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Resilience in Development: The Importance of Early Childhood

Ann S. Masten, PhD, Abigail H. Gewirtz, PhD, Julianna K. Sapienza, PhD

University of Minnesota, USA

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Introduction

The concept of resilience, originally from the Latin resilire (to rebound, recoil, or spring back), is now widely utilized in multiple fields of study to refer to the capacity of a system to respond effectively to challenges that threaten its function, survival, or development.[1-3] It is applied in psychology, ecology, engineering, communications, and disaster management, among other fields.[3,4] In developmental child psychology, resilience refers to resources and processes that promote and protect positive adaptation or development in the context of risk or adversity.

Although people have been fascinated with stories of resilience for thousands of years—judging from ancient tales of individuals who triumph over adversity—the scientific study of resilience in children began around 1970.[1-3,5] Nonetheless, great strides have been made in the past five decades of research and it is clear that early childhood is an important window of time for understanding and fostering resilience.[6-9] During these years, the roots of competence are established and many of the most important protective systems for human development emerge. Thus, early childhood holds great promise for interventions that prevent and reduce risk, boost

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resources, promote competence and build a strong foundation for future development.

Subject

Understanding naturally occurring resilience provides important clues for policies and practices designed to promote healthier development in children threatened by adversity or disadvantage. It is also vital to learn how to foster positive change, so that the odds for favourable development can be improved. Prevention and intervention studies are essential to test the ideas coming from resilience research, to learn the best targets, methods and developmental timing for interventions, and also to learn which approaches work best for whom.[1-3,10-13]

Problems

To study resilience, one must define and operationalize it.[14] This has proven to be challenging for several key reasons. First, resilience refers to a variety of phenomena, such as recovery after the loss of a parent, emergence of normal developmental milestones after a child is adopted from an institution, school success among children growing up in poverty or dangerous neighbourhoods, and mental health in children who experience maltreatment.

Second, resilience is inferred from judgments about what constitutes desirable or “good” outcomes as well as criteria for measuring adversity or risk, which can vary among cultures and investigators.[2,3,5,14-16] Investigators must define the criteria for positive adaptation, and also the standards and measures of adversity or risk confronting the child. A child who develops well may be viewed as adaptive or competent, but not necessarily as manifesting resilience, unless some explicit or implicit threshold of risk or adversity has been met. It is also clear that there are multiple criteria by which to judge positive development or success in life; adaptation is inherently multidimensional and multifaceted. Thus, it is not surprising that definitions and measures have varied, making it complicated to build a coherent body of knowledge about resilience in development.

Third, many processes at multiple levels of analysis are likely to be involved in human resilience.[1-4,17,18] To understand resilience, one must understand the complex behavior and development of living systems in context over time, from “neurons to neighbourhoods”[19] and beyond. Nonetheless, findings from the first generation of resilience research were remarkably consistent, suggesting the influence of powerful but common adaptive processes.[1,3,15]

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Research Context

Systematic research on resilience in childhood emerged from studies of vulnerability and risk in the search for the causes of mental illness.[1-4,20] Investigators began to study children with elevated risk for problems, often due to mental illness or stress in the family, social disadvantages, or poverty. The goals of pioneering researchers, including Norman Garmezy, Lois Murphy, Michael Rutter, Arnold Sameroff, and Emmy Werner, required integrative perspectives and collaboration among developmental and clinical scientists. Such collaborations forged a new science of resilience in development, while at the same time energizing the rise of developmental psychopathology.[1,15,21] The great insight of these pioneers was recognizing the potential of resilience research to inform practice and policies aimed at better development among high-risk children.

Key Research Questions

Developmental studies of resilience often address the following questions:

- What accounts for positive development or recovery among children who experience hazardous circumstances?
- What are the most important resilience factors and processes that promote and protect human development in the context of risk or adversity?
- What are effective strategies for building resilience and fostering positive development among children whose development is threatened by adverse childhood experiences?

Although resilience researchers focus on positive outcomes and their causes, they also acknowledge the importance of understanding risks and threats to development and how to prevent, reduce, or eliminate them.

Recent Research Results

There is exciting convergence in developmental research on competence, resilience, behavioural and emotional problems, brain development and prevention science, all underscoring the importance of early childhood for building protections into human development at multiple levels, within the child, the family, the community and their interactions.[6-13,22-24] During these foundational years, it is crucial for children to have sensitive caregiving and stimulation, as well as the clean water and air, nutrition, healthcare, and other material needs required for healthy

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development. Early foundations of resilience emerge through caregiver-child attachment bonds, interactions with family and other people, healthy brain development, opportunities to play and explore the world around them, and many other interactions with the environment. Many learning and self-control skills develop by the preschool years, and many of these early cognitive and social-emotional skills are related to the quality of available caregiving.[25-28]

Effective preventive intervention programs during infancy and preschool years support caregiving in multiple ways and provide enriched learning environments for children.[7,9,29] Such programs nurture resilience in child development. Early success in school – related to effective care, positive home-school connections and effective classroom practices – appears to be a key segue to resilience in childhood, particularly for very disadvantaged children.[2] Programs or systems of care that focus on building competence and strengths in young children and their families, along with reducing risk and addressing problems early, are yielding promising successes.[2,8,9,11,12,30,31]

A neurobiology of resilience is also beginning to emerge.[17,18,20,29,32-34] New insights into brain development and plasticity, how stress interacts with development, and the interplay of genes and experience in shaping development promise to revolutionize the science of resilience and prevention in early childhood.

There is growing recognition that multisystem threats to human development posed by complex adversities, such as extreme poverty, natural disaster, pandemics, armed conflict, and systemic racism or historical trauma, require multisystem thinking together with coordinated preparation and responses.[35-38] As a result there is more attention to preventing and mitigating harmful adverse experiences in early childhood while also harmonizing investments in resources, and mobilizing multiple sectors and systems to promote healthy development, particularly among children at risk due to poverty, trauma, and other adverse circumstances.

Conclusion

Resilience research indicates that during the early childhood years, it is important for children to have good quality care and opportunities for learning, adequate nutrition, and community support for families, to facilitate positive development of cognitive, social and self-regulation skills. Young children with healthy attachment relationships and good internal adaptive resources are very likely to get off to a good start in life, well equipped with the human and

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social capital for success as they enter school and society. Such children typically manifest resilience in the face of adversity, as long as their fundamental protective skills and relationships continue to operate and develop. The greatest threats to young children occur when key protective systems for human development are harmed or disrupted. In early childhood, it is particularly important that children have the protections afforded by attachment bonds with competent and loving caregivers, the stimulation and nutrition required for healthy brain development, opportunities to learn and experience the pleasure of mastering new skills, and the limit-setting or structure needed to develop self-control.

Implications

Resilience research, studies of normal development and psychopathology, as well as prevention science all highlight the importance of early childhood for establishing fundamental protections afforded children by positive relationships, healthy brain development, good self-regulation skills, community supports for families, and learning opportunities. A resilience framework for practice and systems of care has emerged, with an emphasis on building strengths and competence in children, their families, their relationships, and the communities where they live.[2,35-38] It is clear that many children in modern societies face multiple and accumulating risks that require multiple protective interventions and comprehensive efforts to prevent or ameliorate risks to children and their families.[2,7,23,36-39] No child is invulnerable and, as risk levels rise, fewer children escape the developmental consequences of adversity. Early childhood is a crucial window of opportunity for families and societies to ensure that children have the resources and protections required to develop the adaptive tools and relationships they will need to engage the future well prepared.

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