

Fostering Resilience Using a Strengths-Based Approach

ABSTRACT:

In recent years, there has been a surge in resilience research. People are wondering where **resilience** comes from and what it means for them. A number of studies dispute the notion that risk factors (abuse, neglect, poverty and the ordinary challenges of life) doom people to negative outcomes and failure (O'Connell, 2006). We have learned that there are many paths to building resilience, one of which uses a **strengths-based** approach. This article will define *resilience*, outline a *strengths-based* approach and explain what it means for families and communities.

WHY IS THIS OF INTEREST?

Resilience is dynamic and can be seen differently based on the context and culture to which it pertains (Benard, 2004). As people face challenges in their lives, resilience allows them to successfully adapt to these challenges and to develop a positive well-being (Alliance for Children and Youth of Waterloo Region, 2009). Research has shown that this is possible—as seen in children and youth who face many challenges in their families and communities and who still manage to live positive lives (Benard, 2004).

RESILIENCE IS A PROCESS—it continues over a lifetime as new skills, knowledge and challenges emerge. A person's resilience is greatly influenced by protective factors which can be internal, such as temperament and social skills, or external, such as caring relationships with adults (O'Connell, 2006). In fact, the most important protective factor for a child to build resilience is having a positive relationship with at least one caring adult (Masten & Coatsworth, as cited in O'Connell, 2006). Resilience allows us to bounce back from negative life experiences and to become even stronger in the process.

Traditionally, many family and community interventions have been **deficit-based** in their approaches. Needs assessments are completed and children and families are labelled as 'at-risk'. This leads to professionals coming in to fix the problems, ultimately revealing an unspoken doubt that people can cope with challenges and overcome them on their own (Saleebey, 2009).

In reality, people have more than challenges or deficits to their stories; they are filled with strengths and capacities. By looking for strengths, people who would have previously been labelled as a 'damaged victims' can now be 'resilient survivors' (O'Connell, 2006). It is important to recognize that a strengths-based approach is one of many paths to resilience but it does not create resilience; rather, a strengths-based approach presents the potential for resilience to exist (Benard, 2004).



WHAT DOES RESEARCH SAY ABOUT THIS?

Nurturing, supporting, and restoring the [protective systems] for a child are top priorities for promoting competence and resilience in young people and preparing them to weather the storms of life. (Masten, 2009, p. 32)

Children and families are living in a world that is becoming increasingly complex and technologically driven which poses many opportunities. Masten (2009) outlines three effective steps to promoting resilience in a complex world:

- Reduce exposure to risk factors;
- Increase available resources; *and*
- Mobilize powerful protective systems.

The last two steps are really about using a strengths-based approach. The first step can also be strengths-based; it does not mean ignoring barriers but focusing on the positive rather than spending the majority of time on what is going wrong (O'Connell, 2006).

A strengths-based approach is not a recipe for how things should be done, nor is it a set of hard and fast rules; it is a way of responding—a belief that people have competencies and resources, that they are able to learn new skills, that they can address their own concerns (it is not about professionals coming in to fix their problems) and that they can be involved in the process of discovery and learning. It is not about making up strengths, being insincere or never talking about concerns—it is about finding balance between these and the positives (Alliance for Children and Youth of Waterloo Region, 2009).

Research has shown that promoting competence in people has the potential to prevent future problems (Masten, 2009). One study showed that competence in childhood, such as doing well in school, is a predictor of success later in life (Masten, 2009). Research on effective teaching in schools revealed that teachers will have much better results when they recognize the strengths of their students and have high expectations (Benard, as cited in O'Connell, 2006). Those who work with children and families can appreciate the struggles of an individual, family, or community, but, more importantly, can look at those struggles for evidence of strengths, capacities, and competencies (Saleebey, 2009).

Beginning with the identification of resources and strengths that exist is a starting point. A strengths-based approach allows the community, family, or individual to realize that they do have the capabilities and skills to overcome challenges—as they have probably already overcome many challenges in their lives. It is also important for the process to be driven by relationships (O'Connell, 2006). It is about finding out who people are and what their stories are, and using that information to continue to support resilience. The strengths-based perspective is about building on hope and tapping into the visions and promise of individuals, families, and communities (Saleebey, 2009).



WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES

Individuals' recognition of their own resilience provides the route to authentic self-esteem. Such self-esteem is based on individuals recognizing their actual accomplishments and identifying how they have used and can use their strengths" (Smith, 2006, p. 32).

Everyone who works with children and families can support resilience. Bonnie Bernard (2004), in her book *Resilience: What We Have Learned*, discusses four strengths which she believes support resilience:

- Social competence;
- Problem solving;
- Autonomy, and
- Sense of purpose.

These four strengths can be supported by parents, teachers, social workers, child care professionals, peers, community members and others, by thoughtfully considering what supports are available, what messages the child or family are receiving and what opportunities are being presented.

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Resilience can also be fostered in the family, school, and community through caring relationships, high expectations, and providing meaningful opportunities for contribution (Ungar, 2007). Building relationships that foster trust, unconditional love, and compassion, and by listening actively, conveys to others that they are important in the world and that they matter (Benard, 2004).

It is also important to have high expectations of children and families. This is not about telling others what to do but rather about believing they have the necessary strengths and capabilities and supporting them to believe in themselves (Benard, 2004). Opportunities for meaningful participation help to foster problem-solving and decision-making skills while allowing these opportunities to be successful (Benard, 2004; Ungar, 2007). O' Connell (2006) points out that when youth have opportunities to use their talents and feel they have the ability to make decisions, they report feeling mentally healthy—even when faced with hardship. Ungar (2007) talks about how important it is for parents to give their teens opportunities to take risks and to engage in their own experiences to demonstrate responsibility and competence. To develop identity and independence, it is also important for children to connect with their culture and background (O' Connell, 2006).

Healthy communities promote wellness in young people and young people who are well build healthy communities.

(Alliance for Children and Youth of Waterloo Region, 2009, p.1)

Strengths and capacities are the building blocks for change.

(Duchnowski & Kurtash, as cited in O' Connell, 2006, p. 6)





HOW DOES THIS CONNECT TO START SMART STAY SAFE?

Start Smart Stay Safe (S4) uses a strengths-based approach to enhance resilience among children and their families. The resources developed for S4 are framed within the strengths-based framework, building on capacities. Police officers in the schools build relationships with the students by taking a strengths-based approach in their interactions. The Family Project is based on input from families, allowing families to take the lead and recognize the strengths they can build on.

The four areas of personal strengths outlined by Benard (2004), which are important for fostering resilience—social competence, problem solving, autonomy, and sense of purpose—relate to the four cornerstones of the Start Smart Stay Safe framework.

Benard's Personal Strengths:	S4 Framework Cornerstones:
Social Competence	Service
Problem Solving	Success
Autonomy	Self-Awareness
Sense of Purpose	Significance

Service is linked with generosity, doing things for others, knowing that one has something to offer to one's family, friends, and community in general. Service is about knowing that you can be helpful and contribute with what you have to offer.

Success: is based on mastery, being able to set goals, and achieve them. The "how to" or the process is very important; it is where opportunities for learning, growing, and improving are present. Success is about achieving personal, family, or community goals rather than being better or superior to others.

Self-Awareness is about independence, and being able to make choices that affect one's own life. Giving children the power to make decisions, appropriate for their developmental stage, will help children to learn self-discipline and acquire the confidence to make choices. Children become aware of what they can and cannot do (their own strengths) from an early age. This helps them build their own value system and understand their own limitations.

Significance comes from child's sense of belonging, feeling that one matters and that one is loved. Feeling significant goes beyond basic needs, it explores emotions and feelings, which are a significant part of growing up healthy and balanced. Significance is a child knowing that she or he is important, feeling that one is in the right place; that one fits in.

Key Terms

Autonomy: the “personal rule of the self that is free from both controlling interferences by others and from personal limitations that prevent meaningful choice.” Autonomous individuals act intentionally, with understanding, and without controlling influences (Pantilat, 2008).

Capacity/Asset/Resource: a quality that can be measured within a child, family, or environment that leads toward possible positive outcomes (O’Dougherty Wright & Masten, 2006).

Protective Factors: factors within children and/or their environment that support their positive ability to handle adversity (O’Dougherty Wright & Masten, 2006) and move toward healthy development and resilience.

Resilience: has been defined in many ways (Smith, Tooley, Christopher & Kay, 2010). The meaning of the English word resilience is “to bounce or spring back” (Simpson, 2005). Expanding upon this, resilience is the ability to cope with challenges or stress in ways that are effective and result in an increased ability to respond well to future adversity (Alliance for Children and Youth of Waterloo Region, 2009).

Risk Factor: a characteristic that can be measured with a child, family or environment that lead toward possible negative outcomes (O’Dougherty Wright & Masten, 2006).

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

- How can you truly listen to another’s story?
- Can you find the strengths in a challenging situation?
- Are you providing opportunities for others to be successful?

“The marvelous richness of human experience would lose something of rewarding joy if there were no limitations to overcome. The hilltop hour would not be half so wonderful if there were no dark valleys to traverse.”

Helen Keller



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