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Early Childhood Relationships and the Roots of Resilience

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Introduction

As the expression of competence in contexts of adversity, resilience is of great interest to researchers and practitioners in its own right, as well as for what it can tell us about development in contexts of security. Indeed, processes that engender positive adaptation despite adversity are more similar to those that influence typical development than they are different.[1] Nowhere is this more apparent than in the role of relationships as central risks and resources for understanding resilient adaptation.

Whether in contexts of adversity or security, early relationships form the foundation for cognitive, affective and neurobiological adaptation.[2,3] Whereas relational vulnerabilities engender distress and maladaptation, relational resources foster emotional health and competence.[4,5] In the context of safe and responsive relationships with caregivers and others, young children develop core regulatory and relational capacities that enable them to maximize developmental opportunities and effectively negotiate developmental challenges. When early caregiving environments are sub-optimal, alternate relationships within and beyond the family can serve as powerful conduits for children's (re)organization thereby opening pathways to resilience.

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Subject

Efforts to identify the relational roots of resilience can illuminate modifiable developmental influences that can be harnessed in the service of positive youth development. Prevention and intervention efforts can aim to protect, restore or provide positive relationships in contexts of risk. When taken to scale through family preservation services, community-based mentors, foster or adoptive parent education, and other systematic support services,[6,7] relational resources can engender children's capacity to reach age-expected and culturally significant milestones. Thus, as prominent gateways to both positive and problematic adjustment, relationships are a key focus of resilience research.

Key Questions and Recent Research Results

Which relationships are important for understanding resilience in early childhood?

Relational resources vary in both form and function across development. Parents, age-mates (e.g., siblings, peers, partners), and nonparental adults (e.g., teachers, mentors) vary in their relative influence across developmental periods and contexts. While platonic peer relationships are salient during the school and early adolescent years, for example, romantic relationships become increasingly influential in later adolescence and adulthood. Despite these variations, the roots of relationships and, to a significant degree, of resilience are grounded in the foundational experiences of early childhood.

In the context of the early caregiving relationship, children develop core regulatory and relational capacities. In addition to the basic substrates of stress reactivity and regulation, patterns of exchange in the early caregiving relationship inform children's emerging expectations of self and others.[4] Over time, relationships with siblings, peers, and other adults may further canalize or challenge these early relational schemas. Indeed, accumulating research evidence demonstrates the enduring capacity for nurturing relationships to provide opportunities for change. Thus, children's successful adaptation in contexts of adversity (i.e., resilience) reflects the combined influence of early and ongoing experiences in multiple relationships. Over time, early adaptive patterns may be magnified or re-directed through connections with relational partners outside the family, particularly in school, with peers, and in the community.

Although we typically think of the early caregiving relationship as originating in the recurrent exchanges that typify the caregiver-infant relationship, recent research directs our attention

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even earlier, to pre- and perinatal periods of development. For example, as assessed during pregnancy, mothers' relational representations of their own childhood experiences predict the quality of the mother-infant relationship one year later.[8] Beyond mothers' own childhood experiences, studies of prenatal attachment[9,10] demonstrate that mothers' attachment to their unborn child during pregnancy predicts the quality of the mother-infant relationship postpartum.

While attachment-related representations of self and baby are central in the unfolding process of maternal and child development, these influences are not determinative. Even early after birth, shifting environments can promote resilience. For example, prenatal stress is linked to deleterious brain morphology, such as smaller hippocampal volume, yet postnatal maternal sensitivity, maternal receipt of social support, and good socioeconomic conditions can buffer these links.[5] Likewise, a review of interventions to address maternal postpartum mental health problems found that diverse forms of psychoeducation and mother-infant interaction supports, such as infant massage, group and individual psychotherapies, and video feedback sessions, can promote improved mental health, bonding, and relationship outcomes for these dyads.[11] Hence, the relational roots of resilience reach from prior generations through attachment representations to support and frame children's negotiation of contemporaneous and prospective developmental issues and challenges. Moreover, even when the prenatal environment confers vulnerability, perinatal interventions, particularly those focused on promoting parent-infant relational security, can provide a foundation for future resilience.

How do relationships contribute to resilience?

Resilience research has identified several mechanisms by which protective and vulnerability factors operate to increase or decrease the probability of competence in contexts of adversity, respectively.[12] First, as noted previously, sensitive caregiving engenders adaptive neurobiological, behavioural, and cognitive organization in early childhood.[4,8] Thus, positive relationships contribute to resilient adaptation by promoting resources, such as self-esteem, self-efficacy, and coping capacities. Second, relationships can mitigate risk impact, such as when a sibling provides sensitive supervision to a younger sibling at a time when the parent is unable to do so. Third, relational processes may stymie the progression of negative chain reactions, such as when the presence of an alternate caregiver may quell the series of negative consequences that might otherwise befall a child in the wake of parental loss.[13] Finally, relationships may introduce new opportunities for positive adaptation,[14,15] such as when a mentor exposes a young child to positive outlets for expression and connection through new interests, art, or sport.

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Just as the salience of specific relational partners (e.g., parents versus peers) varies over time, the content and meaning of relational qualities may vary by context. Resilience research highlights the need for a contextually- and culturally-sensitive view of development. Sensitive and responsive caregiving engenders positive youth development, but the specific features that constitute high quality care may look different across cultures.[16] In contexts of heightened risk, relational factors that are associated with poor outcomes in low-risk contexts may engender positive development. For example, studies have shown that some dimensions of authoritarian parenting (i.e., high parental control, low warmth), which may be detrimental for some youth,[17,18] can be less deleterious and perhaps promotive for children in risky environments or within some cultural groups.[19,20,21] Similarly, although parentification (i.e., caregivers charging children with parental caretaking) was once considered inherently detrimental to development,[22] children's provision of care to parents and kin may confer heightened self-esteem and achievement in some groups. Together, these studies show that the developmental effects of specific relational dynamics can be influenced by the culture and value judgments of individuals within the family.[23,24]

Implications for the Policy and Practice

The quality of early caregiving relationships has an enduring, though not definitive, impact on a child's development. Thus, efforts to support these relationships are central to most prevention and intervention programs in early childhood (e.g., home visitation programs,[6,7] child-parent psychotherapy[25]). Even in contexts of extreme adversity, such as out-of-home placement, supporting a positive caregiver-child relationship is vital to successful intervention in infancy and early childhood.[13,26] To that end, several factors are central to support the relational roots of resilience.

First, prevention and intervention efforts must start early, even before birth. Working with expectant parents, biological or otherwise, is essential to support positive development, particularly for children at heightened risk due to parents' own legacies of loss and trauma and/or contemporaneous stressors, such as poverty or war.[27] In early development, support services may expand beyond the caregiving relationship to consider siblings, peers, and teachers as resources who can protect and provide positive relational processes.[28,29]

Second, relational supports must extend beyond the childhood years to ensure positive youth development. Early relationships are special, but not determinative. Just as opportunities for righting maladapted trajectories remain in later development, so, too, might early positive

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trajectories be derailed by subsequent adversity. Positive relationships should be supported and protected across the life course, particularly as they become contexts in which the relational roots of resilience for future generations may flourish or flounder.

Finally, applied policy and practice must be sensitive to individuals' developmental and cultural contexts. Individuals may value and interpret experiences, including presumed adversities, very differently as a function of their developmental and/or cultural context. Thus, researchers and practitioners alike should attend to individuals' unique solutions to the challenges of adaptation and remain open to the possibility that specific relational features may have multiple dimensions of meaning across settings. Indeed, even a presumably negative or deviant relationship (e.g., criminal association through gang activity) may confer some relational protection to vulnerable youth by providing a sense of security and connection. Only by studying individuals in context can we begin to understand the complexity of resilience as a developmental construction over time and in the context of lived experience.

Conclusions

Resilience is a relational process that reflects organizational qualities among systems and among people. It is not a personality trait or genetic endowment, it is not something one has or lacks; it is a capacity that is differentially expressed depending on the relational resources at hand. Resilience in early childhood and beyond reflects dynamic *processes* of adaptation that can be engendered or compromised by close relationships to a significant degree. Applied efforts that are appropriately sensitive to developmental, cultural, and contextual factors have tremendous potential to mobilize the power of relationships in support of positive development for all children.

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