Fostering Resilience among Children in Difficult Life Circumstances

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Resilience is the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or even significant sources of stress -- such as family and relationship problems, serious health problems, or workplace and financial stressors. It means "bouncing back" from difficult experiences. (APA Health Center, 2004). “Resilience” thus refers to the concept that even in situations of multiple risks to an individual’s development, there are certain qualities within the individual or his/her environment that allow him/her to deal with these risks and thrive in spite of them. (Engle et al.,1996:9) Some children from poor family backgrounds are resilient -- that is, they behave better and score higher on intelligence tests than might be expected given the level of social and economic deprivation they have experienced (Kim-Cohen et al., 2004). Bostock (2004) states that resilience refers to the qualities that cushion a vulnerable child from the worst effects of adversity and that may help a “child or young person to cope, survive and even thrive in the face of great hurt and disadvantage”.

The literature on resilience has grown copiously over the last number of years. Burchinal (2006) has presented findings from searches to describe trends in the frequencies of references to resilience on Web pages and in professional literature. The following was found:

Table 1. Number of Web pages dealing with resilience, 2003-2006

Year of search	Number of pages	Percentage change
September, 2003	394,000	
September, 2004	835,000	2003 to 2004, 112%
July, 2005	4,000,000	2004 to 2005, 379%
April, 2006	30,000,000	2005 to 2006, 650%

Table 2. Number of Web pages dealing with resilience as limited by an additional term, 2005 and 2006

Search	Number of pages		Percent change
	2005	2006	
Resilience and children	801,000	8,380,000	946%
Resilience and youth	406,000	4,080,000	905%
Resilience and families	1,190,000	12,200,000	925%
Resilience and community	1,219,000	12,500,000	925%
Resilience and mental health	490,000	3,750,000	665%

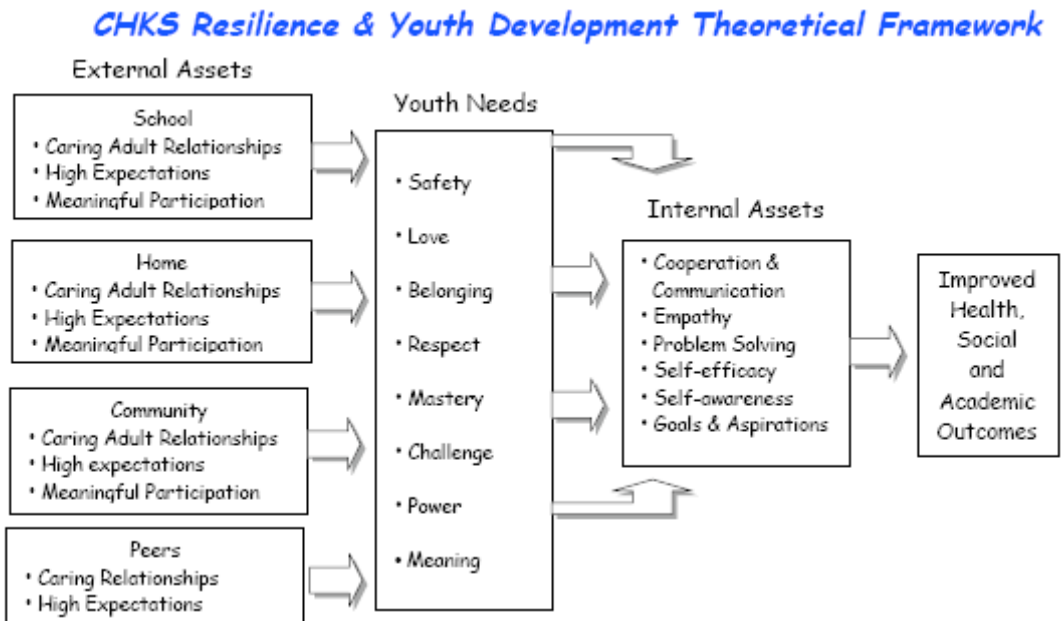
Table 3. Number of Web pages with resilience in titles of pages, 2003 to 2006

	Search terms used Number of pages				Percent change
	2003	2004	2005	2006	2005 to 2006
Resilience and children	191	479	665	621	-7%
Resilience and youth	86	131	149	224	50%
Resilience and families	20	51	93	183	97%
Resilience and community		44	245	322	31%
Resilience and mental health		17	66	154	133%

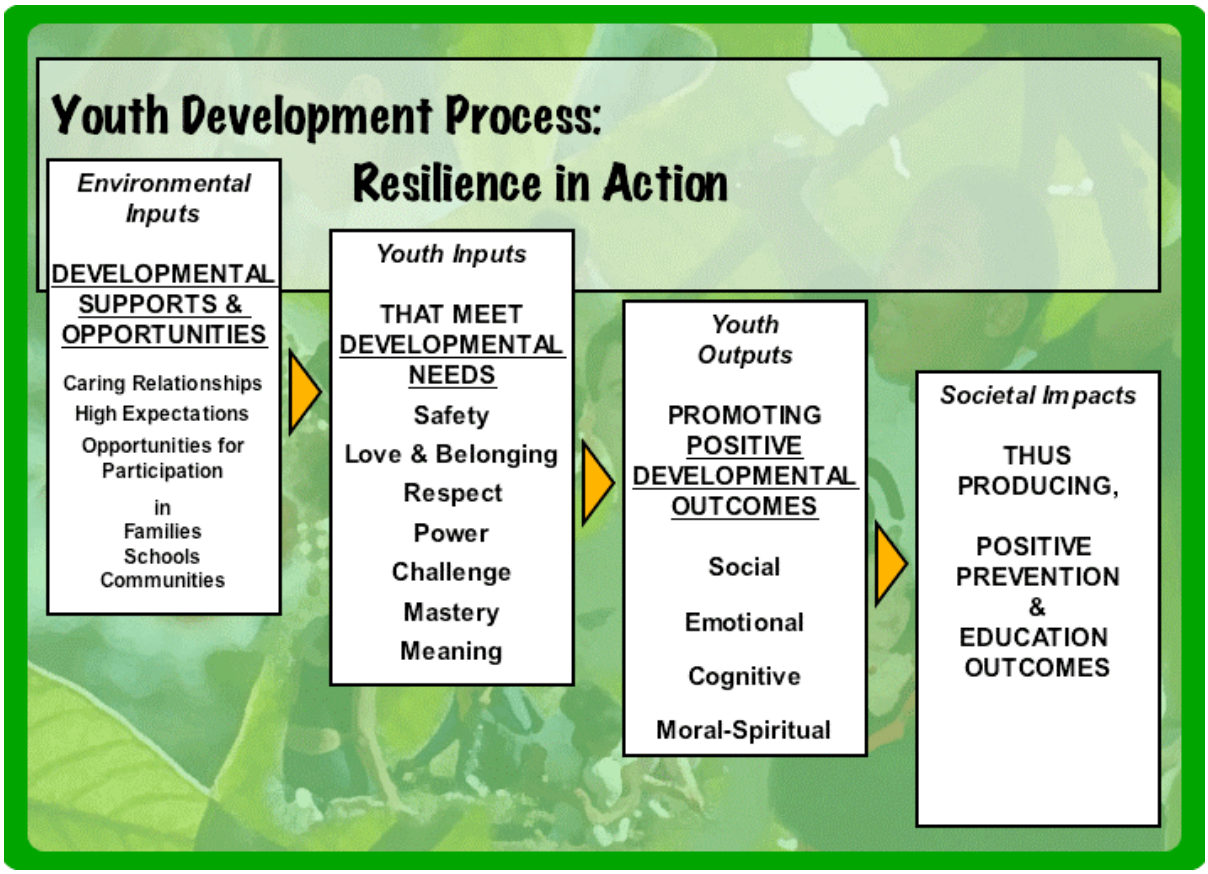
With such a great number of resources dealing with resilience it is not realistic to attempt to write a literature review of the term. Alternatively, we will put forward a number of factors relating to the resilience of children whose subjective wellbeing is quite well despite their bad living conditions. Our paper will present features that manifest resilience among children and youth despite their difficult living conditions. We will open our presentation with two models of resilience amongst youth as developed by WestEd (Resilience and youth development, 2004). We will then look at psychological and personal characteristics that contribute to resilience. This will be followed by psychosocial factors. We will conclude with how the family and school impact on the resilience of children.

Theoretical Model

WestEd, A nonprofit research, development, and service agency, developed a Resilience & Youth Development Module (http://www.wested.org/pub/docs/hks_resilience.html). The following theoretical framework was the basis for their work.



The implementation of the theoretical framework is defined as Resilience in Action that is illustrated in the following figure:



The Psychological Approach

Researchers define *internal protective factors* as characteristics or personality traits of the child, such as activity level, disposition, responsiveness to people, social orientation, communication skills, ability to focus, self-concept, internal locus of control, and desire to improve self (Cove et el., 2005). Buckner et al. (2003) found that resilient youths were notably different from non-resilient youths in terms of having greater self-regulatory skills and self-esteem, as well as in receiving more active parental monitoring. Resilient youths were notably different from non-resilient youths in terms of having greater self-regulatory skills and self-esteem, as well as in receiving more active parental monitoring. Waaktaar et al. (2004) reported that young people with stressful background experiences demonstrated resilience when they had positive peer relations, self-efficacy, creativity, and coherence.

Writing on a more abstract level Grotberg (1999) presents a paradigm of resilience that forms the process for dealing with life's adversities. The paradigm consists of three components:

Paradigm of Resilience

Component	Definition	Building

		Blocks
I HAVE	Supports around each individual to promote resilience	Trust
I AM	Encouragement in developing the inner strengths of confidence, self-esteem, and responsibility	Autonomy Identity
I CAN	Acquisition of interpersonal and problem solving skills	Initiative Industry

Trust - Trust is defined as believing in and relying on another person or thing.
Autonomy - Autonomy is defined as independence or freedom - the ability to make your own decisions
Identity – corresponds to your development during your teen years.

Who am I?
How do I compare to other teens?
What are my new relationships with my parents?
What have I accomplished?
Where do I go from here?
Initiative - Initiative is the ability and willingness to take action.
Industry - Industry is defined as working diligently at a task.

Bell (2000) presented a list of the personal characteristics needed for resiliency. They are: (a) having curiosity and intellectual mastery; (b) having compassion - with detachment; (c) having the ability to conceptualize; (d) obtaining the conviction of one's right to survive; (e) possessing the ability to remember and invoke images of good and sustaining figures; (f) having the ability to be in touch with affects, not denying or suppressing major affects as they arise; (g) having a goal to live for; (h) having the ability to attract and use support; (i) possessing a vision of the possibility and desirability of restoration civilized moral order; (j) having the need and ability to help others; (k) having an affective repertory; (l) being resourceful; (m) being altruistic toward others; and (o) having the capacity to turn traumatic helplessness into learned helpfulness.

Work done at the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory by Winfield (1994) identified individual characteristics of resilient students in high poverty areas who succeeded despite their disadvantaged circumstances. These characteristics include a wide array of social skills, positive peer interactions, a high degree of social responsiveness and sensitivity, intelligence (measured by IQ), empathy, a sense of humor, and critical problem-solving skills. Additional characteristics of resilient children include the following:

Positive peer and adult interactions
Low degrees of defensiveness and aggressiveness and high degrees of cooperation, participation, and emotional stability (teachers' ratings)
A positive sense of self
A sense of personal power rather than powerlessness

An internal locus of control (a belief that they are capable of exercising a degree of control over their environment)

Psychosocial factors

Potential contributors to resilient outcomes for children that have been the focus of research include three groups:

- *Individual psychological characteristics* that allow children to cope effectively with stress, including "belief in one's own self-efficacy, the ability to deal with change, and a repertoire of social problem-solving skills";
- *Social and economic factors* such as socioeconomic status; family dynamics; parenting quality; quality and relationships with teachers and other adults; neighborhood effects; and exposure to violence or trauma; and
- *Access to quality educational and recreational opportunities,* such as schools, sports teams, churches, and Boys and Girls clubs (Cove et el, 2005).

Vance and Sanchez (1998) have broadened these factors relating to resilience putting it into the framework of psychosocial protective factors.

PSYCHOSOCIAL PROTECTIVE FACTORS

QUALITIES OF THE CHILD	FAMILY CHARACTERISTICS	SOCIAL SUPPORT FROM OUTSIDE THE FAMILY
Positive, "easy" temperament type	Lives at home	Adult mentor for child outside immediate family
Autonomy and independence as a toddler	Secure mother-infant attachment	Extra adult help for caretaker of family
High hopes and expectations for the future	Warm relationship with a parent	Support for child from friends
Internal locus of control as a teenager	Inductive, consistent discipline by parents	Support for child from a mentor at school
Interpersonally engaging, "likable"	Perception that parents care	Support for family from church
Sense of humor	Established routines in the home	Support for family from work place
Empathy		
Perceived competencies		
Above average intelligence, IQ>100		
Good reader		
Gets along with others		
Problem solving skills in school age		

Similar work was done by Newman and Blackburn (undated) who defined resilience factors taking into consideration the child, family and environment.

Resilience factors

The Child	The Family	The Environment
Temperament (active, good natured)	Warm supportive parents	Supportive extended family
Female prior to and male during adolescence	Good parent-child relationships	Successful school experiences
Age (being younger)	Parental harmony	Friendship networks
Higher IQ	Valued social role (e.g. care of siblings	Valued social role (e.g. a job, volunteering)
Social skills	Close relationship with one parent	Close relationship with unrelated mentor
Personal awareness		Member of religious or faith community
Feelings of empathy		
Internal locus control		
Humour		
Attractiveness		

Macro approach

We have seen that resiliency in related to both psychological and social factors. There are those who advocate a more macro approach to resiliency. Seccombe (2002) suggests that resiliency will be enhanced more by attention to national economic policies rather than by focusing upon individual personality characteristics, family attributes, or even unique community features. A focus on prevention, through economic redistribution policies could significantly strengthen families and improve their well-being.

But there are those who declare that healthy communities builds resilient youth. (The following has been taken from Healthy Communities/Healthy Youth Berks County Initiative at the United Way of Berks County 1999: http://www.uwberks.org/pdf/community%20bldg/tip%20sheets/Resilience%20in%20youth.pdf)

Building healthy communities to build youth resilience

• **Focus on their strengths.** Help youth to build upon the positives in their lives. Help them to develop an I can succeed attitude.

• **Provide positive messages of care and support.** Help children and their families to identify struggles, challenges, and difficulties they have already overcome.

• **Identify positive connections they have** with peers and adults, programs, activities, clubs and organizations. Positive bonds foster resiliency.

• **Be firm but caring**. Children and teens need boundaries. Set them with their safety and growth in mind. Include them in the setting of these boundaries. Help them understand why they are there builds resilient youth.

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• **Be firm but caring**. Children and teens need boundaries. Set them with their safety and growth in mind. Include them in the setting of these boundaries. Help them understand why they are there.
Set high expectations of behavior and performance. Children will generally become what we expect. If we expect mediocrity, that's what we will get. Expectations alone however are not enough. We need to make sure we give them the tools to reach the expectations.
• **Help them find opportunities to hone in on their talents or passions**. Youth who feel a sense of value will build a self-concept that is healthy and contributing. This value leads to self-sufficiency.
• **Help to find creative ways to engage them in continuous learning.**
• **Ask yourself, .How do I show support** for the youth I interact with? Ask them, .Who supports you emotionally?
• **Model the positive behavior you want to receive.** That means treating others with respect, dignity, being responsible, empathetic, and having the ability to listen attentively with your head and your heart.
• **Teach using positive questions**. When we ask questions versus constantly telling, we teach our children to think through situations and they build critical thinking and decision-making skills.
– **Hold them accountable for unacceptable behavior:** Teach them why it is not acceptable and alternative behaviors that are more beneficial.
– **Hold them accountable for unacceptable behavior:** Teach them why it is not acceptable and alternative behaviors that are more beneficial.
- Don't make them feel small or correct them in front of others. They will take much more notice if you talk quietly to them in private.
• **Don't forget that children and teens cannot always explain themselves as well as we would like.** Teach them how to express their feelings and thoughts.
• **Be consistent**. When mixed messages are sent children and teens will lose faith and respect in you.
• **Listen when they have questions**. Listening acknowledges their existence and value. Be honest if you do not know the answer. Teens especially can see very quickly when adults are making up the answers. Suggest that you will find out the answer and get back to them.
• **Don't forget to follow through**. If you suggested you would check on something, do it and get back to them. This builds trust and teaches them we care.
• **Teach them skills to resolve conflicts maturely**. Help them work through the process of thinking before acting.
• **Help them set goals** both short and long term. Guide them through the process of action steps needed to reach their goals.

Provide positive feedback whenever a child or family is exhibiting a behavior or action that is worthwhile. When positive behaviors and actions are reinforced, they are more likely to be continued.

• **Add a little humor to your relationship.** Appropriate humor can aid in building a bond and making you appear more like a mentor than a professional who sees one child/family after another.

• **Reach out to other community sectors to support youth and their families.** By creating a web of support for children and their families we decrease the needs of families on the system and create an environment that shares responsibility for helping everyone to thrive.

• **Remove the barriers.** Review all organizational policies and procedures. What is working? What are the barriers? Modeling family friendly practices will help families to be resilient which in turns can help their children.

• **Communicate confidence and trust in the child and families abilities.**

• **Invite participation** both from the child and family. By fostering competency and providing support and guidance in a caring and empathetic environment you build a resilience attitude.

• **Encourage balance.** Balance is the underlying principle associated with successful adaptation to the challenges of life. Children and families can become resilient if they are encouraged to develop, maintain, and acquire resources and coping behaviors for managing demands

Fostering Resilience

External protective factors are sources of support and structure in the child's environment. This can include parental warmth, presence of non-parental caretakers, informal sources of emotional support, peer relationships, rules in the household, shared values, access to services (Cove et al., 2005). Both parent and school support factors were significantly positively associated with resilience in children who had been exposed to community violence (O'Donnell et al., 2002). In this section on fostering resilience we will focus on two of the main components that the literature states that foster resilience: the family and the school. It should be emphasized that this is not a comprehensive review of the literature regarding the family and school and resiliency. In this section we put forward only the main points regarding the family and school and resiliency as found in our selected review of the literature.

<u>The Family</u>

Newman and Blackburn (undated) state emphatically that a supportive family is the most powerful resilience promoting factor. Engle et al. (1996) reports, that children's family circumstances shape their ability to exhibit resilience in the face of excessive physiological and psychological risk. Research has focused upon how within-family relations act to buffer children against environmental stresses and how the interaction of the family with the wider community may endow a child with additional support or resources he or she needs to survive, and to grow and develop appropriately. Family dynamics include not only intra-family processes, but also relations with extra-family forces and community organizations, such as non-governmental organizations.

One unique approach to the impact if the family on a child's resiliency, was put forward by Kim-Cohen et al. (2004). They found that children's behavioral and

cognitive resilience to poverty was influenced by their genetic makeup. This suggests that children themselves are agents in rising above their experience of poverty. For example, we found that children with a genetic disposition to be friendly, sociable, and outgoing had the most resilience against poverty. But they also give credit to the child's family environment. They report that children's resilience was also affected by their rearing environment. After controlling for genetic effects, we found that mothers who engaged in more stimulating activities helped promote their children's resilience against poverty. This finding suggests that encouraging parents to engage in activities with their children can help protect children's intellectual development from the damaging effects of socioeconomic deprivation. They conclude that both genetic and social-environmental sources of protection are involved in helping children overcome the hardship of growing up poor. This impact of positive parental upbringing of children exposed to socioeconomic deprivation as a basis for youth resiliency has been supported by Ungar (2004) (close relationships), and Kim-Cohen et al., 2004) (a mother's warmth toward her child, and a stimulating home environment) among others.

But parents also play a role in the link between the family and the school. This link also enhances resiliency in children from lower socio-economic environments. It was found that resilient children also tend to have parents who are concerned with their children's education, who participate in that education, who direct their children's everyday tasks, and who are aware of their children's interests and goals. Another important characteristic of resilient children is having *at least one* significant adult in their lives (Winfield, 1994).

The School

Gilligan (2002) emphasises the importance of encouraging resilience and positive qualities such as self esteem in young people who have been abused. He points out ways this can be achieved, in particular through the child's relationship with a teacher.

Teachers and Schools Have the Power to Transform Lives A common finding in resilience research is the power of teachers to tip the scale from risk to resilience.
Caring Relationships. Teachers can convey loving support to students by listening to students and validating their feelings, and by demonstrating kindness, compassion, and respect
Positive and High Expectations. Teachers' high expectations can structure and guide behavior, and can also challenge students beyond what they believe they can do
Opportunities to Participate and Contribute. As an outgrowth of a strengths-based perspective, turnaround teachers let students express their opinions and imagination, make choices, problem solve, work with and help others, and give their gifts back to the community in a physically and psychologically safe and structured environment. (Benard, undated).

Bickart and Wolin (1997) present a model of how a teacher can practice resilience in the primary school classroom. This includes: children are involved in assessing their own work and in setting goals for themselves; children have many opportunities to work collaboratively; children participate in meetings to solve classroom problems; children have opportunities to make choices; children feel connected in a classroom structured as a community and children play an active role in setting rules for classroom life.

Conclusions

Our brief review of the literature indicates that the key to fostering resilience of children exposed to socioeconomic deprivation is through the family. It has been found that a caring family or at least one caring adult, for example a teacher, makes a significant difference in a child overcoming poverty, social exclusion and difficult life circumstances. The implications of these findings are not very encouraging. We know that it is where there are children in difficult socio-economic conditions that need conditions to develop resilience, are the same social areas where there are dysfunctional families and underachieving schools. Our findings suggest that they way to foster resilient children is through the family. It then leads us to conclude that the family should be the focus of our concern.

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