Resilience: concept, factors and models for practice

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Briefing

Key messages

- Resilience frameworks for practice unify and expand upon developmental, attachment and ecological approaches and can enable a more holistic focus on what children and young people need in order to fulfil their potential.
- Resilience is built upon the complex interaction and operation of risk and protective factors at individual, family and community levels.
- It is important to understand resilience as a process rather than a particular character trait.

- Three fundamental building blocks of resilience are identified in the literature – a secure base, good self esteem and a sense of self-efficacy.
- Attention to different domains in children's lives – secure attachment relationships, education, friendships, talents and interests, positive values and social competencies – can help practitioners to appraise and identify ways to strengthen these building blocks.

Introduction

Theories of attachment, child development and resilience are core to understanding and improving the conditions and circumstances that facilitate children to achieve their potential[1]. Identifying, and understanding the operation of risks to children's physical, cognitive, emotional, and social development is an evolving field. A notable recent advance in knowledge is our increasing understanding of early brain development[1,4], and its consequences for the realisation of children's emotional, behavioural, cognitive and social potential[3]. Knowledge of factors and processes that can moderate risks to child development is also growing. This briefing draws on reviews of empirical research and applied practice literature focused on resilience to highlight its utility for child care and protection practice.

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Why is this issue important?

Within society, people face many adversities or stressors in their lives. "Resilience is important because it is the human capacity to face, overcome and be strengthened by or even transformed by the adversities of life"[5]. Biographical accounts as much as empirical research suggest that resilience, as an outcome, exists[6]. Developing an awareness of the empirical work, exploring factors and processes that affect resilience, can assist practitioners in assessing children's needs[1,7,8] and in the application of resilience-based approaches in practice[9,10,11,12,13,14,15]. The weight of evidence suggests that incorporating resilience-promoting strategies in services to children and young people can make a difference[16,17]. For families too, a comprehensive understanding of the factors that foster family resiliency may serve to inform the development of more holistic policies and programmes to support optimal outcomes for families[18].

What does the research tell us?

Conceptualised as "doing better than expected in difficult circumstances"

The research does not provide clear definitions or clarity in the terminology used to conceptualise the meaning and operation of resilience. Clusters of meanings are associated with "doing better than expected in difficult circumstances"[9]. Commonly cited definitions include: "Normal development under difficult conditions"[20] and "the process of, capacity for, or outcome of successful adaptation despite challenging or threatening circumstances"[21]. Resilience is conceptualised as an outcome (relatively good functioning or well-being), as well as a set of qualities or processes that enable a person to make use of internal and external resources (adaptability in the face of adversity)[1,19]. The personal, familial and environmental features that are associated with resilience in children are well explored but less is known about what contributes to parental[19] or family resilience[18]. Less attention has been paid to evaluating the effectiveness of resilience-promoting strategies in practice, which is a key priority for future research[1,17,19].

Incorporating concepts of adversity, risk, vulnerability and protective factors

Explorations of the concept of resilience are typically framed with reference to adversity, risk, vulnerability and protective factors. Types of adversity considered in the literature vary along different dimensions, including from severe or exceptional to common or everyday; from specific to community wide; from material to non-material; from multiple to single; from interfamilial to external[19]. "Risk", sometimes used as an alternative to adversity, also has multiple, overlapping meanings. It can perhaps most helpfully be understood as something that increases the chance of a specified (negative) outcome[6]. The interaction between risk factors, the accumulation of risk factors, and the timing of exposure to risk factors is important to consider[6]. Vulnerability can be understood as a feature that renders a person more susceptible to negative consequences of adversity[16]. Protective factors can be understood as "circumstances that moderate the effects of risk" in a positive direction[6,16]. Like risk, they, too, are cumulative[17]. Most factors that threaten or protect children are largely inert by themselves[22]: "Their toxic or prophylactic potential emerges when they catalyse with stressful events, especially where these are prolonged, multiple and impact on the child during sensitive developmental stages"[17,p9].

Resilience as a dynamic process

Emphasis is placed on understanding resilience as a process rather than a particular character trait[1,17]. Resilience is seen as being built upon the complex interaction and operation of risk and protective factors at individual, family and community levels[17,18,19]. Protective factors can be seen as operating on dimensions that are intrinsic (internal) and extrinsic (external) to individuals[1,7,8]. These factors vary in their malleability – some are more amenable to change while others are immutable[1,9,10,11] – which provides some opportunities for strengthening factors and processes that can be protective for children and young people's well-being in the longer term.

Factors associated with resilience

The factors that have been shown to be associated with resilience are listed opposite in relation to the age of the child[9,10,11,23] and in relation to an ecological framework[24].

	Individual	Family	Community
Infancy	» Female » First-born » No birth complications » Full term » Easy sleeping and feeding » Affectionate » Drive and vigour » Socially responsive » Actively reaches for others » Secure attachment » Advanced in communication » Alert and cheerful » Adaptable » Fearless » Seeks out novel experiences	» Close bond with at least one person » Nurturance and trust » Lack of separations » Lack of parental mental health or addiction problems » Close grandparents » Family harmony » Sibling attachment » Four or fewer children » Sufficient financial and material resources	» Neighbour and other non-kin support » Peer contact » Good nursery experience
School years	» Female » Sense of competence and self-efficacy » Internal locus of control » Empathy with others » Problem-solving skills » Communication skills » Sociable » Independent » Reflective, not impulsive » Ability to concentrate on schoolwork » Autonomy (girls) » Emotional expressiveness (boys) » Sense of humour » Hobbies » Willingness and capacity to plan	» Close bond with at least one person » Nurturance and trust » Lack of separations » Lack of parental mental health or addiction problems » Required helpfulness » Encouragement for autonomy (girls) » Encouragement for expression of feelings (boys) » Close grandparents » Family harmony » Sibling attachment » Four or fewer children » Sufficient financial and material resources	» Neighbour and other non-kin support » Peer contact » Good school experiences » Positive adult role models
Adolescence	» Male » Responsibility » Empathy with others » Internal locus of control » Social maturity » Positive self-concept » Achievement orientation » Gentleness, nurturance » Social perceptiveness » Preference for structure » A set of values » Intelligence » Willingness and capacity to plan	» Close bond with at least one person » Nurturance and trust » Lack of separations » Lack of parental mental health or addiction problems » Required helpfulness » Encouragement for autonomy (girls) » Encouragement for expression of feelings (boys) » Close grandparents » Family harmony » Sibling attachment » Four or fewer children » Sufficient financial and material resources	» Neighbour and other non-kin support » Peer contact » Good school experiences » Positive adult role models

Reproduced and summarised from[9,10,11,23]

Approaches to applying resilience theory in practice

Research into factors associated with resilience has led to the development of a number of guiding frameworks for intervention. There is some consensus in the articulation of these frameworks with agreement in the need for practitioners and service designs to focus on[25,26]:

- Altering or reducing a child's exposure to risk
- Reducing the "chain reaction" or "pile up" of risk exposures
- Creating opportunities or increasing resources available to children
- Processes, for example, in improving attachment, self-efficacy or self-esteem, or "resilience strings" that can have a knock on effect

It is suggested that the most effective intervention programmes involve "multi-faceted paradigms [that] attempt to reduce modifiable risk, strengthen meaningful assets, and recruit core developmental processes within the child, family and the broader community"[26,p10]

Models for practice

Child welfare academics who have focused on developing models for the practical application of resilience theory identify three fundamental building blocks of resilience[1,12,14]:

1. A secure base whereby the child feels a sense of belonging and security
2. Good self-esteem, that is, an internal sense of worth and competence
3. A sense of self-efficacy, that is a sense of mastery and control, along with an accurate understanding of personal strengths and limitations

Alternatively these can be expressed as "I HAVE…, I AM…, I CAN… "[5]. Attention to different domains in children's lives – secure attachment relationships, education, friendships, talents and interests, positive values and social competencies – can help practitioners to appraise and identify ways to strengthen these building blocks[1,7,12,13,14,15]. It is argued that such resilience frameworks unify and expand upon developmental, attachment and ecological approaches[19] and can enable a more holistic focus on what children and young people need in order to fulfil their potential[1,9,10,11]. The framework fits closely with the aim of Getting It Right for Every Child to encourage practitioners to draw on what family, community and universal services can offer.

Further resources

Understanding resilience – IRISS learning resource (http://content.iriss.org.uk/understandingresilience/index.html)

Fostering resilience – IRISS learning resource (http://content.iriss.org.uk/fosteringresilience/flash/fullscreen.html)

Getting It Right for Every Child promotes shared models and tools including: the My world triangle for holistically assessing the current circumstances in a child's world (http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/1141/0109332.pdf) and the Resilience Matrix (http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/1141/0109967.pdf)

Providing a secure base
Gillian Schofield and Mary Beek at the University of East Anglia have developed "the secure base care giving model" for use in child placement practice which may have wider application for work with parents (http://www.uea.ac.uk/providingasecurebase?mode=print)

Daniel B and Wassell S (2002) have written three practice guides available from Jessica Kingsley Publishers:
- The Early Years: Assessing and promoting resilience in vulnerable children 1
- The School Years: Assessing and promoting resilience in vulnerable children 2
- Adolescence: Assessing and promoting resilience in vulnerable children 3

Gilligan R. (2001) Promoting Resilience: A Resource Guide on Working with Children in the Care System. London: BAAF

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