

Produced by: Professor Duncan Shaw, Dr Andrew McClelland  
NCSR+, The University of Manchester, UK

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# The National Briefing on Societal Resilience [UK+]



## What is 'The National Briefing on Societal Resilience [UK+]'

The National Briefing on Societal Resilience [UK+] is produced by Alliance Manchester Business School (AMBS) on behalf of The National Consortium for Societal Resilience [UK+] (NCSR+).

The briefing speaks to practitioners who work to enhance the resilience of society, including government, emergency planners, resilience officers, the voluntary sector, business, and communities. The briefing shares knowledge and good

practice on operationalising societal resilience, and lessons from ongoing design and implementation work on the NCSR+ strategy and manual on how to create a Local Resilience Capability based on interconnected modules.

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REGISTER: 25/06/2025

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# 10 lessons for engaging young people in resilience

## Foreword

*By Duncan Shaw and Andrew McClelland, NCSR+, The University of Manchester, UK*

Recent conversations in NCSR+ have reflected on the role of children and young people in societal resilience. These conversations have taken place between adults who are embedded in the resilience world sharing their perspectives on how children and youth are the future, tomorrow's leaders, potentially vulnerable, and conduits into households to take resilience lessons home.

To feed into these conversations we thought it important to ask young people what they thought about resilience. So, we found a 15-year-old student (Elizabeth) who was looking to do some work experience and asked her to write a piece on "**Resilience and me**". We shared with Elizabeth some of the key points from NCSR+'s conversations to help her to understand our thoughts and expectations of youth. Then we spent a few hours chatting about what she knew about resilience, whether she was interested in disruptions, and how we could get her interested in resilience. Then we asked her to write it all down.

What she wrote surprised us.

We thought we would get a deep insight into how to engage with youth on resilience. Instead, we got an even deeper dive into why current ways of engaging with young people won't work. We found out that:

- We use the wrong language.
- We have expectations of young people that are out of kilter with their lives.
- We don't engage in ways that appeal to Elizabeth.
- There is no obvious way to engage her in wider conversations about resilience.
- We should engage via fun, group, hands-on activities – learning by doing things in ways that become memorable (like the front-page photos).

Here is what Elizabeth wrote ... addressed to you and us as actors in building societal resilience to disruption. Her narrative is interspersed with our takeaways in the form of ten lessons for resilience partners on engaging young people in resilience. We do not suggest that these lessons are definitive, exhaustive, or entirely novel, but they provide some food for thought.

(Note: the wording in the grey "lessons" boxes below are written by us.)

**Don't tell me about resilience and expect me to take it home. And don't invite me to a workshop on resilience.**

*Written by: Elizabeth S, Cheshire, England  
Date: 07/05/2025*

I don't know a lot about disasters. I assume that adults do.

Below I describe my views, as a 15-year-old, on resilience and how to engage me in preparing for an emergency. I'd suggest that you don't tell me about resilience and expect me to take it home, because I wouldn't take that sort of information back to my parents – I'd rather tell them some of the juicy gossip from school. And don't invite me to a workshop, it just sounds dull. I also share my thoughts on what could engage me.

**Don't tell me, let me experience it**

In some lessons at school, we have been told how to respond to an emergency in our school or home. In Food-Tech and Chemistry, we learned about fires and how a fire needs oxygen, heat and fuel to sustain itself and about how taking away one of those elements can extinguish the fire. In Geography, we covered what to do when a flood happens, like using sandbags to block cracks in doors and slow the flow of water. In History, we learned about the Air Raid drills carried out during WW2. School told me what to do during an earthquake – although I don't quite know why as we have never had an earthquake where I live in England. All this learning, it seems, is based on me being told what to do.

But I have learned through practical experience as well. For example, we have regularly practiced protocols for fire drills and lockdown drills in case someone storms the school. Even though one of the best ways to put out a fire is by using a fire extinguisher, many of my friends have never experienced how to use one – so they would probably fumble about reading its instructions if they ever needed to.

We just get told what to do, but other countries seem to prepare their children with engaging practical experiences. For example, I was lucky to learn how to operate a fire extinguisher when I went on a trip to Japan and visited the Kyoto Bosai Centre. I also got to experience the incredibly nerve-wracking shaking of earthquakes and the battering winds of hurricanes in their simulators, as well as the disorienting feeling of being trapped in a corridor filled with smoke. Why do I not get those hands-on experiences here?

### **Lesson 1: Don't only tell young people what to do – let them experience how to do it, hands-on**

The Kyoto Bosai Centre is the "Citizen's Disaster Prevention Center" and is described as the place where visitors can "see", "hear" and "touch" exhibits to develop knowledge essential to preventing disaster at times of emergency. Find out more [at their webpage](#).

## Don't call it resilience, that means something different to me

My definition of resilience is different to yours. Since I was 6 years old, school has told me that resilience is all about my mental health. School has continuously drummed into me that resilience is about getting up, brushing myself off, and trying again to succeed at something and only stopping once you achieve it. We've had, what feels like, hundreds of hours hearing about resilience.

But, when you talk about resilience, you mean protecting myself during an emergency. I have never heard of that use of the term, and I've never been in an emergency like that. Your resilience sounds a bit boring, sorry.

It is very difficult to know what would help to make resilience a more popular topic as teenagers don't get involved in that. However, it is also difficult for me to identify a better word.

### Lesson 2: Resilience is the wrong word to use when engaging young people

Resilience has many meanings and interpretations. Our differing definitions of societal resilience for resilience partnerships and local community groups attests to this – see [The Manchester Briefing Issue 47](#). Should we use 'resilience' when engaging with young people? Or are we better asking young people what they would do, or what they may need, when disaster strikes?

## Don't expect me to take it home

You may have children, or you may not. If you do, are you of the opinion that your child tells you everything? I am 15 and I think that I speak for most teenagers when I say, "We don't tell you everything". We may tell you about the funny stuff, the monumental stuff, or the stupid stuff that happens at school. But why would I tell you about another "workshop" on "resilience"? As an adult you should know about it already, so it's simply a waste of my breath to tell you stuff that you already know.

Younger children may tell their parents everything, or what they remember. But for years my little brother, who is now 10 years old, has claimed to remember nothing about his school day by the time he gets home.

### Lesson 3: Build household preparedness messaging and strategies based on evidence not myths

Assumptions are often made that children and young people are ideal conduits for resilience messaging to reach family members. Through their new enthusiasm for resilience, it is assumed that household preparedness to disruption can be built. Do we have evidence that is the case? Or is it a shaky foundation on which to proceed?

Even Safety Central, which is a brilliant complex where we got to look and play at things in real life, is more suited to younger children. When my brother came home from that he told us very little. And I have forgotten so much about it as it was so long ago. This begs the question, where and when did adults learn what to do in an emergency? I wonder if they really do know what to do.

### Lesson 4: Identify and address gaps in provision

What provisions are there in your area for children, young people, and adults to learn what to do in a disruption? Are the provisions based on telling people what you want them to do? Are the provisions engaging and hands-on?

## Don't invite me – make me attend or make it unmissable

Sorry, but if you want me to learn about resilience then you'd probably need to make me attend. Learning needs to be compulsory. If voluntary, at lunchtime or after school, then I probably wouldn't attend as I'd rather hang out with my friends. If it's compulsory, then I would need to miss other lessons during school hours.

I do most things with my amazing group of friends. We do things together, like going to the water fountain, walking to lessons, and having lunch. We live in groups for fear of missing out. So, if some people from my friend group are going to a voluntary event during lunchtime, there is a high likelihood that others in the group will also go along. I am much more willing to join an optional activity if my friends are excited by it.

### Lesson 5: Promote fun activity-based sessions that appeal to friendship groups

Getting young people into the room is a challenge. Perhaps the 80:20 rule applies here ... attract one member of a friendship group which will encourage others to join in. The promise of fun-filled group activities is more appealing than a "talking to".

## Don't call it a workshop, and feed me

Our school has a different definition of what a workshop is compared to what you think it is. To me, a workshop involves me sitting in a room and having a person talk at me about a topic. Workshops normally involve me just listening, so they are often not very interesting. Certainly, they are not something that I would opt to go to. So, if you want me to come to your session on resilience, then asking me to come to a workshop isn't going to do it. Workshop is entirely the wrong word to use.

Our school puts on "workshops" during lunchtime. Unless it's a football manager or a West End star, why would I want to cut my lunchtime short?

When I get to your "workshop", it needs a not-so-formal atmosphere to make me feel more relaxed, so I am more likely to enjoy myself and then tell others about it.

Also, please feed me – teenagers have bottomless pits for stomachs so free snacks and drinks will encourage me to attend. You might think that a salad is lovely – I'd prefer an advert that says pizza (preferably Dominos which is a universal favourite) and cakes. Adding a disco on would be cringy and a turnoff.

**Lesson 6: Provide free food to encourage young people**

Incentivise young people to show up and take part in ways that are not boring or tokenistic. Advertising free food that appeals to the specific age group is good and can help to create an informal atmosphere and provide fuel for the fun activities to follow.

These workshops often ask me for my feedback by filling out a survey. My friends and I always just feedback that it was “excellent”, even if it wasn’t, as we don’t want to be cruel, and the teachers are there watching.

**Lesson 7: Think about different ways to collect feedback**

Ways of gathering feedback from adults may not work with young people where there is a power differential between you and them. Collecting feedback in school may need to be creative and focus on “what they want to do next time”.

**So, what could engage me?**

Whatever you do – don’t come into school, during lunch, put up some slides, and tell me lots of stuff about something that adults care about. Maybe have your session as compulsory during lesson time when I can’t escape – but please think about how to make it fun and age-appropriate. Maybe design it with teenagers as they know what they like. Also, attract me and my friends with something that is relevant to me with practical experiences that are creative and interesting. And the promise of free food wouldn’t be bad either.

**Lesson 8: Co-design with young people from the outset**

Don’t “do” resilience to young people. Placing young people at the centre of the process from the outset is so important. Put yourself in their place when designing everything about the sessions. Take off your business-like, adult hat and get in touch with your younger self. Involve young people, and pilot with young people. You have one shot (well, probably only 3 minutes) to make a good impression.

**Lesson 9: Learn from the experience of resilience partners who regularly engage with young people**

Many resilience partners will already engage with schools. Adults from Police, Fire, and healthcare will be used to engaging with schools and will know Head Teachers, the best timings, and activities that are likely to succeed. If you are not already doing so, work with them.

**Post-script**

*By Duncan Shaw and Andrew McClelland, NCSR+, The University of Manchester, UK*

Elizabeth’s voice does not reflect all young people across a country. But we hope that her voice is provocative, maybe revelatory, for readers – either because you have tried and failed to engage younger people and have fallen foul of these lessons; or because they have inadvertently (or hopefully by design) avoided these pitfalls.

In NCSR+ we have long talked about how adults look to the emergency services to come and save them when a disruption hits. This Briefing suggests that the same might be said for youth in that Elizabeth expects adults to know how to deal with disruptions and so come and save her. This is a perfectly reasonable assumption, engrained over a lifetime of adults telling her what to do, identifying risks for her, advising her how to avoid risks and their impacts, and coming to the rescue when she gets into difficulty.

So, Elizabeth’s view of resilience as being psychologically strong and taking care of herself is an important first step to being self-resilient to disruption. Now resilience professionals need to layer the skills of how to foresee, take avoiding action, and respond in the face of physical adversary. Is it sufficient for these skills to be told, or do they need to be experienced so that they are memorable and can be deployed instinctively by young people?

Is the “never used” case of the fire extinguisher a worrying reality for most in society? You are probably “in” resilience so may have used a fire extinguisher more recently than most – but when did your friends or family last practice with a filled fire extinguisher? Some people talk about societal resilience as a concept and talk about preventative actions and responses in abstract terms. Maybe we need to rethink towards “societal resilience as action, for everyone”.

**Lesson 10: Societal resilience as action**

We frequently hear that members of the public need those in positions of authority to permit them to act. Essentially, people fear being told off for acting. Focusing on societal resilience as action will give them the confidence to do something before and during a disruption. The [NCSR+ Spontaneous Volunteers module](#) is pertinent and provides an approach to enable faster, better, safer, and locally appropriate voluntary responses to a disruption.