Resilience in children: A review of literature
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Abstract

Even in the most difficult circumstances, there are some children who not only survive, but actually thrive. The label commonly used to refer to such children is resilient. This review of literature will examine what it is about these children that enable them to bounce right back from adversity, and what makes them immune to the factors that negatively affect others. More specifically, this review will examine protective factors that contribute to resilience. The literature has documented individual characteristics with an emphasis on traits, such as high intelligence and easy temperament as one set of such protective factors. Another set of protective factors includes family characteristics such as positive, involved, and supportive parenting, as well as external support from persons and institutions outside the child and the family, such as a positive school experience and involvement in extracurriculars. A cautionary note will also be made about the importance of avoiding the categorization of children as being either resilient or nonresilient. The consensus that prevails in the current research is that resilience is most accurately understood as a process rather than as a stable character trait. Finally, a chief defect in the literature on resilience will be addressed – namely, a methodological shortcoming in which the perspective of children has been completely disregarded.

We all respond to trauma in different ways, and with greater severity and frequency of traumatic events, our capacity to cope usually declines (Condly, 2006). Children, lacking the means to independently fend for themselves, are especially susceptible to the devastating effects of life’s stressors (Condly, 2006). The rise in child poverty, drug use, violence, and abuse has created environments that some researchers have referred to as toxic to the development of children (Garbarino, 1995). Even in the most difficult circumstances, however, there are some children who not only survive, but actually thrive. This group of children that goes against convention and prosper in the face of life’s challenges has been labelled as resilient (Garmezy, 1996; Masten et al, 1995). Masten et al. (1990) define resilience not as a stable trait but rather as an ongoing process of, having the ability for, or outcome of successful adaptation in spite of difficult circumstances. Modern research on resilience can be traced back to Garmezy (1971), who studied children classified as ‘at risk’ of psychiatric disorders, delinquency and other negative life outcomes. Garmezy took a revolutionary step when he chose to focus on those who overcame such obstacles rather than on the children who succumbed to the adverse effects. Following his lead, in the next decade or so, there emerged a great deal of research on the concept of resilience. The questions that began to be asked were: What is it about these children that enable them to bounce right back, while others become depressed or self destructive? What makes them immune to the factors that negatively affect others? The focus of research became centered on resilient children, because by studying them, it is believed that we can obtain a better understanding of how to frame interventions for children in need (Cicchetti & Garmezy, 1993).

Previous discussions, focused on resilience, usually include risky and protective factors. Newman (2004, as cited in The Bridge Child Care Development, 2007) proposed the following definitions: risk: any factor or combination of factors that increases the chance of an undesirable outcome affecting a person. Protective factors: the circumstances that moderate the effects of risk. Protective factors can be broken
down into internal protective factors, which are the individual characteristics of the child, and external protective factors, which are sources of support in the child’s environment. Werner and Smith (1993) distinguished risk factors, which are conditions that remain stable, from stressors, which are short-term conditions that change over time. Examples of risk factors include poverty and low parental education (Cove, Eiseman, & Popkin, 2005). Stressors range from events such as the birth of siblings or a change in residence or school, to much more negative events like parental divorce or the death of a loved one (Cove et al., 2005). Most risk factors are stressors, but stressors are not necessarily risk factors. Furthermore, some stressful events can be interpreted as ambiguous or even positive, whereas risk factors are always negative (Cove et al., 2005).

No single risk is sufficient to debilitate a child’s development; rather, there is a cumulative effect of risks (Garbarino et al., 1992). Research on resiliency suggests that being exposed to many risk factors increases the likelihood of negative outcomes (Werner and Smith 1993, Garmezy 1993). Moreover, Werner and Smith (1989) stated that as disadvantage and cumulative stress increased, a greater number of protective factors in the children and their care-giving environment were necessary for successful development. Just as risks are cumulative, protective factors too have the same cumulative effect. The more protective factors present in a child’s life, the more likely they are to show resilience. What exactly constitutes these protective factors?

Garmezy (1991) proposed three factors which he believed played an important role in resilience. The first factor is individual characteristics with an emphasis on traits, such as intelligence and temperament. The second pertains to the family and the extent of support they provide to the child. The third is the external support from persons and institutions outside the child and the family. Looking first at individual characteristics, resilient children have been found to possess above average intelligence and an easy temperament (Cicchetti, 1998; Luthar, 1993; Rutter, 1993; Wolff, 1995). Having a high intelligence contributes to resilience by allowing children to understand what is happening to them, to assess their environments, and to choose the most effective means of coping (Block & Kremen, 1996). It is hypothesized that above average intelligence leads to increased rewards in school, such as high grades and praise from teachers, and in turn, these rewards increase the student’s attachment to the school community. Being positively attached to one’s school community then decreases likelihood of delinquent and antisocial behaviour (Kandel et al., 1988).

The other individual characteristic commonly cited in the literature is an easygoing temperament. In studies of temperament, infants characterized as “difficult” or “slow to warm up” were more likely to have a harder time coping with stress than “easy” children (Smith & Carlson, 1997). Having an easy temperament also has a similar effect to high intelligence in that it establishes resilience by enabling children to elicit more positive responses from others (Werner, 1993). A study by the HOPE VI panel, examining disadvantaged youth coming from poor neighbourhoods with high rates of crime and drug trafficking, found that resilient children showed high levels of confidence pertaining to their academic abilities and relationships with family, teachers, and peers (Cove et al., 2005). For example, resilient children often made statements such as “teachers like me,” and in their descriptions of school, many alluded to it as being fun or easy. Milgram and Palti (1993) theorize that high intelligence and easy temperament work together to make children more attractive to others, thus laying the foundation for the superior social skills that resilient children are known to have.

When a child thrives in spite of adverse circumstances in their external environment, it is logical to turn to the family for an explanation. Gribble et al. (1993) found that parents of resilient children had more positive parenting attitudes and were actively involved in their children’s lives. Furstenberg (1999)
found that children living in high risk can nevertheless succeed if their families are supportive (as cited in Cove et al., 2005). In the study of disadvantaged children previously mentioned, the role of parents in building resilience in children was found to be a salient one. It was found that both parental education and commitment to the child’s education contributed to resilience. Correlational evidence from this study showed that children of parents who had high school diplomas were 70% more likely to be resilient (Cove et al., 2005). Furthermore, children in families where the head of household was actively engaged in the child’s education were also twice as likely to be resilient as other children. Parents of resilient children often mentioned visits with teachers and monitoring their child’s grades (Cove et al., 2005). No researcher denies the importance of either individual or family characteristics as factors in resiliency. There may be disagreement in how much an individual’s characteristics, based on genotype, contributes, and how much one’s family and environment contribute. Recent research provides evidence that the role of the family in fostering resilience is strongest early in the child’s life and declines in importance as he or she ages (Condly, 2006).

External support is another factor contributing to resilience that has been supported by a great deal of evidence. If the family fails to provide the child with a nurturing environment, the gap may be filled by a positive school experience. Rutter et al. (1979) showed that children in ineffective homes are more likely to be resilient if they attend schools that have caring and involved teachers. A study by Werner and Smith (1988) also found that the most commonly cited nonfamily role model by resilient children were their favourite teachers. Another source of external support for children is afterschool activities which can limit exposure to environmental risk factors, such as violence and drug activity. In addition, extracurricular activities may improve children’s social skills (Hair, 2001). In the study of underprivileged children, those whose parents reported that they participated in after school activities almost every day were about 70% more likely to be resilient than other children. Whereas the influence of the family lessens as children get older, external supports such as after-school activities have the opposite effect, becoming increasingly important as children age (Werner & Smith, 2001).

Focusing on the individual characteristics of the resilient child may lead one to perceive resilience as an innate quality. Masten et al. (1995) stress the importance of avoiding the categorization of children as being either resilient or nonresilient. Children who show resilient behavior in one area, e.g. behaviour at school, are not necessarily resilient in another, e.g. level of depression (Luthar et al., 1993). Resilience is most accurately understood as a process rather than as a stable character trait (Luthar et al., 2003). It is not something that children either possess or do not possess. The same child can be highly resilient or low in resilience at different points in his or her life, depending on the interaction between individual and environmental factors. In sum, resilience is the result of interactive processes among the protective factors existing within the child, family and community (Yates & Masten, 2003).

Finally, a chief defect in the literature on resilience needs to be addressed. The majority of studies assess stressors in children using methods modeled after adult stress inventories, and these methods completely disregard the child’s perspective. One method that was used extensively in the early literature involved presenting parents or other caregivers of children with a checklist of major life events, e.g. changing schools, or the loss of a job by a parent. Parents would check off the events that their child had experienced during a specified time period, and then stress scores would be calculated by adding up the total number of check marks. Children with high scores on these stress inventories were considered to be at high risk. As mentioned earlier, however, stressors do not necessarily entail risk factors, and some stressful events can be interpreted as positive events. Further-
more, it is not wise to assume that adults can accurately identify what is stressful for children, especially when the field of developmental psychology provides us with a wealth of evidence that children interpret their worlds differently than adults (Goodwin & Davidson, 1991). Thus, it is quite possible that children use different criteria than adults to define and assess risk.

In conclusion, much of the work on resilience in children has been focused on identifying the factors known to foster resilience. The protective factors that have been documented in the literature include individual traits, family characteristics, as well as external support. Another significant contribution of the literature on child resilience is the finding that resilience is a process as opposed to a stable trait. However, despite these advances, a methodological shortcoming remains, such that the perspective of children has been completely disregarded. Further research should emphasize taking into account the individual interpretations of the child. Such improvements are necessary if the results from these studies on resilience are to be the basis of future interventions.

References


