

Resilience: The Common Underlying Factor

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In all of my workshops and writings about the theme of resilience I have posed the question, “What has research identified as an essential factor in helping children to cope more effectively with adversity, to bounce back from hardships, and to become resilient?” As anyone who has read my writings or heard one of my presentations knows, the answer I offer is to have a supportive adult in one’s life, an adult who encourages you and reinforces skills necessary for effective adaptation.

To capture the lifelong impact of this adult, I often refer to the late Dr. Julius Segal’s notion of a “charismatic adult,” defined as an “adult from whom a child gathers strength.” My colleague Dr. Sam Goldstein and I have expanded the scope of this definition by asserting that at all ages we benefit from having this kind of supportive person in our lives. The profound importance of having connections with other people who encourage and are present for us does not lessen when we enter our adult lives.

When I highlight the power of a relationship in nurturing resilience, it is not unusual for participants at my workshops to question what is it that charismatic adults do in their interaction with children. In books such as *Raising Resilient Children*, Sam and I assert that such adults convey unconditional acceptance or love, focus on identifying and applying the strengths or “islands of competence” of youngsters and not just on “fixing” their deficits, help children learn to deal with both successes and setbacks, teach children problem-solving and decision-making skills, discipline in ways that promote self-discipline, and create opportunities for youngsters to enrich the lives of others.

Given my decades long interest in the concept of resilience, I was immediately drawn to an article authored by Bari Walsh that recently appeared in *Usable Knowledge*, a publication of the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Its title was “The Science of Resilience: Why Some Children Can Thrive Despite Adversity.” The opening paragraph offered an explanation.

When confronted with the fallout of childhood trauma, why do some children adapt and overcome, while others bear lifelong scars that flatten their potential? A growing body of evidence points to one common answer: Every child who

winds up doing well has had at least one stable and committed relationship with a supportive adult.

Walsh refers to a recently released Working Paper #13 by the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, the result of a multidisciplinary collaboration chaired by Dr. Jack Shonkoff, Director of the Harvard Center on the Developing Child and a Professor of Pediatrics at Harvard Medical School and Boston Children's Hospital. (For the sake of simplicity I will use either WP #13 or the Council when citing information from this paper.) In reading WP #13 I was very impressed not only by the wealth of information it contained related to factors that contribute to resilience but also by its recommendations for applying these factors in public policy and programs. I describe below some of the key points advanced in WP #13, but for a more comprehensive overview of the insights offered by the Council, the reader is referred to the full report: http://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/reports_and_working_papers/working_papers/wp13/

Supportive Relationships and Intrinsic Factors

The Council observes, “Resilience depends on supportive, responsive relationships and mastering a set of capabilities that can help us respond and adapt to adversity in healthy ways.” While the relationship with adults is afforded center stage, WP #13 also highlights that children possess inborn qualities that play a significant role in determining the nature of these relationships. “Children who do well in the face of significant disadvantage typically exhibit both an intrinsic resistance to adversity *and* strong relationships with the important adults in their family and community. Indeed, it is the *interaction* between biology and environment that builds the capacities to cope with adversity and overcome threats to healthy development.”

This viewpoint, to which I subscribe, should not be interpreted to imply that if children are born with so-called “difficult” temperaments that lessen their “resistance to adversity” they will not be able to form satisfying relationships and become resilient. What is housed in this view is that when we are raising or working with children whose inborn qualities serve as obstacles to developing positive relationships with adults, we must communicate to these children through our words and actions that we believe in and care about them and we will remain by their sides.

Even when children possess challenging temperaments and display questionable behaviors, even when they have struggles forming bonds with adults, we must not abandon our efforts to garner their trust in order to help them to become more hopeful and resilient. Adults must be willing to stay with and nurture children even when children push us away. We must appreciate that it is easier to assume the role of a charismatic adult when children invite us to do so; it is more challenging when their behaviors serve as barriers to assisting and encouraging them. As I once heard someone assert, “Children need our love the most when they seem to deserve it the least.”

Attitudes and Skills Associated with Resilience

A caring and supportive relationship is an essential foundation for resilience but, as the Council highlights, that relationship must be used to reinforce certain attitudes and skills if resilience is to emerge. One such attitude is related directly to a concept I have emphasized in my work, namely, *personal control*. Resilient people focus on events over which they have some influence or control rather than adopting what researchers have referred to as a “victim’s mentality” and constantly asking, “Why me?” This outlook is captured in WP #13 by the following statement: “Those who believe in their own capacity to overcome hardships and guide their own destiny are far more likely to adapt positively to adversity.”

It is for this reason that adults must communicate in an empathic way to children that while they have had little, if any, control over the emergence of certain adverse events in their lives, what they can learn with the assistance of supportive adults is to gain increasing control over their attitude towards and the constructive ways in which they respond to such negative events.

This reinforcement of *personal control* is associated with another set of skills that charismatic adults can reinforce in children--skills that fall under the rubric of executive functioning and self-regulation. The Council observes, “These skills enable individuals to manage their own behavior and emotions and develop and execute adaptive strategies to cope effectively with difficult situations.”

Faith and cultural traditions are also cited in WP #13 as protective factors in shoring up resilience. “Children who are solidly grounded within such traditions are

more likely to respond effectively when challenged by a major stressor or a severely disruptive experience.”

The Council emphasizes that there are certain activities we can choose to engage in that can increase the probability of our dealing more successfully with adversity. The examples involve those I have been advocating in my writings about health and wellness; they also fall under the umbrella of *personal control*. For instance, the Council notes, “Increasing evidence suggests that regular physical exercise and stress-reduction practices (such as mindfulness and mediation) at all ages can alter brain structure and function, while also reducing the expression of proinflammatory genes.”

In addition, “Programs that actively build skills for planning, organization, impulse control, cognitive flexibility, and other executive functions can also improve the abilities of adults with limited education and low income to cope with, adapt to, and even prevent adversity in their lives and in the lives of their children.”

I would add to this list what I as well as others have discovered to be a rich source of resilience, namely, involvement in what I have labeled “contributory” or “charitable activities”; these are activities that involve helping or enriching the lives of others. A number of my writings cite studies that demonstrate the impact of contributory behaviors in adding meaning, purpose, and resilience to our lives. I have long advocated that we regularly introduce opportunities for children to engage in such activities as an effective intervention for reinforcing resilience.

To Avoid Blaming the Victim

During the past few years much has been written about the importance of “grit” and perseverance as qualities of resilience. While these characteristics should not be minimized, I admire the perspective taken by the Council. “There is no ‘resilience gene’ that determines the life course of an individual irrespective of the experiences that shape genetic expression. The capacity to adapt and thrive despite adversity develops through the *interaction* of supportive relationships, gene expression, and adaptive biological systems.”

The Council adds, “When overcoming the odds is erroneously viewed as simply a matter of individual motivation or grit, the failure to succeed is perceived as the fault of the individual, and ‘blaming the victim’ becomes the most frequent response.” WP #13

suggests that this misinterpretation has contributed to public policies that actually work against helping children to become more resilient. An example that is offered is the practice of removing a child from an environment that is unsafe but failing to provide opportunities necessary “to restore the relationships and build the capacities that underlie resilience.”

Is It Ever Too Late?

I have frequently been asked if it's ever too late during our lives to become resilient. In *The Power of Resilience: Achieving Balance, Confidence, and Personal Strength in Your Life*, a book I co-authored with Sam Goldstein, we describe examples of resilience in our elderly years. Each summer I offer a week-long seminar on Cape Cod titled “Resilience Across the Lifespan” in which I advance the view that if we conceive of resilience as a “mindset” associated with particular skills and coping behaviors, then there is no reason to believe that resilience cannot be nurtured throughout our lives.

In light of this position, I was delighted to read in WP #13 the subtitle “The capabilities that underlie resilience can be strengthened at any age.” The support of this statement resonated with my own perspective. “A growing body of evidence shows that the coping skills that support effective adaptation in the face of adversity are built through a developmental process that occurs over an extended period of time, from infancy through adolescence and into the adult years.”

A Summary Statement

The last paragraph of WP #13 offers a concise summary of the direction our efforts should take to nurture resilience in children. “Extensive evidence collected over decades of research points towards the powerful influence of a composite of personal, relational, and contextual factors that are associated with positive outcomes in the face of adversity. Drawing on this powerful knowledge base, all prevention and intervention programs would benefit from focusing on combinations of the following: (1) facilitating supportive adult-child relationships, (2) building a sense of self-efficacy and perceived control; (3) providing opportunities to strengthen adaptive skills and self-regulatory capacities, and (4) mobilizing sources of faith, hope, and cultural traditions.”

Research has provided guideposts for nurturing resilience. Now we must have the resolve to use these guidelines in implementing interventions that will enrich the lives of children and their families.

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