

strengthening families

research in brief: resilience in childhood

RESILIENCE: COMPETENCE DESPITE ADVERSITY

An important question raised by many researchers is “Why are some children able to function successfully in a context of multiple risk factors that extend over time while others are not?” Many studies have found that children who were victims of child abuse and neglect were able to develop positive relationships later in life.

The explanation for variable responses to severe, cumulative risk factors lies in an understanding of “resilience”: a dynamic process that entails positive adaptation and successful developmental outcomes in spite of the presence of adverse conditions. Resilience is not only the presence of risk factors, but also the presence of protective factors that counterbalance risk.

PROCESS VERSUS PERSONALITY TRAIT

Some researchers have used the terms “resiliency” and “resilient children” both which may suggest a discrete personality trait. Other researchers caution against this usage because conceiving resilience as a personality trait implies that it is a quality that some children have and others do not; that some children have the capacity to overcome adversity and others do not. These researchers suggest that it would be more beneficial to conceive resilience as a dynamic, developmental process and seek to understand those factors that underlie it.

RESILIENCE IS NOT INVULNERABILITY

The ability to demonstrate resilience does not mean that a child is “stress resistant” or “invulnerable” to adversities. Children who are able to demonstrate resilience are affected by stressful and challenging situations, sometimes to the point of feeling overwhelmed. The difference is that they are more able to bounce back from adversity than their peers who don’t show resilience in various contexts.

RESILIENCE MAY BE UNEVEN

Resilience is multidimensional. This means that children who experience severe or prolonged risk factors may be able to

demonstrate resilience in some domains or contexts (e.g., positive adaptation in an academic setting) but not others (e.g., peer relationships). Thus, resilience may not be even across all domains; positive adaptation in one domain does not mean competence in all domains. Increasingly, researchers are using qualifiers like educational resilience or social resilience.

FACTORS RELATED TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF RESILIENCE

Resilience may derive from factors both internal and external to a child:

- 1 **Attributes of the Child** (e.g., feelings of hope and meaningfulness of life)
- 2 **Aspects of the Family** (e.g., strong relationship with a caring, prosocial parent or parent-figure)
- 3 **Characteristics of the Social Environments** (e.g., opportunities to learn and experience mastery; opportunities to be mentored by a competent, caring adult)

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