

The Kids Are Watching What are We Role-Modeling?

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PRE-READING WARM-UP

1. You are an African American family, and the Ku Klux Klan kills your cat in an effort to intimidate you. You decide to stand up to the KKK and you refuse to move out of the neighborhood. One of the side effects of your action is:
 - a) Stray cats start hanging around your house.
 - b) A cat food company asks for your endorsement.
 - c) The KKK suddenly renounces racism.
 - d) Your child shows more resilience in school, does better academically, and has more faith in the possibility of a bright future.
2. You are an experienced female construction worker who loses her job to a less experienced man. You sue the company, claiming gender discrimination. One of the effects of your action is:
 - a) The construction company decides to only hire women from now on.
 - b) Your family begs you to get a more “feminine” job.
 - c) Other workers wear pink in solidarity with you.
 - d) Your niece, who observed your struggle, feels less resigned about unfair barriers at school and more optimistic about her own chances for academic success.
3. After responding to questions 1 and 2 above and reviewing the answers (see below), discuss what you think the article will be about. What do you predict it will say about role-modeling?

For questions 1 and 2, the correct answer is D. Are you curious about why? Read the article to find out.

A Surprise (Extra) Benefit of Standing Up for Your Rights

There is a lot of debate about what could support African American adolescents to do well in school. There is talk of smaller or larger classes, more or less standardized testing, and new approaches to teaching reading. But what if “at risk” young people need more than certain classroom strategies? What if one of the keys to doing well academically is having role models who fight for their rights? What if these role models help young students

even though the rights they are fighting for have nothing to do with school and may not even have a direct connection to the young person?

In a study about what makes low-income African American adolescents succeed in school, despite many obstacles, researchers found something very interesting. They found that resilient youths had a certain experience in common: They had witnessed family and community members fight for their rights. This group of students all had caretakers who protested when they experienced discrimination or racism.

For example, one mother protested when her more accomplished daughter lost a school oratory competition to a white student. In another family, an aunt sued for gender discrimination when she lost out to a less experienced man for a construction job. In a third, the family refused to move after the KKK killed their cat. And in another family, there was on-going discussion about the need for collective action to protest discrimination and fight for equal access to jobs.

Role Models for Resilience

In similar situations, the families of the less resilient students tended to retreat or resign themselves to the injustice. What contributed to the resilience of students was role models to show them that individuals and communities can actively resist social injustices.

The information from this study tells us that school success for African American adolescents doesn't come *just* from what goes on in the classroom. It comes also from what young people see in the community around them. And being a good role model perhaps includes showing young people not just ways to make their way through life's obstacles, but also ways to remove those obstacles.

Andy Nash is director of NELRC. **Source:** O'Connor, C. (1997). "Dispositions toward (collective) struggle and educational resilience..." *American Educational Research Journal*, 34, 593-629.

POST-READING ACTIVITIES

Have you ever seen someone speak up against an injustice? What happened? How did it affect you?

Have you ever seen a group of people take action against an injustice? What happened? How did it affect you?

Have you ever spoken up about an injustice (either alone or with a group)? What happened? How did you feel afterwards? How did it affect you?

What role models do you want your children to have?

What examples of oppression do your children see around them?

What can you do to make sure your children don't resign themselves to a limited future?

Look at the picture below. Talk about what you see. How do you think the children will be affected by seeing the adults around them take action?

