



Synthesis on resilience

(Published online March 7, 2008)

How important is it?

Research shows that children who are exposed to [adversity](#) have worse developmental outcomes than those who are not. But children who are resilient have the [ability to adapt](#) despite experiences of significant risk or trauma.

Resilience can mean many different things: recovering from traumatic events, overcoming disadvantages to succeed in life, and withstanding stress to function well in the tasks of life. It was thought initially that resilience was a characteristic of the child; however, more and more, research indicates that family and social factors help a child to offset environmental stress.

It is important to identify the [sources of resilience](#) in competent children because we can then try to boost the resilience of less competent children, especially those living in conditions of high stress.

What do we know?

Studies show that the more risks children are exposed to, the worse their outcomes will be. [Social risks](#) across family, peer group, school and neighbourhood accumulate to have a consistent negative effect.

The presence of protective or resilience factors may be the reason some children succeed despite less-than-optimal conditions. Although the kinds of adversity children experience can vary greatly, a core theme transcending diverse risk conditions is the presence of a strong, [supportive relationship](#) with at least one adult. Also helpful are warm, supportive and consistent relationships outside the family, such as those with caregivers in child-care settings or with teachers in schools. Together, supportive families, accepting peer groups, competent schools and neighbourhood all contribute to children's positive developmental outcomes.

School can provide an important environment for learning or building on resilience. Early success in school appears to be a key pathway to resilience, particularly for [disadvantaged children](#).

Children's own strengths also contribute to resilient adaptation. Children with high intelligence, easy-going temperament, charisma and social skills are more likely to adapt positively to adversity. However, many of these characteristics are themselves vulnerable to assaults from the environment.

Young children with healthy attachment relationships and good cognitive, social and self-regulation skills are typically resilient in the face of adversity, as long as their fundamental [protective skills](#) and relationships continue to operate and develop. [Emotional regulation](#) in particular plays a critical role in resilience.

Evidence is mounting that [genetic factors](#) also contribute greatly to children's ability to be resilient. For example, a genotype that is associated with lower likelihood of developing depression later in life could influence a child's ability to adapt to adverse situations.

What can be done?

Early childhood is an important window of time for understanding and promoting resilience. Children typically experience multiple risks in multiple social contexts. Combined prevention and intervention efforts work together to target multiple rather than single sources of resilience.

Interventions must be dynamic, flexible and culturally specific to ensure their integration into the structure of the community. [Effective resilience programs](#) target multiple developmental systems and promote community participation and empowerment.

The most effective intervention programs will reduce factors associated with disorder (i.e. risks), provide resources associated with positive adaptation (i.e. assets) and support the core adaptational systems through multi-faceted applications.

For children with [biological vulnerabilities](#) (e.g. high stress-reactivity or less-than-average intelligence), we must ensure that mothers have sufficient resources to provide warmth and consistency in everyday schedules in order to foster resilience.