

REFRAMING RESILIENCE

Respecting Youths' Request Not to Be Labeled Resilient

While the term “resilience” is often intended as a compliment regarding a youth’s strength and perseverance, youth can feel burdened by labels such as resilient, strong, or brave. Youth¹ emphasized that they did not choose the traumatic events they faced and believe they should never have had to be resilient in the first place.

Why the Labels Strong, Brave, or Resilient Can Be Harmful

PAINFUL REMINDER

- Being called resilient can serve as a painful reminder of what the youth was denied including security, empathy, and care.

DISMISSIVE AND HURTFUL

- Affirmations like “you’re strong” or “you did great” can feel dismissive and hurtful, effectively blanketing the depth of the struggle the youth has endured.

ISOLATION IN HEALING

- Society’s praise for “maturity” can make a youth feel abandoned to heal from trauma alone, as the label suggests they already have the internal tools to cope without further support.

THE BURDEN OF PERFORMANCE

- Youth may feel that “resilience” is an external expectation attached to their status as “foster youth,” leading to a phenomenon youth described as “foster care with a side of resilience”.

Moving Beyond the Label

When we label a youth as resilient, we risk reframing a systemic failure as an individual burden. Youth described the need for resilience as evidence of unmanageable situations where the structures and adults responsible for protecting them failed. In some cases, professionals may use the label when they do not know how to provide effective support or lack the proper protocols to handle a crisis. The goal for caseworkers should be a paradigm shift: moving from celebrating a youth’s ability to endure harm to creating spaces where youth in care feel safe expressing their feelings and needs.

Quotes from Young Adults Who Were Youth in Care

“You are brave when you skydiving. You are brave when you climb up a mountain. These things are chosen. No one chose to survive their traumas. No one chose to be brave with this.”

“When people say you are strong, it is usually that fake persona. They’re currently not there. It’s like you have no idea what the protocol would be at that moment. You are just not the right person to come to with this.”

“It’s hard to be resilient. But if you don’t know how strong they’ve had to be, it can be hurtful.”

1. Twenty-five young adults with lived experiences as youth in care under Illinois DCFS and 16 parents of youth in care shared their perspectives on well-being and resilience as part of Northern Illinois University’s Listen to Us Study in 2024. For questions about this study contact Dr. Heather L. Fox at hfox1@niu.edu.

Shift Language from Praise to Validation

Effective, trauma-informed communication prioritizes validating a child's experience over labeling their response to it. This means replacing praise with presence, affirmation, and genuine curiosity. The following table offers practical alternatives to common but problematic phrases.

Instead of This Language...	...Try This Validating Approach
"You're so resilient."	"You have had to manage so much. am proud of you. That sounds incredibly difficult."
"You're so strong."	"It's okay to feel sad or angry about this. You don't have to be strong right now."
"You're so brave."	"You didn't deserve for that to happen. You deserved to be protected."
"I'm sure that was tough, but you're fine now."	"Thank you for trusting me enough to share that. I'm here to listen."
"You'll get through this."	"I'm here with you. How can I support you in this moment?"

The goal of these alternatives is not to offer solutions or fix the problem. Instead, they serve to validate the youth's experience, affirm their right to their feelings, and demonstrate that you are a safe person who is capable of sitting with them in their pain. This approach builds the foundation of trust necessary for healing.

Commitment to Protective and Empathetic Practice

Youth ask that we move away from admiring their resilience and toward building systems of care where resilience is no longer required of them. They ask us to critically examine our language, challenge our assumptions, and commit to creating environments defined not by endurance, but by safety, empathy, and unwavering protection. What is most critical is to authentically be present for the youth. As one youth suggested, "Don't listen to respond, listen to understand." Parents of youth in care emphasized the importance of utilizing supportive body language that invites engagement without undue pressure. They also suggested employing alternative communication activities (e.g., art, music, play, etc.) for children who may struggle to communicate their emotions. Finally, consider engaging with other supportive adults (e.g., parents, extended family, therapists, etc.) who the child trusts, especially if you are unsure how to support a youth struggling with processing trauma. To put this commitment into practice, we can distill our learning into three critical takeaways:

Listen Beyond the Label

- Understand that words like resilient, brave, and strong, however well-intentioned, can be experienced as a burden that dismisses pain, obscures trauma, and reinforces a sense of isolation.

Prioritize Safety Over Strength

- Recognize that the most fundamental need of a child who has experienced trauma is not to be strong, but to have safe environments and relationships where they can be vulnerable without judgment or expectation.

Embrace Protective Action

- Know that true support lies not in praising a child's ability to survive hardship, but in taking meaningful, empathetic action to protect them from further harm, validate their experiences, and hold systems accountable.

Let's commit to this more empathetic and protective approach, ensuring our actions and words contribute not to the burden of resilience, but to the promise of healing and the fundamental right of every child to be safe, seen, and supported.

Suggested Citation. Fox, H. L., LaSota, R., & Song, E. (2026). *Reframing resilience. Respecting youths' request not to be labeled resilient.* Illinois Department of Children and Family Services.
<https://dcfs.illinois.gov/for-providers/child-well-being.html>