

A Brief Overview of Resilience: How Does the Concept Help Us Understand Children's Positive Development under Stress?

Discussion Paper for The Learning Partnership¹

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Three children...

Three children, three different contexts...

Tania is an energetic White four-year-old living in subsidized housing in a city of one million. Her mother, a sole parent, is recovering from a cocaine addiction, and is retraining as a cook. Tania attends a community pre-school while her mother is at class. Child and Family Services have had the family's file open since Tania's birth. There are worries about gang violence in Tania's neighbourhood. Her mother has been in at least one violent relationship since Tania was born. Tania's teachers at school say the little girl is showing great progress expanding her vocabulary and learning her colours. They've seen to it that she was fitted for glasses when they noticed she was squinting at letters. Her mother likes that Tania wears glasses. She says it makes her look "smart."

Jake is an eight-year-old child from a rural First Nations community of two thousand. His parents both work for a local lumber company partly owned by their Band Council. Last year Jake was sexually abused by older teens in his community. Despite the abuse, he has continued to play hockey and attends school regularly. He refuses to talk with the counselor the court provides him, sitting mute whenever he's interviewed.

Vivian is a five-year-old African Canadian child living with her father and grandparents in the suburbs of a large city. Her mother died of cancer when she was two. She's a demanding child who steals things from other children in her primary class. She throws temper tantrums when challenged or disciplined. She is a big child which has made it increasingly difficult to control her. Her father finds she listens to him when he bribes her with sweets. Her grandparents mostly ignore her when she is acting out. At school Vivian gets lots of attention, including a special educator who works with her every day. It's suggested she be assessed for Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. Her father agrees to take her to a local children's hospital but keeps missing appointments.

Tania, Jake and Vivian all demonstrate aspects of resilience. The term is most commonly understood as the ability to cope well after exposure to acute or chronic stressors. An acute stressor can be a single incident of sexual abuse. A chronic stressor can be poverty, experiences of racism, or exposure to violence. The child who continues to function well, like going to school, participating in loving relationships, and having a sense of self-esteem, is thought to demonstrate resilience. Understood this way, resilience is a set of protective processes that children engage in that help them succeed, and a description of their successful development under stress.

In this brief essay, I'll review what we know about resilience and its implications for working with young people who are challenged by difficult social and physical environments.

Defining Risk

It is important that resilience be preserved as a concept that describes positive growth during adversity. Risk and resilience are two sides of the same coin. Risk factors are any individual, family, community, institutional or cultural force that threatens a child's normal development. A learning disability, family violence, racism, a government policy that discriminates against one family or another, and cultural practices that deny social justice to individuals, all exert varying amounts of risk in a child's life. Risk is, however, only an indication of what might occur. The impact of a risk factor may be negligible or severe. It can be difficult to estimate the impact a risk factor

will have on an individual child as risk factors, and protective factors associated with resilience, interact. For example, the sexual abuse that Jake experienced may have affected him much more had he not had the protective factors of a well-resourced home, community activities like hockey, a responsive mental health system and police who ensured the abuse stopped.

Distinguishing Strengths from Resilience

There is some degree of confusion when the term resilience is used. The most common problem is that resilience and strengths mean slightly different things. When we talk about strengths we are referring to a population wide roster of internal and external assets. Research shows that in general, across the developmental life span, the more assets a child (or adult) has, the more likely she is to succeed in culturally approved ways. For example, work by Resiliency Canada has identified many common strengths that group under eleven categories: Parental support and expectations; peer relationships (positive peer influences); community cohesiveness (a caring neighbourhood and community values); commitment to learning at school; school culture (bonding and high expectations by educators); cultural sensitivity (cultural awareness and spirituality); self-control; empowerment (including safety); self-concept (self-efficacy and self-concept); and social sensitivity (empathy and social justice).

Resilience describes the presence of these strengths when a population of children are exposed to multiple risks. In other words, Tania's engagement in learning at her pre-school is a strength that indicates her resilience because she is growing up in an environment that exposes her to a substantial number of threats to her well-being (e.g. her mother is recovering from an addiction; her community is poor; she is exposed to violence). While many other children from stable, well-resourced, non-violent homes enjoy the internal assets of a capacity to learn and curiosity, as well as the external asset of a caring pre-school, we would only say those children have strengths, not resilience. The risks they face are minimal.

None of this necessarily detracts from service providers practicing primary prevention by providing population-wide interventions (like subsidies for mothers and fathers to take leave from their employment after the birth of their child; quality daycares; and well-baby clinics that check for physical and psychological delays). These efforts can prevent future problems across a population, and the compounding effect of stressors piling up in children's lives.

Hidden Resilience

Until now, the definition of resilience I have been using has implied positive growth that we regard as socially acceptable. Most commonly, we understand resilience to be an indication of coping in ways that are valued by those who represent the dominant culture (mental health professionals, educators, police, etc.). The child who, despite exposure to multiple risks, stays in school, doesn't fight, and acts age appropriately, is the child we understand to be resilient. What, then, do we make of a child like Vivian whose demanding behaviour in her classroom is her way of coping? Are her strategies maladaptive and therefore a sign of vulnerability? Or is the answer more complicated?

Vivian is an angry child who uses her negative attention-seeking behaviours to evoke from others the resources she needs to cope. Though maladaptive, a growing

Difference
between
resilience
&
assets

The presence
of strengths in the
presence of risks
indicates resilience

number of resilience studies are arguing for a more contextually sensitive and culturally attuned understanding of what resilience looks like.

Arguably, Vivian copes as best she can with the strengths she has in an environment that doesn't offer many other ways for her to succeed. Rather than seeing her behaviour as necessarily dysfunctional, one might better understand it as *hidden resilience*, making due with the strengths she does have (her obstinacy and aggression) to cope in a neglectful environment.

? Culturally Maladaptive

Resilience as Fit

The fit between the individual's capacity to cope (strengths), the risks he faces, and the context in which adaptation takes place (Is the environment supportive or does it burden the child?) are all integral to whether resilience can be expected or not. The more one looks at resilience as fit, the more one sees the paradox of thinking of resilience as a characteristic of individuals alone. Where once we spoke of "beating the odds" stacked against a child, there is growing evidence that resilience is just as much about "changing the odds" so that children thrive. The most common image of resilience promoted by those in the psychological sciences is of a strong child who interacts well with a diminished environment, achieving outcomes thought exceptional. The view is of the rugged individual. A bi-ocular view of the problem of resilience is more accurate. Individuals adapt to the extent that environments provide them with what they need.

To identify a "resilient individual" is a misnomer. An individual is resilient only to the extent he finds among his family and community the resources he needs to develop the internal strengths that are associated with experiences of resilience. External resources in one or more areas of a child's life help make up for the challenges the child faces in the areas of his life that function less well (keeping in mind that resilience only describes children who experience adversity). For example, a community resource like a good school can be a welcome reprieve from a chaotic or dangerous home life. Likewise, a coach or mentor can offer an opportunity for attachment that compensates for feelings of exclusion the child experiences elsewhere. In general, the more resilient (well-resourced and responsive) a child's environment, and the more opportunities for a child to demonstrate his talents and experience personal growth, the more likely the child is to thrive.

? Resilience is a descriptor of the environment rather than the child

An Understanding of Resilience

Resilience can be understood as follows:

- First, the capacity of individuals to *navigate* to resources that sustain well-being;
- Second, the capacity of individuals' environments to provide resources; and
- Third, the capacity of individuals, their families and communities to *negotiate* culturally meaningful ways for resources to be shared.

find and make use of

provide

make appropriate use of

Understood this way, resilience is a quality of both children and their environments that provides opportunities to experience strengths in socially acceptable ways. One might think of this as a two-part process. The first part is *navigation* (bullet point one above). The child exhibits sufficient personal agency (power) to seek out what she needs, while the social and physical ecology around the child provides the

resources (bullet point two). Of course, if this was enough, every child offered an educational opportunity would take advantage of the schooling available. We know instead that many children decline services, just as Jake does when he is offered counseling. It's for this reason that resilience needs to be understood as more than just the presence of assets. Resilience also depends on the resources offered by one's environment fitting well with what one values. The second part of the process is **negotiation** (the third bullet point). The individual child, embedded in culture, will have some say over what she finds helpful. **The more that which is provided fits with the child's values and strengths, the more likely resilience is to result.** In practice, what this means is that different cultural groups decide what assets are most useful.

Are these values & strengths subject to change?

A Broader Understanding of Resilience

Once we take our focus off the individual, and shift it to the interaction between the individual, the individual's values (and those of the individual's family and community), and the individual's environment, much changes in how resilience is understood. Gone is the certainty of standardized "pan-human validity," the assertion of survival looking the same for all children across all cultures and contexts. Gone, too, is the belief that children thrive because of something innate. The good news is that this evolution in the way resilience is understood opens doors to much better interventions. A few important findings from the research remind us that **resilience is fluid and contextually dependent.**

Cumulative Effect of Resilience Factors

The research evidence suggests **more is better when it comes to strengths, and earlier is better when it comes to when resources are provided.** Processes associated with resilience may accumulate to exert an exponentially greater effect on outcomes. Simply put, that means doubling the number of assets a child has can result in a four-fold decrease in the odds the child will become delinquent in her later teens. While any single factor, like attachment to a significant caregiver, or involvement in sports, may be associated with better outcomes for some populations, usually the amount of influence is relatively small even if it is statistically significant. More likely, factors work in concert with each other to produce notable gains. Involvement in after school sports, as Jake experiences, may expose a child to adult mentors, enhance self-esteem, teach social skills and responsibility, and prevent unstructured and unmonitored time in the community. It may also provide opportunities to do fundraising, travel, and offer other rites of passage associated with growing up well.

Multiple Pathways to Resilience

As more comprehensive research is conducted, the pathways that children travel towards positive development are being shown to be less linear and one-dimensional than originally thought. Suniya Luthar, Erin Phelps, Richard Lerner, and many others, have demonstrated that children may develop in ways that appear positive or even negative, but that growth still occurs. Werner and Smith have shown that over a fifty-year period, even resilient individuals experience developmental stages during which they may become more vulnerable.

Interaction Effect: Differential Impact of Risk

A risk factor exerts a detrimental force in a child's life under some but not all conditions. For example, exposure to bombing during the Second World War in London was less stressful for children who remained with their parents than for those removed from the cities. Similarly, the divorce of one's parents may have little or no impact on a child's development when family conflict subsides as a consequence of the separation, especially if the child maintains the same standard of living he experienced before the divorce. In both these examples, the risk factors are not the most obvious (bombings or divorce). In such instances, it is a sequence of events that cause the child harm. In general, risks factors interact with the strengths shown by a child and the child's environment to determine the degree of risk exposure. No risk is in and of itself predictive of one outcome or another. Instead, one must see a risk factor as one part of an interactional process in which its meaning and impact is determined in combination with the assets available to a child.

Context: Ability, Gender, Sexual Orientation, Race, Ethnicity and Geography

Patterns of behaviour associated with resilience have at times been biased towards one context or another. As conceived, outcomes such as educational attainment, relationships with parents, and pastimes are usually contextually relevant to one population. Those with disabilities, for example, argue they are differently-abled, with their ability to resist stigma or disassociate themselves from the label of disabled being an important contributing factor to their resilience. Likewise, standards for achievement among boys and girls have tended to overlook differences in development. Ironically where once girls were disadvantaged by this neutrality, it is now boys that are thought to be losing out when aspects of development like learning style overlook different needs. Likewise, racialized groups argue different parenting patterns in more or less dangerous contexts are predictive of positive child outcomes, though the tendency is to favour Baumrind's authoritative style of parenting as the singular and best model. Geographic differences between children also influence patterns of resilience. Whether a child is growing up in a rural, suburban or urban setting can influence rites of passage (When does the child learn to drive? Is the child responsible for a domestic animal?), pastimes (hobbies and interests may vary by setting) and access to services (such as teen health clinics, and remedial education supports). The increasing plurality of perspectives in the resilience literature is helping us to broaden our understanding of the factors associated with healthy development and the context-specific processes populations of children use to sustain themselves under stress.

Culture: The Indigenization of Resilience

Though culture is an aspect of context, it deserves more specific attention because of its influence. Culture may encompass any group identity (because of one's race, ethnicity, nationality, or special association with others) that brings with it everyday practices that influence beliefs and behaviour. In order to understand resilience better, the research is becoming increasingly *indigenized*. Whether a child is from an affluent family in the United States, a South African township, an Aboriginal community in northern Canada, or a Brazilian street, the factors associated with survival under stress

are going to vary first by context, and second by culture. The values and beliefs of the society surrounding a child decide what resources are provided to the child (like schooling for children under age six, or education for girls after grade eight). In turn, behaviours associated with resilience are usually storied through cultural practices. Thinking back to Tania, her academic success is an obvious benchmark of successful development appropriate to her culture.

Summary

Resilience remains a helpful concept, if only because it shifts our focus from problems to solutions. Though the idea remains controversial, and the indicators uncertain, there is growing evidence that many children cope with adversity and thrive. Their success is an interactive, complex process that requires sensitivity to the risks the child faces, the internal and external assets the child has, and the culture and context in which the child is coping. Despite this complexity, the study of resilience is helping us identify what things children do right to protect themselves when facing multiple challenges. Lessons learned will certainly help to inform interventions with those who are vulnerable. Understanding resilience opens the possibility of seeing the vast range of possible ways children can cope and how their caregivers can best help those who are coping less well.

1) Questions to explore resilience

Considering the community in which you live:

- How do children and their families define what it means to “grow up well?”
- What assets do children commonly show when they do well?
- How do they develop, or gain access to, these assets?

Now consider interventions in your community that:

- Help children **beat the odds**:
 - What services and interventions are offered to children and families that build individual strengths?
 - Whose responsibility is it to provide these services?
 - What can be done to enhance services that help children beat the odds?
- Help **change the odds** stacked against children:
 - What services do children need to avoid risk?
 - What services do children and their families say they need, but have yet to be provided?
 - What steps should be taken to help change the odds in your community?

2) Questions to identify hidden resilience:

In this essay, I understand resilience as:

- First, the capacity of individuals to *navigate* to resources that sustain well-being;
- Second, the capacity of individuals’ environments to provide resources; and
- Third, the capacity of individuals, their families and communities to *negotiate* culturally meaningful ways for resources to be shared.

With the principles of navigation and negotiation in mind, and remembering the challenges individuals, families and communities have accessing resources, consider the following sequence of questions:

Part A. Thinking about a child with whom you’ve worked who is challenged by many problems, or a child in your community who you think needs help, summarize the problems he or she faces individually, as part of his or her family, and as part of his or her community.

Part B. Now consider:

- What personal and social/economic/political resources are **realistically available and accessible** to this particular child, his or her family and community?

- Given the child's strengths and access to resources in his or her family and community, **how does the child cope** (sustain well-being) despite the adversity he or she faces?

Given your answers to Part B, are there any problem behaviors that the child shows (like delinquency, procrastination, withdrawal) that may be reasonable adaptations in resource-poor contexts?

Part C. With your answers in mind, summarize the child's strengths and assets, both internal and external, that sustain the child's well-being. Try not to judge the resulting behavior as good or bad. With the child's pattern of coping in mind, ask yourself:

- What resources are missing?
- What resources are plentiful?
- Is the child making good use of what he or she has available?
- Is the child demonstrating hidden resilience?

Part D. How would you **structure services** (education, child welfare, mental health, public health, transportation, housing, social assistance, daycare, etc.) to nurture both internal and external assets in ways that the child values, and that the child's family and community also finds acceptable?

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