

# Handout

## Resilience

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Tony Newman, writing about resilience defines a resilient child as one who 'can resist adversity, cope with uncertainty and recover more successfully from traumatic events or episodes'. Resilience is something acquired through experience, although there may be some inherited aspects. It is not about invulnerability, but our capacity to cope. Continuous and extreme adversity is likely to drain the most resilient children.

Pre pubescent girls tend to be more resilient than pre pubescent boys. This is probably in part because girls are statistically less likely to be disabled but also because girls are encouraged to express their feelings whereas boys are more likely to be socialized in ways that encourage inhibition of their emotional expression.

Adolescent boys tend to be slightly more resilient than adolescent girls, but the reasons for this are not well understood. However, resilience in girls is encouraged in households where 'there is an absence of over-protection, an emphasis on risk taking and where there is reliable emotional support'. Resilience in boys is encouraged in households where 'there is greater structure, rules, parental supervision, a healthy male role model and encouragement for emotional expression.'

Michael Rutter argued that resilience is created, when risk is reduced through protective mechanisms that change a child's trajectory in life. When children are helped to have a positive appraisal of their self and to think differently about events, they are enabled to feel differently about their own competence and believe in their ability to cope. He also argued that risk is reduced when the exposure to risk is altered. For example, despite a high risk environment a child may mitigate the exposure to risk through engaging in extra-curricular activities at school that provide a range of supports.

In particular Rutter points to the following as factors which protect young people in adversity:

- The ability to integrate experiences into their belief systems
- The presence of self-esteem
- The ability to be proactive in relation to ongoing stress

- Having secure affectional relationships
- Some measure of success and achievement
- Interaction with others in securing gains
- Parental modelling or redeeming relationships – i.e. modelling by another supportive adult
- The ability to process events and experiences in a meaningful way
- Gaining mastery over stressful events

Daniel and Wassell have developed the notion of Domains of Resilience. These are six areas of a child's lives where resilience can be promoted (secure base, education, friendships, talents and interests, positive values and social competence). The idea of 'resilience strings' is similar to Rutter's protective mechanisms, which are processes over time that interact with each other to reinforce resilience. It is likely that in resilient children one domain of resilience is likely to positively impact on another. So, for example, a child who has a talent to play a musical instrument and who is asked to perform in the school orchestra is also likely to develop friendships and, as a result, will take up a valued social role and his/her education will be promoted.

Research has consistently identified the following protective factors for children's mental health:

### **Resilience in the child**

- Being female (in younger children)
- Secure attachment experience
- Outgoing temperament as an infant
- Good communication skills, sociability
- Being a planner and having a belief in control
- Humour
- Problem solving skills and a positive attitude
- Experiences of success and achievement
- Faith or spirituality
- Capacity to reflect

### **Resilience in families**

- At least one good parent child relationship (or one supportive adult)
- Affection
- Clear, consistent discipline
- Support for education
- Supportive long term relationship or the absence of severe discord

## **Resilience in Communities**

- Wide support networks
- Good housing
- High standard of living
- High morale school, with positive policies for behaviour, attitudes and anti-bullying
- Opportunities for valued social roles
- Range of sport and leisure activities

