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Resilience - giving children the skills to bounce back

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It is thinking style that determines resilience - more than genetics, more than intelligence, more than any other single factor.

A. Shatt , 2002

Let's put our children on the pathway to a resilient future.

Darlene Hall, November 2003

With the incidence of childhood depression on the rise, it's great news that something can be done. Children can be taught to challenge their thinking so that they learn to bounce back from adversity. Authors Darlene Hall and Jennifer Pearson report that training early childhood educators to model resilient thinking behaviours in childcare settings has had a positive impact on the educators, the centres and the children in their care. As a society, we need to introduce children to skills that will help them think in a more resilient way when confronted with difficulties. To do this, we need to increase public awareness of the impact of adult thinking styles on the developing thinking patterns of children.

Introduction

Families today are exposed to high levels of daily stress and the incidence of childhood depression is increasing.¹ Introducing children to resiliency skills that promote accurate and flexible thinking can help prepare them to deal with inevitable adversity and inoculate them against depression.

Resilience is important to success and satisfaction in life; it allows us to overcome life's stresses and adversities, steer through troubled waters and bounce back from tough times.²

Despite our best efforts we cannot prevent adversity and daily stress, but we can learn to be more resilient by changing how we think about challenges and adversities. Research has shown that how we think about adversity and opportunity affects our success in school and work, our health and longevity, and our risk for depression.³

The importance of promoting resilience in children

Thirty years of research tells us that resilient people are healthier, live longer, are more successful in school and jobs, are happier in relationships and are less prone to depression.⁴ Resilience helps people deal with stress and adversity, overcome childhood disadvantage and reach out to new opportunities.⁵

Resilience has been defined as the "ability to persevere and adapt when things go awry".⁶ Masten and Coatsworth define resilience globally as "manifested competence in the context of significant challenges to adaptation or development".⁷

Stress and adversity are an inevitable part of life-therefore it makes good sense to introduce resiliency-building strategies to children at an early age.

Resiliency promotion programs for children have existed since the 1970's and have focused primarily on building self-esteem, increasing school readiness and supporting the parent-child relationship.⁸ Most promotion efforts, however, have tended to overlook the importance of thinking processes in the development of resilience and handling of stress and adversity.

"Non-resilient thinking styles can lead us to cling to inaccurate beliefs about the world and to inappropriate problem-solving strategies that burn through emotional energy and valuable resilience resources."⁹

Research suggests that resilient thinking patterns can be learned by adults and children.¹⁰ Skills that aid habitual use of more accurate and flexible thinking can be absorbed by children from a very early age and can optimize development of resilience.¹¹

What we know about thinking processes and resilience

An important body of research centres on what we "think" about stresses and adversity. Studies show that people who manage best under stress perceive themselves as capable of influencing certain aspects of their lives and so take action when faced with adversity. In addition, mistakes and change are viewed as opportunities for new learning and growth; commitment and active engagement in work and other pursuits are seen as a basis for meaning in life.¹²

The ability to reframe negative events by searching for a perspective that is simultaneously truthful and favourable helps people maintain a realistically optimistic perspective.¹³ For some people, stress and adversity typically create feelings of helplessness and wanting to give up - in others, challenges trigger problem solving, learning and growth.¹⁴

How people explain their successes and failures influences whether they persevere or give up when faced with adversity.¹⁵ These explanations or attributions can become a habitual way of explaining adversity, challenge and success, and so develop into a "thinking style" or preferred way of viewing the world. Our style can help or hinder our ability to respond resiliently to inevitable bumps in the road.¹⁶

People are more likely to become stressed, anxious, unhappy, and ultimately depressed, when their habitually negative beliefs about successes and obstacles remain stable.¹⁷ Many of us believe that bad events themselves cause us to act in certain ways:

Adversity leads to **C**onsequences

Albert Ellis had a different theory and created the **ABC** Model to help us understand our reactions to adversity.¹⁸ He observed that rather than **A**dversity itself, it is our **B**elief about the cause of the adversity that actually triggers our feeling response and behaviour (**C**), i.e.:

Adversity leads to **B**elief leads to **C**onsequences

Beck further added that habitual negative thoughts about one's self and the future are related to depression.¹⁹ He labelled depression as a "disorder of conscious thought."

Martin Seligman, a social psychologist, and his colleagues at the University of Pennsylvania have studied the development of resilience for more than thirty years. In the 1970's, Seligman's research focused on learned helplessness. Later he and his colleagues explored attribution and explanatory style as well as the relationship between optimism, pessimism and depression. In the 1980's, Seligman and his students turned their attention to creating and evaluating programs to prevent depression and promote resilience in preteen children and adults.²⁰

One of these programs, the Penn Resilience Program (PRP), trains teachers and children from eight to thirteen years in the use of cognitive skills that aid development of a resilient approach to

adversity. These same skills, which focus on thinking processes, have been taught to adults in the workforce, college students and adolescents with positive results. Because of the beneficial effect of the resiliency skills training programs and the research to back it up, these programs are being adopted by educational institutions and businesses around the world to increase social problem solving and productivity and reduce the risk of depression.²¹

According to researchers at the University of Pennsylvania, thinking processes directly affect many critical abilities associated with resilience including:

- emotional regulation
- impulse control
- causal analysis
- empathy
- maintaining realistic optimism
- self-efficacy, and
- reaching out to others and taking opportunities.²²

The implication of this body of research is compelling - it suggests that some of the important skills that help people develop resiliency abilities can be learned, and introduced to children at an early age. And unlike most intervention programs, those most at risk for feelings of helplessness and depression benefit most from the skills training.²³

"It is thinking style that determines resilience - more than genetics, more than intelligence, more than any other single factor".²⁴

Social problem-solving capabilities including perspective-taking, conflict resolution and anger management can be influenced positively through the use of more accurate and flexible thinking processes.

Promoting resilience through new thinking skills

We can learn several skills that promote accurate and flexible thinking including:²⁵

- recognizing that our beliefs about adversity affect how we feel, and consequently what we do (the **ABC** model)
- challenging our beliefs about why things happen - uncovering our thinking style
- developing an awareness of common thinking traps or errors
- understanding that our core beliefs about the world may be preventing us from taking opportunities
- gathering evidence to dispute/support beliefs - generating other alternatives
- putting stresses/adversities into perspective
- calming and focusing

These skills help us to regulate our emotions and dispute erroneously held beliefs about adversity and opportunity. The use of these skills during times of stress and adversity helps us to step back and think about the situation more flexibly and accurately thus promoting more resilient behaviour.

The Penn Resilience Program (PRP) for school-age children and adolescents is a 12-session protocol comprised of cognitive behavioural and social problem-solving components.²⁶ One important piece of the PRP skills training helps participants become more aware of their habitual way of explaining "why" things happen to them - their explanatory style.

Explanatory style thinking habits are shortcuts we reflexively take in order to quickly process things that happen to us. However, these thinking habits may not provide an accurate

assessment of the situation and tend to lock us into inflexible thinking patterns, causing us to respond less than optimally.

Explanatory style can be viewed along three dimensions -- personalization, permanence and pervasiveness:²⁷

Who is to blame? **ME / NOT ME**
(personalization)

How long will this last? **ALWAYS / NOT ALWAYS**
(permanence)

How much of my life does this affect? **EVERYTHING / NOT EVERYTHING** (pervasiveness)

For example, people with a **ME / ALWAYS / EVERYTHING** style tend to blame themselves and give up easily because they see the situation as unchanging and all-encompassing. These characteristics are frequently found in people who are described as engaging in habitual pessimistic thinking. Ultimately they may view things as hopeless and become depressed.

Those with a **NOT ME / ALWAYS / EVERYTHING** style tend to blame others and take little responsibility for their role in the adversity. They tend to respond to stresses by becoming angry and view these situations as violating their rights. However, because they see events as permanent and affecting many areas of their lives, there is also a sense of futility. An extreme version of this pattern is sometimes seen in people who tend to act out or engage in delinquent behaviour.²⁸

While a **NOT ME / NOT ALWAYS / NOT EVERYTHING** style is often viewed as the most "optimistic" explanatory style, it still is not necessarily an accurate or realistic view of the situation. Most stresses and adversities are not 100% the result of just one person. Nor do many stresses last indefinitely or affect all areas of one's life.

The ideal is not to fall on either end of the spectrum, but to view things as a continuum along these three dimensions. The goal is to maintain a sense of "realistic optimism" by thinking as accurately and flexibly as possible about each situation we face by challenging reflexive thinking patterns.

Reivich and Shatté describe realistic optimism as the ability to maintain a positive outlook without denying reality; actively appreciating the positive aspects of a situation without ignoring the negative aspects.²⁹ It also involves working toward positive outcomes with the knowledge that they don't happen automatically, but are achieved through effort, problem solving and planning.

Supporting the need for training children in this particular resiliency skill is a recent study by John Abela at McGill University. He explored psychological and environmental factors related to the development of depression in children of parents with and without depression. "The study found that children with a pattern of negative and self-critical thoughts were more susceptible to depression than those with a more positive outlook."³⁰

Children whose parents were depressed were more likely to exhibit thinking styles associated with depression. Children in the study were taught how to challenge pessimistic styles of thinking ("optimism training") with good response. Abela recommends that all Canadian grade schools offer this type of training to reduce the risk of childhood depression and to help children handle daily stresses.³¹

Programs that help children challenge their thinking styles have concentrated on school-age children and adolescents. However, by the age of eight, most children have already developed a

preferred mode of explanation or thinking style. And children as young as two or three years can mimic the thinking styles of their primary caregivers.³²

Thus, intervention aimed at young children to influence emerging thinking processes could be an important introduction to the development of essential resiliency skills and abilities. But young children are reported not to be developmentally capable of "thinking about their thinking" -- so how can these skills be introduced to them?

Seligman makes several suggestions for helping young children in this regard.³³ He believes that caregivers should assist children by providing them with opportunities to:

- experience true mastery (outcomes contingent on actions)
- gain a perspective of "positivity" (identify and emphasize positive experiences; give love unconditionally; give praise that is congruent with effort and accomplishment, since a belief in one's competence is a precursor to genuine self esteem)
- have positive explanatory styles modelled by adults around them.

Adult modelling of resilient (accurate and flexible) or positive thinking styles can be crucial during children's early years. Until recently, however, there have been no specific programs to introduce these thinking skills to young children.

In 1998, the Child and Family Partnership* began to search for best practice models to promote resilience in young children. The Partnership consulted with researchers at the Penn Resilience Program to develop the Reaching IN...Reaching OUT Project and in 2002 received funding from Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC)-Social Partnerships Program to test the PRP model. As of September 2003, testing was completed and HRDC awarded stage-2 funding to RIRO to develop training materials to expand the program across Canada.

**The Child and Family Partnership consists of the YMCA of Greater Toronto (Family Development Centre), the Crèche Child and Family Centre -Toronto, the University of Guelph (Centre for Families, Work and Well-Being), and George Brown College (Early Childhood Education Program).*

[The Reaching IN...Reaching OUT Project](#)

The Reaching IN...Reaching OUT Project (RIRO) takes new human knowledge about resiliency promotion and adapts and evaluates the Penn Resilience Program (PRP) school-age model for use with young children in childcare. RIRO is helping children learn to "reach in" to think more flexibly and accurately and to "reach out" to take on new opportunities.

The quality of children's experiences in RIRO pilot childcare centres is being enhanced as a result of initial specialized resiliency skills training of their teachers, or early childhood educators (ECEs). ECEs were chosen because of their day-to-day contact 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 childcare and education have shown its benefits for all children and its ability to promote resilience in disadvantaged children.³⁴

ECEs at four pilot childcare centres in Ontario were trained by researchers from the Penn Resilience Program in theory and skills related to resiliency promotion and thinking habits.

Ongoing training and consultation by RIRO staff increased ECEs' awareness of the importance of their own thinking style in modelling resilience for young children. The ECEs engaged in structured reflective journaling and activities specifically designed to integrate the training into their workplaces. Together ECEs and RIRO staff introduced developmentally adapted activities centred on the resiliency skill areas to children at their centres and evaluated the impact of this work.

RIRO offered parent information sessions and created resource materials to increase parents' awareness of the importance of promoting resilience and the impact of adult thinking styles on children's developing resilience. ECEs are actively involved in a collaborative process with the RIRO project team and faculty consultants from the University of Guelph and George Brown College to develop:

- strategies and innovative resource materials that can be distributed and used in a wide variety of childcare and early childhood settings
- a self-contained curriculum module that could be offered by community colleges and universities as part of diploma/degree/or continuing education courses.

Despite the importance of thinking styles to children's development and resilience, this content is largely absent in early childhood education and is not part of the curriculum in diploma programs in Canada, nor is it part of the training programs in most other child-serving professions.

New Research Findings

Early childhood educators have told us that since training in the PRP model, their approach and language has changed when they are talking with children about conflict situations and daily frustrations. Before the training they typically would ask children about their feelings when there was stress or conflict. But 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.

The PRP model adds a whole new layer to early childhood education practice with children - i.e., understanding the importance of beliefs and inquiring about them. It helps ECEs ask about children's thinking in addition to their feelings. This expanded focus has major implications for ECEs' observations, their assessments of children, and their interventions.

In May 2003, ECEs and childcare centre directors participating in the RIRO project completed comprehensive formal surveys about the impact of the resiliency skills training on them and the children during the past year. Some highlights of the findings include:

Impact of resiliency skills training on ECEs and directors:

- 100% reported the resiliency skills training had an impact on their interactions with children at their centres.
- More than 80% found the resiliency skills helpful in dealing with adult communication issues with other teachers, adults in their families, as well as friends and acquaintances. These ECEs rated the level of impact as "moderate" to "high" on interacting with children, understanding their own behaviour, understanding child behaviour and increasing teamwork in their rooms.

Importance and usefulness of the resiliency skills and factors to ECEs:

- ECEs reported the top three resiliency skills for them professionally are:
 1. learning to put adversities and challenges into perspective,
 2. calming and focusing themselves, and
 3. using the ABC model to understand how their own beliefs about the causes and consequences of adversity affect their response to it.
- More than 70% reported using the top three adult skills at least once a day in their work setting.
- ECEs rated the usefulness of their knowledge of the factors or abilities associated with resilience to their professional work very highly (mean average = 6.1 on 7-point scale).

- The resiliency abilities reported to be most affected by the ECEs' personal use of the resiliency skills were being able to better "analyze the causes of problems" and "regulating their own emotions."
- ECEs reported that increased awareness of their own thinking style has provided a framework to engage in "reflective practice" and enhanced efficacy in assessment and understanding of child behaviour.

Importance of resiliency skills to children in childcare:

- ECEs reported that the resiliency skills seem to work best through adult modelling of the skills in daily interaction with young children. Direct activity-based work with the children was easiest to facilitate with children at least four years of age.
- More than 75% of ECEs reported the top three child resiliency skills - calming, generating alternatives, and gaining perspective - could be used in assessing and modelling with individual children in preschool and kindergarten programs.
- 100% of ECEs responded positively when asked whether they had observed changes in child behaviour that they felt were attributable to their resiliency training. More than 60% reported changes in the children's impulse control and emotional regulation.

Next steps: how can more children benefit?

We need to introduce children to skills that will support continuing development of important resiliency abilities and thinking. We want children to be equipped with skills and strategies that promote thinking processes to support resilient responses to adversity. To do this, we need to increase public awareness of the impact of adult thinking styles on the developing thinking patterns of children.

There is a need for widespread adult and child training programs aimed at supporting resilience through accuracy and flexibility in thinking processes. These programs would train adult caregivers to model resiliency skills during interactions with children at home and in childcare centres. Training programs for children and youth within schools, community and recreational centres, mental health centres and youth employment sectors would follow.

We need to create new partnerships within and between sectors to develop and implement seamless training programs across the age spectrum, from birth to 19 years. RIRO would like to partner with other child-serving organizations to implement adult skills training and companion child training programs in childcare, education, mental health, and child welfare sectors.

Conclusion

A large body of research tells us that how we think about adversity can help or hinder a resilient reaction to life's inevitable stress, change, and challenge. Families today are exposed to high levels of daily stress and the incidence of childhood depression is increasing. Children and adults can learn to cope effectively with life's obstacles, and guard against depression through systematic and ongoing skill development.

We can develop perspectives that promote realistic optimism and learn cognitive skills that aid deployment of flexible and accurate assessments of the causes of adversity. Resilient thinking modeled by warm caring adults nurtures children's lifelong capacity for resilience. Research has provided us with the direction and tools. Let's put our children on the pathway to a resilient future.

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[Resources and Links](#)

Websites:

Adaptiv Learning Systems - the training\evaluation arm of the University of Pennsylvania resiliency research program: <http://www.adaptivlearning.com>

Kids Have Stress, Too - a Canadian parent education/support organization offering training to professionals and caregivers: <http://www.kidshavestresstoo.org>

Positive psychology web site (Seligman): <http://www.positivepsychology.org>

Reaching IN...Reaching OUT Project web site: <http://www.reachinginreachingout.com>

ResilienceNet - information on resilience: <http://resilnet.uiuc.edu/>

Books:

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Author Bios

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