

Family Resilience

ABSTRACT:

Families possess unique and innate qualities, strengths, and skills that enable them to adapt to life's challenges despite the increasing diversity and complexity of family structures (i.e. divorce, re-marriage, single-parent household, common-law relationship) (Benzies & Mychasiuk, 2008). Identifying the different levels of social and economic factors within our communities through a strengths-based lens helps professionals and families work collaboratively to promote resilience (Walsh, 2006). This paper outlines descriptions of various support systems within the community that enable children and families to thrive in the midst of life's challenges. The central focus of this paper is on families' role in nurturing and sustaining resilient behaviours in children.

A comprehensive understanding of attributes, characteristics and skills that strengthen resilience within communities, schools, and families, increases awareness and promotes the development of more holistic policies and programs to support healthy families and children's development.

(Paterson, 2002)

WHY IS THIS OF INTEREST?

Parental involvement in their children's learning, not only improves a child's morale, attitude, and academic achievement across all subject areas, but it also promotes better behaviour and social adjustment. In all these ways, family involvement in education helps children to grow up to be productive, responsible members of the society.

WHAT DOES RESEARCH SAY ABOUT THIS?

Identifying the various internal and external factors that interact to enhance family coping strategies brings meaning, hope, and the courage to adapt to daily or future circumstances. According to Paterson (2002), caregivers who maintain a resilience approach are better able to enhance families' coping abilities to adjust to daily life stressors and challenges. Believing in the innate abilities of families to discover new strengths and assets while enhancing existing skills fosters room for empowerment (Paterson, 2002).

Family resilience is "the ability of a family to respond positively to an adverse event and emerge strengthened, more resourceful and more confident" (Simon et al., 2005 as cited in Benzies & Mychasiuk, 2008, p.2).

Family resilience can also be described as "characteristics, dimensions, and properties which help families to be resistant to disruption in the face of change and adaptive in the face of crisis" (McCubbin & McCubbin, 1988, as cited in National Network for Family Resilience, 1996, p.5).

The family resilience framework is a strengths-based approach rooted in the belief that individuals and families can adapt and manage basic or complex life situations when existing strengths, skills, abilities, and resources are identified, nurtured, and built upon (Walsh, 2003). This concept fosters problem solving, healing and growth.

Understanding how to facilitate and nourish resilience is an important part of continued success. Facing and overcoming adverse challenges and experiencing the impact of choices will support the growth of resilience in families and individuals. Approaching each change with existing strengths and skills will promote success.

WHAT DOES RESEARCH SAY ABOUT THIS?

Walsh (2003) identifies three main processes in strengthening family resilience:

Family Belief Systems

Socially constructed beliefs and shared meanings are learned through cultural rituals, interactions with families, and various ecological systems interacting within our environment to influence us (friends, peer groups, neighbourhood, schools, media, and community constructs). Our sense of who we are and how we navigate through perceived threats, daily challenges, and traumatic events are rooted in past experiences and overall beliefs. Thinking, feeling, and acting based on failures and weaknesses can reinforce learned helplessness and self-doubt in the midst of adversity. Family encouragement and support fosters opportunities to build upon existing capacities and skills. Support and encouragement can also facilitate an optimistic outlook and healthy adaptation to perceived threats (Walsh, 2003).

Family Organizational Patterns

Resilience is strengthened by mutual support, collaboration, and commitment to weather troubled times together
(Walsh, 2003, p. 11).

Transitions in different stages of the family cycle such as the birth of a new child, family relationships, unemployment, divorce, aging, and death pose significant stressors which may positively or negatively impact a family's coping abilities (Walsh, 2003). Each family's challenges are unique and should be approached by emphasising family strengths in developing resilience. When continuous mutual support, encouragement, and assurance exists within a family, each family member is able to make meaning of the perceived threats and adapt to them effectively (Walsh, 2006). Age-appropriate learning opportunities for children and discussions centred on healthy responses to life challenges should be openly discussed in a nurturing manner that facilitates learning and aids healing (Walsh, 2003). When families, neighbourhoods, and support networks collaborate to mobilize social and economic support systems, there will be opportunities for culturally empowering stability within each family unit and neighbourhood (Walsh, 2003).

Resilience is the capability of individuals, families, groups and communities to understand and creatively draw upon their internal and external strengths, resulting in effective coping with challenges and significant adversity in ways that promote health, wellness and an increased ability to respond constructively to future adversity.

(Hammond, 2008)



Communication/Problem-Solving Process

Communication processes foster resilience by bringing clarity to crisis situations, encouraging open emotional expression, and fostering collaborative problem-solving (Walsh, 2003, p. 12).

According to Walsh (2003), the three main processes to foster resilience through communication are clarity, open emotional expressions, and collaborative problem solving. Within each family unit, open and honest communication enhances relationships and shared understanding of current and future conflicts, crisis, or expectations (Walsh, 2003). It is important to foster an environment where problems, issues, and hardships are collectively discussed in a manner that promotes a sense of belonging and mastery of skills to tackle new challenges (Garfat & Bockern, 2010).

Circumstances and difficulties are inevitable. Life struggles and challenges may be sudden and unexpected, leaving families and individuals overwhelmed and in despair. Avoiding discussions can heighten conflicts, repression, or outbursts. It can also significantly impede a family's collective functioning ability. Clarifying and sharing crucial information about hardships allows families to collectively brainstorm and identify key strengths within each family member (Walsh, 2003).

A caring environment filled with nurturing and open discussions enables children to understand their emotions. An open environment also allows children to effectively identify and express multiple emotions without feeling judged. An enriched context with opportunities to discuss events and situations allows children and families to tackle challenges as a learning process and adaptation (Garfat and Bockern, 2010).

Certain social and psychological characteristics are present in healthy families such as commitment, appreciation, time together, communication, faith, values, and coping skills (Stinnett and DeFrain, as cited in National Network for Family Resilience, 1995). According to Dunst, Trivette, and Deal (as cited in National Network for Family Resilience, 1995), research shows that engaging in healthy, positive response to stress or hardships while anticipating and preparing for future circumstances improves a family's self-help capacity and the impact of professional help.

Research also shows that preventative interventions that help families develop strong protective factors are found to be more cost-effective than the aid for families already in crisis (Patterson, 2002). According to Smokowski et al., (2004, as cited in Benzie & Mychasiuk, 2008, p. 7), "research has proven that certain protective factors are stronger predictors of outcomes than any risk factor examined. Such findings can be used by clinicians to frame a comprehensive, integrated family intervention program".



Children who have experienced traumatic events can thrive in the midst of adversity with or without a stable family unit; however, the importance of caregiver or parent bonding is linked to successful outcomes of resilience (National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, 2000, as cited in Saleebey, 2006).

Key Terms

Family Resilience: the ability of a family to respond positively to an adverse event and emerge strengthened, more resourceful and more confident (Simon et al. 2005, as cited by Benzies and Mychasiuk, 2008, pg.2).

Collaboration: an active process whereby individuals, groups, and organizations work together to achieve desired results (National Network for Collaboration, 1995, p.4).

Community Ecology: the psychological and practical relationships between humans and their social, as well as physical, environment (Berns, 2007).

Developmentally Appropriate Practices: Practices that match strategies and curriculum to children's individual development, learning styles, and experiences within the context of family culture and community (Crowther, 2003).

Diversity: A reference to a range of categories including culture, religion, ethnicity, abilities, or beliefs.

Empowerment: Enabling individuals to have control over resources affecting them (Berns, 2007).

Holistic: Information gathered and integrated from as many sources as possible; encompassing every aspect of a belief or approach.

Inclusion - The educational philosophy that all children are entitled to participate fully in their school and community (Berns, 2007).

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES?

Promoting resilience through a strengths-based perspective acknowledges existing strengths within families and children, while building upon their skills to meet the complex demands of daily challenges. A paradigm shift from a deficit-based to a strengths-based approach challenges the existing belief systems, mandates, and policies that are focused on weaknesses, failures, problems and illnesses.

A strengths-based approach embraces the skills that individuals use to cope or manage daily stress while applying existing capacities and skills to navigate through different life situations. The motivation and ability of families to engage, advocate, and utilize resources and skills within their communities may increase when they are aware and understand the strengths within themselves and their communities.



When families and children feel a sense of belonging within their environment, they will feel accepted, comfortable, and confident knowing that they are safe and secure. A safe and caring community nurtures and mobilizes resources, and collectively enhances dreams, aspirations, and the zest for finding one's own unique path within the challenges of today's society. New skills and experiences bring out the innate qualities of children and families with or without crisis and enable them effectively adapt to life's challenges.

Family resilience does not develop through evasion of risk but through successful application of protective factors to engage in adverse situations and emerge from them stronger

(Benzies & Mychasiuk, 2008, p. 1)

HOW DOES THIS CONNECT TO START SMART STAY SAFE?

Start Smart Stay Safe (S4) is a community-driven and designed to enhance resilience within children, families, and communities. It is important that protective internal and external factors within the child, family, school, and communities are identified and supported when working with children. Identifying the qualities and skills of families and children within the community stems from S4's four cornerstones: Significance, Self-Determination, Success, and Service.

This community initiative is led by families to increase community collaboration and the capacity to identify and access existing resources needed to buffer protective factors. Families feel more strengthened, empowered, and resourceful when existing strengths and skills are utilized. Providing a safe and supportive environment enriched with age-appropriate learning opportunities for children and all family members enhances confidence and self-esteem.



THINGS TO THINK ABOUT:

Include: Provide and encourage age-appropriate discussions and activities that foster a sense of belonging and learning experience for children and all members of the family.

Nurture: Be flexible, think and listen with an open heart—be willing to acknowledge the challenges a loved one might face while providing comfort, love, and hope.

Collaborate: Connect with the people around you! Seek out resources and support networks within your community that provide an enriched context for learning and growth.



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