her love of words. She is worried about getting Rita's GPA up as she is convinced that success is inherent in getting accepted into a prestigious school. That B- Rita has in math is creating lots of anxiety in her mom. So forget about that summer writing workshop... Rita's signed up for ACT prep and math tutoring.

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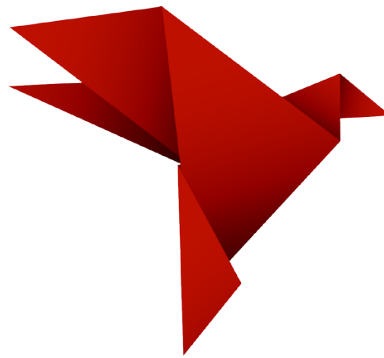
George is a natural people person, quick with the eye contact and has that natural ability to lean in and make others feel heard. He spends time in many collaborations, navigating dramas among his peers, mediating conflicts. He can feel at home with varied cliques at school. What he doesn't seem to have is the desire to "win" and that makes his mediocre performance and investment in his lacrosse team a point of irritation for his father. His dad believes you must have drive, a winner's mentality to be successful. How in the world is George going to climb the ladder of success if he doesn't focus on getting aggressive?

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We provide a valuable gift to our children and ourselves when we take the time to reflect on our assumptions about "success" and how we may impose these assumptions on our children.

# Final Thoughts

We hope that this booklet encourages you to reflect and start a conversation. Our goal was to have parents, teachers and caregivers think more deeply about transitions and their impact on our youth. This goal does not have a finite ending, but rather, encourages you to open the door and explore possibilities about redefining success and fostering resilience while navigating transitions.



## A Note From the Authors

### **David A. Songco, Psy.D.**

As a professor and a psychotherapist who has worked in various settings including eating disorder outpatient programs and university counseling centers, I have seen first hand how the pressure of success and the need to fulfill expectations can be so detrimental to our youth. My encounters have often been “after the fact” in which children, teens, and young adults are “tapped out” and fighting to take their lives back. Being a witness to their struggle as well as their resiliency to overcome and redefine success has inspired me to share their perspective. I want to be a part of this change in which we challenge this culture of success and begin a conversation with you, the parent, to have with your child. “Stressed out” can no longer be the norm. I hope that this booklet has challenged you to engage in a creative and potentially “different” conversation both with yourself and with your family.





**Barb Stutz, LCSW**

As a mom to teens and a psychotherapist, I'm hoping this booklet invites adults to new perspectives and insights about transitions, success, and resiliency. I worked clinically with teens and their families the first decade of my professional life and was quite humbled once my children reached their adolescence. Parenthood is not for sissies! The "contractions" of birthing our kids into adulthood can be as painful as the literal physical contractions of birth... and we can't epidural them... and we often lack any midwives! Being authentic is essential to being influential with teens. They have finely tuned BS meters. This may be because they are exquisitely attuned to the need to find out who they truly are and where they belong. I like the resiliency attitude, "What is right with you is more powerful than anything wrong with you".



**Amy Miller**

I am an educator, resident, and parent from Shorewood. For two years, during her fifth and sixth grade years, I was one of Abby Goldberg's primary teachers. I want to honor Abby's memory and her parents' commitment to helping grow the conversation around mental health. As a teacher and parent of a 16-year old and 20-year old I have experienced first-hand and see the need in my community for adults to engage in courageous conversations about stress, success, transitions, and resiliency at both school and home. I hope this document helps its readers recognize the need and benefits to starting those conversations.

Special Thanks:

Abe and Beverly Goldberg  
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Shorewood Press  
REDgen

# Additional Resources

## Books

Ginsburg, Kenneth R., and Martha Moraghan Jablow. *Building resilience in children and teens: giving kids roots and wings*. 2nd ed. Elk Grove Village, IL: American Academy of Pediatrics, 2011. Print.

Huffington, Arianna Stassinopoulos. *Thrive: the third metric to redefining success and creating a life of well-being, wisdom, and wonder*. New York: Harmony, 2014. Print.

Lerner, Richard M., and Roberta Israeloff. *The good teen: rescuing adolescence from the myths of the storm and stress years*. New York: Stonesong Press Book/Crown Pub., 2007. Print.

Levine, Madeline. *The price of privilege: how parental pressure and material advantage are creating a generation of disconnected and unhappy kids*. New York: Harper, 2008. Print.

Schulte, Brigid. *Overwhelmed: work, love, and play when no one has the time*. Brooklyn: Sarah Crichton Books, 2014. Print.

Tough, Paul. *How children succeed: grit, curiosity, and the hidden power of character*. Mariner Books, 2013. Print.

## Websites

[www.challengesuccess.org](http://www.challengesuccess.org)  
[www.livingcompass.org](http://www.livingcompass.org)  
[www.momenough.com](http://www.momenough.com)  
[www.worrywisekids.org](http://www.worrywisekids.org)  
[www.fosteringresilience.org](http://www.fosteringresilience.org)

A more comprehensive and updated list of additional readings, resources, and articles can be found at the REDgen website by visiting

[www.REDgen.org](http://www.REDgen.org)

## “What Constitutes Success”

By Bessie Stanley (1905)

He has achieved success who has lived well,  
laughed often and loved much;  
who has gained the respect of intelligent men  
and the love of little children;  
who has filled his niche and accomplished his task;  
who has left the world better than he found it,  
whether by an improved poppy, a perfect poem, or a rescued soul;  
who has never lacked appreciation of earth's beauty  
or failed to express it;  
who has always looked for the best in others  
and given them the best he had;  
whose life was an inspiration;  
whose memory a benediction