



SECTION 3

**About Reaching IN...
Reaching OUT**

What is Reaching IN ... Reaching OUT (RIRO)?



Reaching IN ... Reaching OUT (RIRO) is an evidence-based skills training program designed to promote resilience in young children. RIRO helps adults and children learn to “reach in” to think more flexibly and accurately and “reach out” to others and opportunities.

RIRO began as a multi-stage research and demonstration project. In 1998, the Child and Family Partnership conducted a search for best practice models to promote resilience in young children. The Penn Resilience Program (PRP) model, developed at the University of Pennsylvania, was chosen. The Partnership consulted with researchers at the University of Pennsylvania to develop RIRO and, in 2002, received funding for a pilot study.

RIRO adapted and tested the feasibility of using the PRP model with young children in child care. Based on the promising results of the pilot stage, funding was received to develop a specialized evidence-based resiliency skills training program targeting professionals and students working with children six years and under. The skills training program and curriculum modules were completed in April 2006 and are available for broad dissemination.

What is the Penn Resilience Program?

In the 1980s, Martin Seligman and his fellow researchers at the University of Pennsylvania began creating and evaluating programs to prevent depression and promote resilience in preteen children and adults.¹⁹ One of these programs, the Penn Resilience Program, consists of twelve sessions of skills training, comprising cognitive behavioural and social problem-solving components.²⁰

The PRP program trains educators and children from eight to thirteen years of age to develop skills such as identifying personal explanatory styles and challenging habitual thinking processes. After the training, people are able to assess situations more flexibly and accurately during times of stress and adversity, thus the training promotes more resilient behaviour. In contrast with most intervention programs, those most at risk for feelings of

helplessness and depression benefit most from the skills training.^{20,21}

These resiliency thinking skills have also been taught to adults in the workforce, college students, and adolescents with positive results. Because of compelling research results showing the benefits of resiliency skills training programs, the PRP program and its adult counterparts have been adopted by educational institutions and businesses around the world. The aim of these programs is to increase social problem solving and productivity and reduce the risk of depression.¹⁶ Until recently, however, there have been no specific programs to introduce these thinking skills to young children.

What are the results of the RIRO pilot project (Stage 1)?

Two questions guided the pilot research:

- What is the impact if adults who are taught resiliency thinking skills introduce them *indirectly*, through role modelling, in their everyday interactions with children?
- How early can these resiliency skills be introduced *directly* to children through developmentally adapted activities?

Participants

Early childhood educators (ECEs) were chosen as the target group for this pilot project because they interact daily with young children and their parents. Their intensive contact places them in a unique position to influence the development of children's thinking styles and emerging belief systems, and thereby their resilience. Controlled studies of high-quality early child care and education have shown their benefits for all children and their ability to promote resilience in children who are at a disadvantage.^{6,7,8,24}

Skills training and consultation

Researchers from the Penn Resilience Program trained ECEs at four pilot child care centres in Ontario in theory and skills related to resiliency promotion and thinking habits. Ongoing training and consultation by



RIRO staff increased the ECEs' awareness of how important their own thinking styles are in modelling resilience for young children. The ECEs engaged in structured reflective journaling and activities designed to integrate the training at a level required to developmentally adapt and pilot skills activities, as well as to model the skills with children. Teachers found the journaling and related activities to be very valuable:

When I write down observations and ideas [in the journals], I tend to put the info into action and plan solutions for the problems I see.

—CK (supervisor)

I really like the activities for working with the children, like asking children to make up a story based on a picture from a storybook, because they give me a basis of where to start. And the children love giving us their ideas, and because they show such an interest in doing it, it gets me excited as well. I say, "Wow, tell me more of what you think." It helps me understand that child. I find myself thinking, "I didn't know that this is what you thought about certain things." Then it jogs my memory and I think, "Ohh ... this why you reacted to that situation last week. This is why you said that, because this is what you believe..." Then I can say to the child, "It's okay to believe what you believe, but can you look at it this way?"

—AY (kindergarten)

Introducing resiliency skills to the children

After the ECEs integrated the skills into their own thinking and became more comfortable using them, they were asked to model the skills with the children in their daily interactions. Then, ECEs and RIRO staff worked together to create and introduce developmentally adapted activities centred on the resiliency skill areas to children at the pilot centres, and evaluated the impact of these activities in various age groups (toddler, pre-school, and kindergarten).

Results of the pilot project

What ECEs told us

Early childhood educators in the four pilot centres told us that, since receiving training in the PRP model, their approach and language has changed when they speak with children about conflict situations and daily frustrations.

Before the training, they typically asked children about their *feelings* when there was stress or conflict. Now, they also ask about the children's *thinking*.

ECEs expressed surprise at how much young children can tell us about their thoughts if they are asked in age-appropriate ways. One teacher told a story about how she got at a young child's beliefs by asking, "What did you say to yourself?"

What surprised me about working with the children was that some children were actually able to think about their thinking. And that was something I didn't think they would be able to do. I knew they could tell me what they felt, but not about the thinking that went behind that. For example, when a particular child was very upset about another child not playing with her, I talked to her about it. I tried not to ask, "What were you thinking?" but rather, "What did you say to yourself when N didn't want to play with you?" And, what was interesting was the child could actually say, "She doesn't like me—that's what I said to myself." So I was getting to the actual thought behind the feelings of being very sad and upset about the friend not playing with her.

—LD (kindergarten)

The PRP model adds a whole new layer to early childhood education practice—understanding the importance of children's beliefs and inquiring about them. This expanded focus has major implications for ECEs' observations, their assessments of children, and their interventions.

Over the course of a year and a half, RIRO research staff interviewed early childhood educators in the pilot centres about their use of the resiliency skills.



One year after the initial training, the teachers completed a comprehensive survey about the impact of the skills training on them and on their work with children. Here are some of the things ECEs said:

- The ECEs had to learn the skills and reflect on their own thinking styles before they could model resilient responses during daily interactions with children.
- The skills helped them assess and understand child behaviour better, through greater awareness of their own thinking styles and as a framework for reflective practice.

The resiliency skill set has helped me refine my observation skills. It gives me another thing to look for. I'm not only looking to see, "Does this child have the fine motor skills to print?" or, "Does this child have the self-regulation skills to calm himself at naptime or during a transition?" It's also helping me see, "Are the children resilient when things happen? If they have conflicts with peers, are they able to work through them? Are they able to be upset, but then they're okay later in the day? Or, do they think that their whole day has been ruined because this one thing has happened?"
—AB (kindergarten)

- The resiliency skills helped ECEs deal with communication issues and adversities that they experienced with other teachers and parents in the centres, and with their own family and friends.

The resiliency skills have affected every aspect of my life, both in personal relationships and as a manager. The skills give me a better understanding of where I'm coming from and help me read other people's reactions. They provide clarity for the issue at hand. Knowing that my emotions are in check and that I'm trying to get a good picture of what's happening really helps mediate my reactions to things and the words I use. I've just become more effective in my relationships with other adults. —LD (supervisor)

We are in a field where we have to communicate so much, not just with the children, not just with the parents, but also with our co-workers. The

whole daycare works as a team, and I'm finding that, by having these tools, my colleagues and I can communicate with one another much more clearly. —MS (preschool)

- They used the skills on a daily basis in the centres and in their personal lives.
- Resiliency thinking skills can be modelled in daily interactions with children of any age. Teachers believe this training should start as early as possible.

If something falls and breaks, instead of showing frustration and anger, say, "OK, we can deal with this. It's not a problem!" That's really important for children to know—that little things don't have to be such a big deal. I think, in the future, it will teach them that some bigger things can be dealt with in that sense, too. —CP (toddlers)

- Direct introduction of the resiliency skills, using teacher-designed skills activities, were most effective with children four years and older, although some verbal three-year-olds also made effective use of these activities.
- ECEs observed that children model some of the resiliency skills with their peers, for example, generating alternatives, catching "Always" statements, and calming strategies.

Older children will role model the skills for younger children. There was a situation where J and M were upset because we had asked them to take a break from each other, as a consequence for some of the behaviour that was happening between them. M, who quite upset, was sitting on the couch and said, "I never get to play with J." One of the older children, A, was in the area and she actually said to him, "But you were playing with him this morning. Do you think you are going to play with him when you go outside today? I bet you are going to play with him outside." I heard M agreeing with A. It seemed to help him calm down and regulate his emotions, so he could focus, do something else for a while, and then have that reassurance that he would be able to play with this person again, just not right now. The interesting part was that I had



intervened in the same way with A when she was upset about not playing with one of her friends. Then I see her turn around and use the thinking skill with one of her peers. —AB (kindergarten)

- ECEs observed positive changes in children, especially in impulse control and emotional regulation, which they believe is a result of their resiliency training.

Before the training, I looked at child N as a child who was having a temper tantrum, just an everyday temper tantrum—EVERYDAY! After the training, my team teacher and I came to realize that child N was feeling anxious, and she didn't know how to express herself other than throwing stuff around the room. She had a lot of insecurities and didn't believe she was going to be heard or understood. Through the B-C connections, we were able to work with her and pinpoint what was wrong. We had to start with her insecurities. We had to give her those words—we had to help her understand her feelings. Now she is a wonderful, well-adjusted child who can solve her own problems and help others who are feeling the same way that she felt. —JH (preschool)

These findings show that the Penn Resilience Program school-age model can be adapted to help young children of any age. If adults are trained in the adult skill set, they can learn to model these important skills in their daily interactions with children.

These resiliency skills and abilities really need to be looked at, primarily by ECEs and people working with young children. I really feel that society is moving so fast, that we don't often ask, "How are our children doing?" They give us cues—they have temper tantrums, they sit down and they cry. And the only thing we can think of sometimes is, "How are we going to make them conform to what society is expecting from them? How are they going to survive in life?" The resiliency skills training tells you how to do this. It makes you stop and think—learn about the children, learn about yourself, learn about their emotions, learn how to deal with life. That's what you want to do to prepare children—give them the skills that they can take with them. —LD (supervisor)

Those who work most closely with children also found that certain resiliency skills can be adapted for use with verbal children as young as three, using child-friendly activities, such as stories, puppet plays, drawings, and movement-based activities. (See Section 2 for examples of using stories and puppet plays.)



What parents told us

RIRO staff offered a parent information session on promoting resilience and resilient thinking at each of the four participating child care centres. The session included an overview of the resiliency abilities and an explanation of how thinking habits influence our responses to adversity. In addition, the parents received booklists of children's stories that relate to the resiliency abilities, such as emotional regulation, analyzing the cause of problems, and maintaining realistic optimism.

Six weeks after the information sessions, parents completed surveys to help RIRO staff determine whether they found the sessions and handouts useful. This is what parents and caregivers told us:

- They had increased knowledge and awareness about resilience in children. (average = 1.8 point increase in knowledge and 1.3 point increase in awareness, based on 5-point scale)



- They had increased interest in finding out more about resilience, as well as increased awareness about their own and others' thinking about adversity. (average = 3.6 increase in each, on 5-point scale)
- They gave high ratings to how important it was for teachers at their child's centre to promote resilience in the children. (average = 4.5, on 5-point scale)
- More than half the parents reported already having read the RIRO handouts, and nearly a third had read or planned to read books to their children from the children's booklist on emotional regulation.
- Nearly 20% of the parents had already shared the handouts with friends and neighbours.
- Parents expressed the hope that RIRO would develop a resiliency skills training program for parents and caregivers.

What are the results of Stage 2—developing RIRO's skills training program?

Skills training program development

Based on the results of the pilot project, Stage 2 funding was awarded in 2003 to develop an evidence-based skills training program with resource materials. The training would be used in a wide variety of settings, including Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC), as well as other child-serving sectors and educational programs with young children.

Over the next two years, four additional pilot centres were added. RIRO's skills training program was piloted throughout southern Ontario, reaching more than 350 ECEs and allied professionals, such as social workers, nurses, psychologists, and other mental-health workers.

RIRO's skills training program currently consists of "Adult Skills" and "Child Applications" courses, covering approximately fourteen hours of content. Because of chronic under-resourcing of the ELCC sector and the additional challenge of arranging in-class coverage when a staff member attends professional training activities, RIRO's skills program was tested in a variety of formats and venues.

Modules were created and tested for full- and half-day sessions, as well as for a six-session after-work series and a two-day intensive training. This *Guidebook* and other written resource materials, a documentary and seven skills videos, and RIRO's website (www.reachinginreachingout.com) were created to increase community awareness about resilience and to help professionals integrate and implement resiliency skills.

Faculty consultants from the University of Guelph and George Brown College collaborated with the RIRO project team to develop and pilot, with their students, three self-contained curriculum modules about thinking processes and promoting resilience in young children. These modules can be offered by community colleges and universities as part of diploma, degree, or continuing education courses.

Results of Stage 2 evaluation activities

RIRO's resiliency skills training was evaluated by participants during, immediately after, and post-training through formal surveys and structured interviews.

The training was consistently well received. Participants' suggestions were incorporated into the skills training program and tested. Interviews with ECEs in the eight pilot centres helped RIRO staff determine which skills most participants used, and what difficulties they encountered integrating the skills and introducing them to children. As a result of this feedback, RIRO developed and piloted a second training session that focused on how to apply the skills in their work with children.

A formal survey was sent to all participants receiving RIRO skills training between September 2004 and December 2005. The purpose of the survey was to determine how useful the participants found the skills at work, whether they had introduced the skills to children, and what impact the skills had on them and on the children with whom they work.

Based on the responses, participants ($n = 77$) confirmed the findings of the initial pilot study. As well, professionals who had participated in the skills



training at least three months before the survey, compared to those who had taken the training less than three months before, reported the greatest number of gains for themselves and the children.

Specifically, professionals reported the skills are

- very useful to their work (rated 4.2 on 5-point scale)
- used frequently at work (95% at least once/week; 64% daily use)

They would recommend RIRO skills training to colleagues (100%) because the skills help them

- reduce their own stress (77%)
- increase their understanding and empathy for children (77%)

These findings were consistent across all professional sectors. Allied professionals, as well as ECEs, found the skills valuable in their work.

ECEs reported that they have introduced the skills to the children by modelling (82%), and through conversations and developmentally adapted activities with individual children (57%) and with groups (41%).

The impact on children, as reported by frontline workers (95%) who had used the skills for more than three months, included more

- problem solving and generating of alternatives
- reaching out to others when needing help
- helping others and being empathic
- ability to see mistakes as being okay

Taken together, the findings from Stages 1 and 2 suggest that the resiliency skills are user-friendly and useful to professionals working with young children. Both professionals and the children they work with benefit by experiencing less stress and enhanced ability in areas that researchers have found to be associated with resilience. (For further information about RIRO research findings, please see our website, www.reachinginreachingout.com, and click on "Research Results.")

College and university students who piloted the curriculum modules also reported a positive impact on their learning about the importance of resilience. The skills they acquired have enhanced their reflective practice and their promotion of resilience activities with children and youth. Faculty members who piloted the modules reported that the modules could be easily integrated into current college and university curricula.

Finally, parents and caregivers have responded positively to RIRO resiliency promotion materials and information sessions. The high level of interest that they have expressed confirms the importance of developing an evidence-based skills training program for parents and paraprofessionals, such as foster parents and lay home visitors.

What kind of training and dissemination activities is RIRO planning for the future?

Dissemination of RIRO products

RIRO's website will be the vehicle for disseminating several RIRO products at no cost, including the *Resiliency Guidebook*, *RIRO College Curriculum Modules*, and the seven skills videos. Hard copies of the *Guidebook* and *Curriculum Modules* are available through the Canadian Child Care Federation. (See the copyright page or follow links on RIRO's website, www.reachinginreachingout.com).

"Train-the-trainer" activities

RIRO has just received three-year funding from the Ontario Trillium Foundation to design and pilot a "train-the-trainer" program aimed at professional trainers from the ELCC sector in Ontario. This program will increase the number of authorized RIRO trainers in the ELCC sector to more than 120 over three years.

RIRO will also work with its partners to promote use of RIRO curriculum modules in the community college sector. The goal is to make RIRO self-sustaining in the Ontario ELCC community within three years.



RIRO skills training program

The RIRO skills training program will be offered as part of the practicum experience for trainers involved in the RIRO “train-the-trainer” program, in various locales across Ontario. The program will also be available in other provinces/regions and to professionals in other sectors on a fee-for-service basis. RIRO will continue working with the Canadian Child Care Federation to disseminate RIRO skills training and “train-the-trainer” programs across Canada.

Development of a skills training program for parents

RIRO is collaborating with several organizations to develop a proposal for creating an evidence-based resiliency skills training program for parents and caregivers.

For more information about attending RIRO skills training sessions, becoming a RIRO trainer, or assisting with the development of the parent skills training program, please contact RIRO’s coordinator through RIRO’s website, www.reachinginreachingout.com, or e-mail info@reachinginreachingout.com.

For additional resources about resilience, please see page 62 or RIRO’s website.