

MENTAL HEALTH

AND

RESILIENCE



**THE
OUTWARD
BOUND TRUST**

CONTENTS

CONTENTS	1
1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	2
2. INTRODUCTION	3
3. DEVELOPING IN THE FACE OF ADVERSITY: RISK FACTORS	4
4. AGAINST THE ODDS: BEING RESILIENT	6
5. ACTIONS FOR BUILDING RESILIENCE: WORKING ACROSS THE LEVELS	9
6. ACTIONS BUILDING RESILIENCE THROUGH OUTDOOR LEARNING	11
7. OUR WORK AT THE OUTWARD BOUND TRUST	12
8. CONCLUSION	14
9. REFERENCES	15



1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report focuses on resilience – the ability to achieve positive outcomes despite challenging or threatening circumstances. Young people growing up in the UK today face multiple barriers to living healthy, happy and successful lives, including declining emotional wellbeing and a rise in mental health issues; a growing attainment gap; political and economic uncertainty; and a lack of preparedness for the workplace.

Understanding what it means to be resilient and how to strengthen young people's resources of resilience is key to overcoming some of these challenges. In particular, half of diagnosable mental health conditions start before the age of 14 and one in eight young people aged 5 to 19 have at least one mental disorder. The relationship between mental health and resilience is a virtuous one: having good mental health and wellbeing is a contributing factor in resilience, and resilient individuals are more able to successfully navigate mental health problems.

Research into childhood resilience is clear: children and young people who are exposed to stressful life events and adversity stand significantly reduced chances of reaching their full potential as adults. These adversities are considered 'risk factors' – circumstances which increase the probability of poor outcomes for young people. They have a huge range of impacts – on a young person's physical health; social and cognitive development; social determinants of health such as education, employment and income; and mental health and wellbeing.

Fortunately, not all young people exposed to risk factors experience poor outcomes. In fact, many children and young people who encounter stress and adversity fair well, and those that succeed in spite of adversity have been identified as being *resilient*; possessing certain strengths and benefiting from protective factors that help them overcome adverse conditions and thrive. There is a strong evidence base for the existence of key protective factors at the individual, family and community level, and these resources of resilience can reduce the impact of adversity on mental health. Research suggests that some of the most impactful protective factors are self-regulation and emotional adjustment, secure parent-child attachments, and social relations and social support.

As this range of resources indicates, resilience is best optimised when protective factors are strengthened across all three levels. When looking at ways to build young people's resilience, it is important to think holistically, for example through the Public Health England (PHE) advocated 'whole school approach' to wellbeing or implementing overarching workplace practices. In addition, youth transitions, such as starting school, college or employment are key opportunities to help young people practice the skills and attitudes needed to be resilient. Developing psychological robustness through experiences of transitions in earlier years helps to mediate the impact of adversity in later life.

At The Outward Bound Trust, this is our area of expertise. We provide programmes for young people to develop their social and emotional skills at every stage of their education, from the end of primary school through to university and the early stages of employment. The skills that they develop are those that will play a pivotal role in how they successfully navigate transitions through school, and the challenges of adolescence and early adulthood. As the evidence suggests, this can help them to flourish in many different ways throughout their lives.

2. INTRODUCTION

No one health condition matches mental health in its combined extent of prevalence, persistence and breadth of impact¹. Half of all diagnosable mental health conditions start before the age of 14², meaning they often affect people for a long period of time and have adverse effects on many areas of life. One in eight young people aged 5 to 19 have at least one mental disorder³, and the Prince's Trust Youth Index 2018 showed that today's youth are particularly worried about their emotional health⁴. Accordingly, research into resilience is a priority, due to its role in mental health promotion and risk behaviour prevention in young people⁵.

A focus on resilience – taken here to mean achieving positive outcomes despite challenging or threatening circumstances^{6,7,8}, can provide information about the resources that can be mobilised to promote positive outcomes in challenging environments and situations⁵. In 2018 Public Health Wales research, childhood resilience was associated with less mental illness across the life course⁹. The relationship between mental health and resilience is also a virtuous circle: having good mental health and wellbeing is a contributing factor in resilience, and resilient individuals are more able to successfully navigate mental health problems.

This report explores this relationship. At The Outward Bound Trust, working to build young people's resilience is a core component of what we do – but we know it's a bit of a buzz word, a catch-all term for what young people need to do to keep moving on up in this world. Therefore, we've produced this report to explore what it really means to be resilient, and why it is so important for young people growing up today. We outline findings from some of the key research into resilience and young people, which identifies the risk factors associated with poor mental health and protective factors which contribute to resilience. In so doing, this report focuses on an important question: can protective factors be cultivated or strengthened to improve young people's resilience?



3. DEVELOPING IN THE FACE OF ADVERSITY: RISK FACTORS

Children and young people who are exposed to stressful life events stand significantly reduced chances of reaching their full potential as adults^{6,10}. These adversities include growing up in poverty, illness, and Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) – which encompass emotional and physical neglect, emotional and physical abuse, and household dysfunction such as substance misuse or living in care¹¹.

These adversities are considered to be ‘risk factors’ – circumstances which increase the probability of poor outcomes for young people. They have a huge range of impacts, on a young person’s physical health; social and cognitive development; and social determinants of health such as education, employment and income.

<p>PHYSICAL HEALTH</p>	<p>Persistent high levels of stress can lead to the prolonged activation of stress response systems and physiological changes such as increased cortisol levels and blood pressure. These bio-markers present a combination of risk factors for a range of physical health issues such as cardiovascular disease and diabetes¹².</p>
<p>SOCIAL AND COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT</p>	<p>This dangerous level of stress is referred to as ‘toxic stress’¹³. It can derail healthy brain development and lead to a propensity to experience future stress, adopt health-harming (risky) behaviours, and develop mental and physical illness^{13,14}. These changes can also undermine the ability to form relationships and regulate emotions, and impair cognitive functions^{15,16}.</p>
<p>SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF HEALTH</p>	<p>These challenges to physical and cognitive development add up to young people who are often significantly socially disadvantaged, for example, through being unable to gain educational qualifications¹⁷. In addition, there is a significant correlation between socio-economic deprivation and risk factors^{1,18}, meaning that those who are disadvantaged are more likely to be exposed to risks, and therefore more likely to be subject to further disadvantage.</p>

Links to mental health and wellbeing

These risk factors and their impacts – physical health problems, impaired social and cognitive development and social disadvantage – all add up to a significantly increased risk of suffering from poor mental health. Stress and adversity erode emotional, spiritual and intellectual resources which are essential for psychological wellbeing¹.

Poor mental health can also impact on young people’s ability to learn, with those with emotional difficulties more likely to be assessed with Special Educational Needs¹⁹. This demonstrates the complex interaction between risk factors and impacts, with particular negative outcomes such as poor mental health further compounding cognitive development, which can then cause young people to become involved in further risky behaviours. This cumulative effect will have a continued impact on a young person’s social positioning and disadvantage into adulthood.

The Princes Trust Youth Index from 2018 indicates that young people’s wellbeing has fallen to its lowest level since the study was first commissioned in 2009⁴. This drop is related to political and economic uncertainty and the turbulent landscape of the current job market. 59% of young people say the unpredictable political climate makes them anxious about the future. Consequently, the number of young people who do not feel in control of their lives has increased by more than one-third. One in four young people also feel trapped in a cycle of jobs they don’t want, and almost a third of working young people have to settle for whatever job they can get. Jobs are equated with a number of potential benefits to overall wellbeing, and 34% say losing their job could put their mental health at risk⁴. Here we can see the impact of the current political and economic climate on young people’s mental health. It is potentially decreasing their sense of self-regulation, and increasing feelings of anxiety, which is heightened by the fact that moving into the world of work is a critical point of transition in young people’s lives. If we take these anxieties, and put them on top of risk factors, socio-economic disadvantage and poor mental health, we have a situation when our young people may now be struggling to cope with their everyday lives.

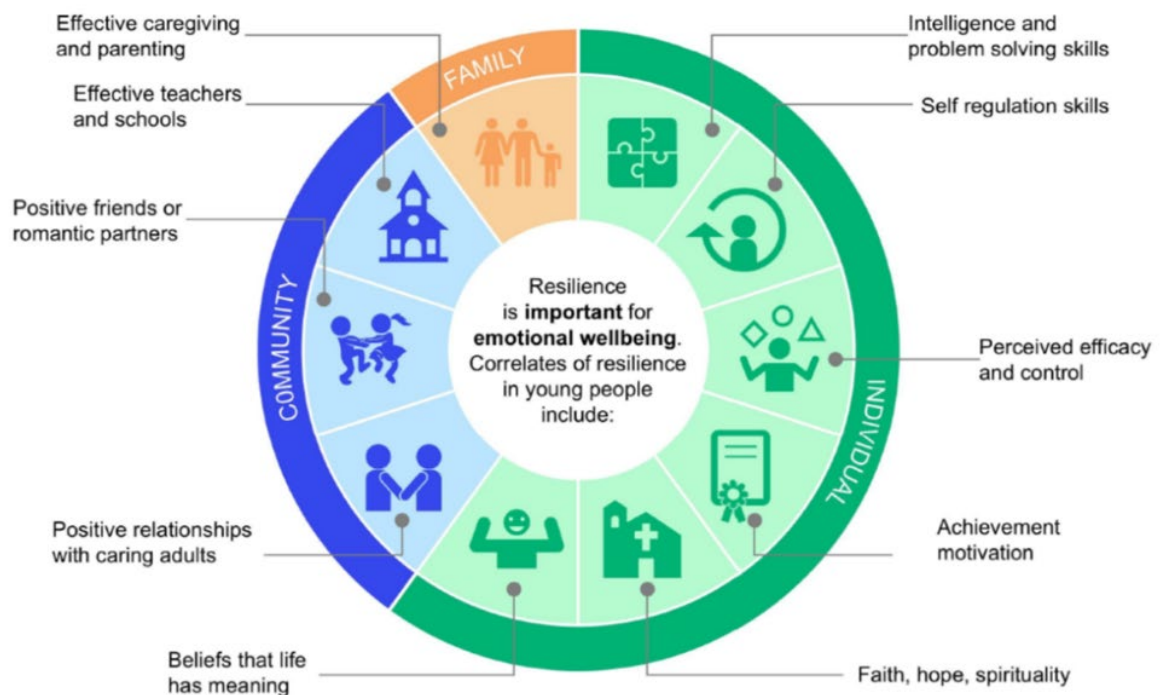


4. AGAINST THE ODDS: BEING RESILIENT

Fortunately, not all young people exposed to risk factors experience poor outcomes. In fact, many children and young people who encounter stress and adversity fair well, despite facing severe challenges^{6,7,21,22}. **Those that succeed in spite of adversity have been identified as being resilient;** possessing certain strengths and benefiting from protective factors that help them overcome adverse conditions and thrive⁶.

Resilience is not a one-dimensional attribute, but the possession of several skills in varying degrees which help a person to cope²¹. We can best understand it as the process of **interplay between risk and protective factors, which leads to positive adaptation**²³.

Protective factors have commonly been identified at three levels: individual, family, and community^{6,23,24}.



Source: [PHE \(2016\)](#)

There is a growing body of international evidence that suggests that protective factors and resources of resilience can reduce the impact of adversity on mental health⁹, and there is considerable consistency across this evidence to support key protective factors at all three levels²³.

Individual protective factors

Personal characteristics have been identified which act as buffers against external risk factors. In particular, mental health plays a key role in individual factors promoting resilience. Positive mental health can be seen to include our **emotion** (feeling or outlook); **cognition** (perception, thinking and reasoning); **social functioning** (relationships with others in society); and **coherence** (sense of meaning and purpose in life)¹. And overall, good mental health and wellbeing have strongly been associated with positive outcomes^{1,5,6,9}. These include better physical health^{12,25}; adoption of healthy behaviours^{25,26}; productivity at work^{30,31,32}; educational outcomes⁵; and prosocial behaviour^{25,28,30}.

In addition to good mental health, **self-regulation** has been identified as one of the most fundamental individual protective factors^{5,6,31}. This is our ability to maintain effort and work towards a desired goal, while controlling immediate impulses that arise – involving managing emotions, thinking constructively, regulating and directing behaviour, and acting on the environment to control sources of stress^{5,32,33}.

Personal traits such as **self-esteem** and **self-concept** also positively contribute to individual resilience^{34,35}, serving as ongoing resources in a person's background to help them believe through experience, example, or encouragement that they can face and overcome various stressors in their life^{36,37}.

Family protective factors

The family is a key site of protective factors, and the [National Institute for Health Care and Excellence \(NICE\)](#) commissioned review of resilience research highlights three interrelated family protective factors²³:

1. Supportive environments (e.g. parent-child attachments and intrafamilial relations)
2. Family practices (e.g. parenting approaches, norms and values)
3. Resources (e.g. stable and regular income, parent education and competence)

Recent Public Health Wales research shows that trusted adult relationships are one of the key sources of resilience for young people experiencing adversity⁹. Undeniably, children and young people are products of their experiences, the wider environmental contexts in which they live and the responses they have developed through their interactions with others.

'...the quality of the relationships between children and the adults in their lives, along with children's levels of emotional wellbeing, will largely determine the outcomes children realise.' (Children's Parliament, ['It's all about relationships'](#)³⁸)

The presence of supportive relationships with adults appears to buffer young people from developmental disruption, helping build skills such as the ability to plan; monitor and regulate behaviour; and adapt to changing circumstances¹¹. This in turn helps to turn 'toxic' stress into 'tolerable' stress. We can see again the complex relationship between risk and protective factors and the way they interlink. The presence of stressful life events can impact on social and emotional development which makes it difficult for young people to build meaningful relationships, whilst relationships are also an important protective factor against these stressors.

Community protective factors

Finally, evidence from research shows that there are a number of protective factors at the community level, which can be categorised as²³:

1. Psycho-social effects (e.g. social support/cohesion and sense of belonging)
2. Collective efficacy (e.g. informal support and collective action)
3. Cultural norms (fostered through strong community networks)

There is strong evidence for the ‘buffering’ effect of social networks^{5,6,23}. We now know that the significance of adult-child relationships is not confined to parents or carers³⁹. Adults such as teachers or sports coaches are key figures in young people’s lives who can provide very important relationships. Positive relationships, such as those between teacher–pupil, can help repair some of the potentially impaired ways of working (such as the expectations and beliefs that a person develops about themselves, others and the relationships that they have) developed as a result of adversity, or a lack of previous supportive relationships⁴⁰.

Social participation and social support are associated with a reduced risk of common mental health issues and better self-reported health, whilst social isolation has been identified as a risk factor for poor mental health⁴¹. There is also evidence supporting a positive correlation between self-regulation and involvement and inclusion in the community^{42,43}. In addition, communities with high levels of social capital – indicated by trust and participation – have advantages for the mental health of individuals, and these characteristics have also been seen as indicators of the mental health or wellbeing of a community^{44,45}.



5. ACTIONS FOR BUILDING RESILIENCE: WORKING ACROSS THE LEVELS

As is evident, individual, family and community level protective factors are interrelated, combining to exert direct and indirect effects on an individual’s resilience. **Resilience is optimised when protective factors are strengthened at all interactive levels of the socio-ecological model** (i.e., individual, family, and community)³¹. Accordingly, actions for building resilience must not only target the development of specific skills that are needed for adaptive coping, but also focus on the familial and community level factors which are necessary to support these individual traits. For young people, this means that we can help to build their resilience through their education and work environments.

A whole-school approach

With children in the UK spending roughly seven hours a day, 190 days a year in school, it is no surprise that schools are considered to be a key component in building young people’s resilience. As already suggested, teacher-pupil relationships can be a valuable protective factor. To further the impact of these relationships, several public institutions, including the NICE and Public Health England advocate a whole-school approach to promoting young people’s well-being. This approach works towards embedding a school culture where an understanding of wellbeing is promoted within the curriculum, as well as working with families, communities and outside agencies to help foster healthy practices and attitudes.

A whole-school approach can be guided by eight principles set out by PHE/CYPMHC⁴⁶:



Source: [PHE/CYPMHC 2015](#)

Resilient workplaces

As the Prince's Trust Youth Index 2018 indicates, young people's current employment situations are a source of stress and anxiety⁴⁶. Uncertainty around job roles and responsibilities, in addition to rapid changes to workplace practices such as the use of new technologies that demand constantly updated skills, and the decline of the 'job for life' are adding to the challenges young people are facing in the workplace.

Employers often find that young people are not sufficiently prepared to adjust to the demands of employment, and skills that would enable them to adapt positively are often lacking. In the 2016 CBI Education and Skills Survey, 48% of employers reported that school and college leavers lacked resilience and the ability to self-manage⁴⁷. Similar to the premise of a whole-school approach, resilience in the workplace is not limited to individual characteristics of each apprentice or graduate. As young people transition from education to work, there are a number of practical steps that employers can take to help build resilience amongst their young employees⁴⁸:

1. **Encourage physical wellbeing.** Physical health and positive mental health are interlinked and creating a pleasant working environment and promoting healthy behaviour can bring many benefits. Examples include:
 - Eating healthily – providing fruit for snacking.
 - Exercise – bike to work schemes.
 - Quitting smoking – offer counselling support.
 - Sensible drinking – change the drinking culture.

2. **Promote a healthy psychological environment.** Make the workplace a happy place to be through:
 - Promoting an open and trusting management style and atmosphere;
 - Training managers to consider the mental wellbeing of staff;
 - Providing job security;
 - Making jobs varied, interesting, and managing workloads;
 - Training staff in new skills;
 - Allowing autonomy and letting individuals do their jobs;
 - And rewarding good work.

3. **Provide specialist support to help maintain good physical and mental health,** including:
 - Occupational health;
 - Human resources;
 - Counselling;
 - Physiotherapy.

4. **Promote open communication and strong social networks.** People who have positive relationships in the workplace are more likely to enjoy coming to work and be productive when they get there. Encouraging teamwork, and supportive culture, and the use of team days and work social events can be helpful here.

6. ACTIONS BUILDING RESILIENCE THROUGH OUTDOOR LEARNING

In addition to working across school and workplace environments, outdoor learning programmes can also play a key role in helping to build resilience in young people. From the information outlined above, we can identify a number of core areas, both in the form of outside supports and inner strengths, which can be focused on to build resilience in young people⁴⁹:



Source: [Best Start \(2017\)](#)

Many of the experiences offered through outdoor learning help to encourage these inner strengths, or individual protective factors. These include building confidence in individual ability and positive strategies to cope (self-control) with stressful situations through taking on challenging tasks; and creating opportunities for responsibility and participation through having a go, making mistakes and learning from these mistakes.

Outdoor learning also supports the development of external protective factors, or outside supports. Young people can experience and develop positive relationships with adult leaders (and peers) who model behaviours. The social environment of outdoor learning programmes, with a small group size, opportunities for leadership, reflection, and feedback from the group, supports feelings of social connection through communication cooperation and trust⁵⁰.

7. OUR WORK AT THE OUTWARD BOUND TRUST

At The Outward Bound Trust, building young people’s resilience is exactly what we do. We focus on developing those individual skills which can act as protective factors in times of difficulty or change. We aim to create moments where everyone can see and believe in themselves, sowing the seeds of skills such as self-confidence, self-efficacy, and self-regulation. We provide an environment for young people to build relationships with their peers, colleagues, teachers, and instructors, to allow their wider social environment to act as a source of resilience.

Critical points of transition – such as going to or moving schools and starting work – influence, and are influenced by emotional, cognitive and social development. Learning to be resilient in these early transitional experiences has been shown to be a key factor in how individuals deal with challenges later in life⁵¹. That’s why we provide programmes for young people to develop their social and emotional skills at every stage of their education, from the end of primary school through to university and the early stages of employment. The skills that they develop are those that will play a pivotal role in successfully navigating transitions and challenges in adolescence and early adulthood.

Why is our approach effective?

We understand that young people growing up in the UK today face multiple barriers to living healthy, happy and resilient lives. As this report has highlighted, there are numerous indicators that many of them are struggling to cope, including:

- A decline in young people’s happiness and wellbeing⁴.
- Rising mental health issues, where one in eight 5 to 19 year-olds had at least one mental disorder when assessed in 2017³.
- The growing attainment gap evidenced by those eligible for free school meals making even less progress than their more affluent peers by the end of secondary school⁵².
- Reported lack of readiness for work, with half of employers observing weaknesses in school leaver’s communication, self-regulation and resilience⁴⁷.

We work with young people in schools and colleges, individuals who attend our summer programmes, and apprentices and graduates who have just entered the world of work, to take a step towards helping them to address some of these challenges. To achieve this, our programmes contain four core elements which make up our approach⁵³:

1. **Authentic adventure.** Adventure provides opportunities for individuals to respond to challenge and uncertainty. When positively experienced, this encourages them to embrace rather than avoid, challenge and uncertainty in the future.
2. **...In the natural environment.** Wild and unpredictable environments, such as those in which we operate, provide optimum conditions for authentic adventure to take place.
3. **Deliberate learning.** Programmes delivered with specific outcomes and integrated into the curriculum have been shown to deliver stronger and more lasting outcomes. Learning strategies such as goal-setting and feedback are effective at improving pupil outcomes. Instructors, qualified both as outdoor practitioners and to facilitate learning, work with participants for the duration of their course.

- 4. The residential experience.** Research has shown that residential impact on relationships between peers, as well as staff and students; develop resilience, self-esteem and well-being; and improve engagement with learning, behaviour, and preparedness for transitions into new environments.

Evidence from our programmes

Through this approach, Outward Bound programmes act as a catalyst for positive change. Young people are empowered with the attitudes, skills and behaviours they need to successfully overcome the challenges they face. They can go on to thrive in their education, training and at work, and throughout their lives.

Our latest Social Impact Report (SIR) presents case studies and statistics from our most recent course evaluations to demonstrate the positive impact we have on young people. We have been refining this process over the last decade, using data that is assessed, independently verified and compiled to measure the lasting effects our courses have on participants. Some of the key impacts outlined in the 2017 SIR include⁵³:

- Using the Resilience Scale – measuring five separate characteristics of resilience – 58% of participants on an Education course and 82% on a Skills for Life award increased their score for resilience. Six months post-course, 41% and 64% respectively still recorded an increased score. This impact was also retained twelve months on.
- Using the personal development scale, we recorded improvements in communication, teamwork and leadership. 91% of participants on an Education course recorded an overall increase in their confidence to interact with others, whether working in a team (75%), presenting their ideas (65%), or being the leader of a team (65%). We found a last effect in this impact when we followed up with one course six months later.
- Our work with employers to address the skills gap in apprentices and graduates has shown that Outward Bound courses have a positive impact on their self-management, resilience and determination, relationships with others, and engagement with their employer.
- 60% of participants on our Education course and 71% of participants on our Skills for Life Award course recorded an increase in their emotional score from their baseline score at the end of the course (measured through the Life Effectiveness Questionnaire). This was echoed by parents, where 68% recorded an improvement in participants' emotional control six-eight weeks post-course.
- After participating in our courses, young people are more confident to set targets and achieve goals. 69% of participants on our Education courses recorded an increase in their confidence to achieve goals, 65% to set targets and 57% to make decisions.
- 51% of young people increased their confidence at the end of their 5-day Education course, and 60% at the end of their 19-day Skills for Life Award course (measured through the Life Effectiveness Questionnaire).

The impacts and statistics outlined here are only a small part of the picture. You can [download](#) the full 2017 SIR for more information on case studies, methods and outcomes. Through the SIR, we are proud to be able to prove that our programmes are having a significant positive effect on some of the individual protective factors outlined earlier, such as self-confidence, self-regulation, and a positive outlook. What's more, the SIR shows that our programmes help strengthen relationships, to build a sense of community across school and work groups. Our programmes are effective in helping to strengthen protective factors not only at the level of the individual, but across all levels, optimising young people's capacity to be resilient, overcome challenges and flourish.

8. CONCLUSION

This report has focused on resilience – the ability to achieve positive outcomes despite challenging or threatening circumstances. Children and young people who are exposed to stressful life events and adversity stand significantly reduced chances of reaching their full potential as adults. These adversities are considered ‘risk factors’ – circumstances which increase the probability of poor outcomes for young people. They have a huge range of impacts, on a young persons’ physical health; social and cognitive development; social determinants of health such as education, employment and income; and mental health and wellbeing.

However, not all young people exposed to risk factors experience poor outcomes. In fact, many children and young people who encounter stress and adversity fair well, and those that succeed in spite of adversity have been identified as being *resilient*; possessing certain strengths and benefiting from protective factors that help them overcome adverse conditions and thrive. There is a strong evidence base for the existence of key protective factors at the individual, family and community level, and these resources of resilience can reduce the impact of adversity on mental health. Self-regulation, secure parent-child relationships, and social relations and support in particular have been identified as moderating against adversity. Evidence shows that we can cultivate resilience in young people and it is best optimised when protective factors are strengthened across all three levels.

Resilience is best understood as a *process* of interplay between risk and protective factors, which leads to the positive adaptation of the effects of risk factors. The relationship between these two sets of factors is complex, as the association with mental health demonstrates. Mental health is implicated in outcomes associated with adversity, and poor mental health can compound the impact of other risk factors. Simultaneously, positive mental health and emotional wellbeing has been identified as an individual protective factor promoting resilience against risk factors.

Whilst reducing the presence of risk factors in young people’s lives is a long-term aspiration, it is crucial to develop resilience in young people as a protective mechanism. That’s why, at The Outward Bound Trust, developing young people’s social and emotional skills is a core goal. We provide courses for young people to build their resilience at every stage of their education, from the end of primary school through to university and the early stages of employment. The skills that they develop are those that will play a pivotal role in how they successfully navigate transitions through school, and the challenges of adolescence and early adulthood. As the evidence suggests, this can help them to flourish in many different ways throughout their lives.

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