Encouraging Resilience in Children

How your program can help children beat the odds

In 1955, Emmy Werner and Ruth Smith began working on what is now one of the most famous studies on resilience. Their research consisted of a long-term study of more than 600 children born on the island of Kauai in Hawaii. They collected data from the children’s birth until well into their 40s. Approximately half of the children in this study grew up in poverty, and about one-third of the children had four or more factors that placed them in a high-risk group.

Not surprisingly, Werner and Smith found that children who grew up in impoverished conditions were more likely to experience a wide variety of harmful child health and developmental outcomes than children who did not grow up in impoverished conditions. Approximately two-thirds of the children in this high-risk group developed serious problems as adults. There are other studies that confirm Werner and Smith’s findings — including studies that have shown that poverty is linked to low-quality prenatal and medical care; low birth weight; delays in physical, cognitive, and social development; school dropout; teen pregnancy; and eventual unemployment.

Werner and Smith also found, however, that one-third of the children in the high-risk group matured into competent, caring adults whose educational and vocational accomplishments were equal to the children who grew up in a more secure and stable environment not marked by hardship. So even though all the children in the high-risk group grew up in similar environments, the outcomes in their lives were strikingly different. The children who developed serious problems as adults were described as “vulnerable,” as opposed to the children who were “resilient” and did not develop problems. This successful adjustment despite risk and adversity

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is generally defined as resilience. But why are some children able to surmount the adverse circumstances they grow up in and go on to excel while others are not?

**Risk and protective factors**

Werner and Smith described several risk factors that were common among the two-thirds of the children in their study who grew up in high-risk circumstances and developed serious problems later in life; these factors included chronic and severe poverty, lack of maternal education, family instability, single parenthood, and significant health and physical problems (including prenatal problems, birthing difficulties, and other health problems during infancy). Later, in adolescence and adulthood, the vulnerable children grew to develop their own problems, including teenage pregnancy, learning problems, delinquency, and mental health problems. Werner and Smith also found that the children in the Kauai Study tended to have lower intelligence scores when two factors — low-birth-weight and being raised in poverty — were both present. Yet, children tended to have higher intelligence scores when they either had a low-birth-weight or were raised in poverty, without the combination of both factors. This suggests that multiple risk factors are likely to compound each other and result in negative outcomes.

While we often hear of risk factors that place children at an increased risk for negative outcomes, we seldom hear about protective factors. Protective factors are characteristics or elements that counter the effects of adversity, enabling individuals to overcome their stressful experiences. Protective factors may be intrinsic elements of an individual's make-up, strengths that come from within, or they may be extrinsic, derived from the individual's environment.

Werner and Smith examined the one-third of the high-risk sample that managed to excel and determined that these individuals shared the following protective factors, which likely led to resilience:

- As infants and later in childhood, they developed at least one close, personal relationship to a caregiver.
- As infants and later in childhood, they were affectionate, responsive, and good-natured.
- During grade school and high school, they had friends and interests, characterized, in part, by their frequent participation in youth groups, camps, and other social functions.
- During grade school and high school, they had verbal abilities on par with their counterparts.

Because protective factors vary, we can't definitively predict what factors will enable a child to overcome adversity. Factors that are beneficial for one particular individual or group may not be beneficial for other individuals or groups. And, in fact, the same protective factors that lead to healthy outcomes
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for one individual in one situation might not lead to healthy outcomes for that individual in another situation. While we don’t have a definitive list of protective factors, like Werner and Smith, researchers have identified protective factors that contribute to a healthy life despite impoverishment or adversity.

Through her own research on resilience and review of other relevant research findings, Ann S. Masten, professor and director of the Institute of Child Development at the University of Minnesota, identified the 10 most frequently reported protective factors that play a role in resilience. These protective factors are...

1. Effective parenting.
2. Connections to other adults.
3. Good intellectual skills.
4. Adults find them socially responsive.
5. Areas of valued accomplishment.
7. Involvement in faith-based activites.
8. Socioeconomic advantages.
9. Good schools.
10. Community resources.

**Protective factors we can encourage in young children**

Even when faced with grave challenges and obstacles, children can lead healthy, successful lives. Through our awareness of risk factors and our understanding of protective factors, we can find effective ways to help children become resilient. Following are just a few suggestions of ways you can promote resiliency in your classroom.

**“Required helpfulness” through assigned chores**

Assigning children regular household and classroom chores is one way to build resilience. Chores teach children valuable lessons about life, instilling in them a sense of responsibility for their surroundings and making them feel as though they are contributing members of a social group. Most young children are delighted to be “helpers,” but even those who are resistant when assigned a chore derive a sense of usefulness from being responsible for and completing a task. Chores are wonderful self-esteem builders!

When a child sweeps the floor, the floor becomes clean. That has affected his environment. From this simple task, the child learns that he has power over his surroundings and that his actions make a difference.

By regularly performing chores, children practice affecting their world.

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**Additional reading**

- *Overcoming the Odds: High risk children from birth to adulthood*, by Emmy Werner and Ruth Smith.
For instance, if a child has the daily chore of feeding the dog, she will eventually develop a bond to her daily task. If she is required to clean the dog bowl and scoop in new food, even when she’s not in the mood, she will experience and learn commitment, patience, and perseverance — skills that are fundamental components of resilience.

**Promoting resilience through play and hobbies**

Primary components of the resilient personality are a sense of autonomy and self-reliance. Minimally supervised play gives children the opportunity to develop these components by testing boundaries and taking risks. Climbing up a ladder and sliding to the ground are primary exercises in autonomy and self-reliance.

Play is also a dynamic forum for negotiating positive relationships with others, another key ingredient in resilience. During play, children must establish rules and then adapt those rules as needed.

Often young children play at make-believe, in which they take on roles they’ve encountered in their daily life and act them out. These role-playing situations are important learning opportunities for children, allowing them to express their feelings, yearnings, and needs.

Young children need to have encouragement, time, and freedom to play. When children are chronically troubled by the emotional turmoil that can result from living in poverty or an environment marked by alcoholism, violence, or other adversity, they may not feel free to play. To help counter this, you can provide environments and situations that support and facilitate play — like a trip to the park or the beach. You probably can’t fix the problems that are burdening a child at home, but you can help the child find reassurance and enjoyment by affirming the importance of his play and interests.

In Werner and Smith’s Kauai Study, parents and teachers described resilient children as those who had interests, activities, and hobbies that gave them solace in adverse times and a reason to feel proud. As parents and teachers, we can help our children develop resilience through special interests and activities. Providing safe parameters for children to play freely gives them an arena in which resilience is bolstered.

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**Sample of age-appropriate schedule of chores for preschoolers**

**Art’s Daily Duties**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Job</th>
<th>Monday</th>
<th>Tuesday</th>
<th>Wednesday</th>
<th>Thursday</th>
<th>Friday</th>
<th>Saturday</th>
<th>Sunday</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Make the bed</td>
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<tr>
<td>Put away toys</td>
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<tr>
<td>Feed the dog</td>
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<tr>
<td>Put clothes in hamper</td>
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</tbody>
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**Tips on teaching chores**

It is important to choose chores that are age-appropriate for the child. The chores should be simple enough to be accomplished yet challenging enough to provide a sense of satisfaction at their completion.

- Demonstrate how you want the task completed; don’t assume that the child knows how to do it.
- Be specific about the tasks involved. For example, say, “I want you to put all your toys in the toy box and make your bed” instead of, “I want you to clean your room.”
- Praise the child for his efforts even though he might not have done a perfect job. He will learn that his effort is appreciated and will be not be discouraged.
- Do not bribe the child with material rewards. The value of the chore is in its accomplishment.
Building resilience through social competence
How does teaching at-risk children courtesy serve to strengthen their resilience? Werner and Smith’s longitudinal resilience study provides an answer. When they were toddlers, all the children in the study were examined by pediatricians and psychologists. Most of the children who were later identified as resilient had been described by the pediatricians and psychologists as possessing traits of positive social orientation. In other words, the professionals who examined the children found the children to be pleasant. Adults find positive social skills in children appealing. Therefore, children with good social skills are more likely to attract positive attention from adults, which can lead to healthy relationships with adults who act as mentors and provide support and encouragement.

When teaching children good manners, we must help them understand the difference between appropriate and inappropriate expression and responses. This helps children start to establish an awareness of which behaviors are acceptable, the importance of civil behavior toward others, and how they themselves should be treated by others. Good manners also teach appropriate boundaries and help children develop a sense of respect for themselves and for others.

Beating the odds
Considering that cumulative risk factors increase the odds that children will succumb to adversity, programs that work to ameliorate or eliminate risk factors are our best hope of promoting and enhancing the healthy development and adjustment of children. While it may not be possible to wipe out poverty or alcoholism from the lives of the children we serve, there are still many things we can do to enrich their lives and increase their chances of succeeding. By giving the children in your classroom tasks and chores to encourage their helpfulness at home, in school, and in the community; by teaching them to play; and by helping them develop good social skills, you can help children overcome the many obstacles they face.

Children need the freedom and encouragement to identify their individual talents and strengths. And they need to be able to rely on healthy relationships with adults for reassurance and guidance. As an educator, you are in an excellent position to help children develop the skills they need to transcend hardship and go on to lead successful and fulfilling lives. And you can be sure that throughout their lifetimes, children will frequently remember and benefit from your contribution.

Helpful books for teaching children good manners
- 365 Manners Kids Should Know: Games, Activities, and Other Fun Ways to Help Children Learn Etiquette, by Sheryl Eberly.
- Grover’s Guide to Good Manners, by Constance Allen (Big Bird’s Favorite Board Books).
- The Berenstain Bears Forget Their Manners, by Stan and Jan Berenstain.
- The Thingumajig Book of Manners, by Irene Keller.
- What Do You Know about Manners: A Funny Manners Quiz, by Cynthia MacGregor and Christine Zuchora-Walske.

For more information on scheduling a Resilient Child: Life Assurance workshop or seminar, contact Jeannette Johnson by e-mail at jj44@acsu.buffalo.edu.

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