

Promoting Resilience in Children: What Parents Can Do

Information for Families

Center for Effective Collaboration and Practice

Derek is 12 years old and has failed two grades. His parents are divorced and his father disappeared and does not support the family. Derek lives with his mother and two younger siblings in a small apartment. The family income places them well below the threshold of poverty. His mother works nights as a waitress and often comes home very late. Derek is the caregiver of his younger siblings at night and in the morning. Derek's teachers report that he often argues and raises his voice when asked about incomplete school work.

Many children, like Derek, are faced with stressful situations. Challenges such as poverty, divorce, illness, or other catastrophes can put a child at risk for school failure and behavioral problems. The reason some children succeed when faced with risks and adversity is resiliency—an individual's, family's, or community's ability to cope or “bounce back” from significant adverse life situations or stresses in such ways that are not only immediately effective, but also result in an increased ability to respond to future adversity.

This brief identifies factors that may contribute to academic failure and behavioral problems (risk factors), as well as factors that help promote resiliency (protective factors). It also offers specific suggestions for parents and families on how to promote resiliency in their children.

RISK FACTORS

Risk factors are disabling, cultural, economic, or medical conditions that deny or minimize opportunities and resources for a child and place him or her in jeopardy of failing to become a meaningful member of the home, school, and community. Risk factors can be internal (within the individual) or external (involving the family, school, and community).

Some examples of internal risk factors are hyperactivity, concentration problems, restlessness, early involvement in antisocial behavior, and beliefs and attitudes favoring deviancy. Derek's poor school performance is an internal risk factor. External risk factors include conditions in the environment, such as the home, school, and community (see Table 1). Derek's risk factors include his father's

abandonment, a single-parent household, and the family's poverty. School risk factors may involve overcrowding, a high student/teacher ratio, insufficient or inappropriate curriculum, and weak and inconsistent adult leadership. Factors in the community that may cause risks for children are high levels of neighborhood disorganization, high mobility rates, few adults to monitor children's behavior, and high levels of drug and gang activity in the neighborhood.

PROMOTING RESILIENCY BY PROVIDING PROTECTIVE FACTORS

With all these risks in their lives, how can we protect children like Derek from failing in school or developing behavioral problems? The good news is that most children who grow up in families with many challenges do overcome the odds and manifest “resilience.” Resiliency may be explained by the presence of “protective factors,” those qualities or situations that help alter or reverse expected negative outcomes. Resiliency can be cultivated by providing and promoting these protective factors in a child's life. Protective factors also can be internal (within the individual) or external (involving the family, school, and community).

INTERNAL PROTECTIVE FACTORS

Protective factors within the child involve the ability to take control, be proactive, and make decisions about what to do instead of just letting things happen. Resilient children take responsibility for their decisions, and they engage others when needed. Resilient individuals seem to understand and accept their abilities and limitations and know when and how much to push themselves. They are goal directed and realistic about their goals, and they can discriminate when to persevere and when to quit. Resilient individuals have a positive outlook and have developed coping and stress reduction strategies. One way to help children like Derek develop these internal protective factors is to look for external protective factors that can be employed to build their resiliency.

EXTERNAL PROTECTIVE FACTORS

Like risk factors, external protective factors can also be found in the home, school, and community environments. Researchers have identified three themes involving external protective factors that apply to each of these environments: (1) caring

relationships, (2) positive and high expectations, and (3) opportunities for meaningful participation.

Protective factors in the home that promote these themes may involve an attachment to at least one family member who engages in proactive, healthy behaviors with the youth. This individual may give the youth a sense of belonging and purpose within the family unit and value his or her abilities and may additionally tell the child that he or she can and will be successful. In Derek's case, perhaps his mother could tell him how important his role is in looking after his younger siblings. If she is not able to help him with his homework, she may be able to find a relative or friend (whom Derek likes and respects) to help him. Table 2 is a list of protective factors that families can provide for their children.

Schools can help students develop resiliency by providing a positive and safe learning environment, along with setting high, yet achievable, academic and social expectations. Parents can visit their child's school or call and talk to the teachers and administrators about their expectations for their child. Academic clubs or social organizations sponsored and supported by the school provide meaningful participation for youth, making it less likely that they will fail or demonstrate deviant or antisocial behaviors. Further, parents can encourage their children to join such clubs or organizations. School personnel, especially teachers, can provide protective factors for children and youth by conveying an attitude of compassion, understanding, and respect for the student. A teacher is the most frequently encountered positive role model outside the family, and a caring relationship often develops between student and teacher. Teachers who offer trustworthiness, sincere interest, and individual attention and who use rituals and traditions in the classroom are often the determining factor for whether a child opens his or her mind to learn. Derek's mother might contact his teachers and indicate her concerns and her willingness to support classroom strategies and learning activities at home.

Community protective factors include neighborhoods that offer a context where youth can be exposed to positive influences. For instance, a community mentor can be instrumental in teaching a child strategies for avoiding trouble and interacting positively with others. For example, Derek's mother might contact Big Brothers and Big Sisters of America.

Other community support factors include after-school programs and recreational opportunities offered by

the city or by neighborhood associations. A Carnegie Council study concluded that community-based youth programs offered during non-school hours, in conjunction with family and school-focused efforts, can provide the critical community support necessary to prevent delinquency. Volunteer activities in the community and gainful employment also promote resiliency in youth.

WHAT PARENTS AND FAMILIES CAN DO

How parents and other caregivers respond to situations, and how they help a child to respond, separates those adults who promote resilience in their children from those who destroy resilience or send confusing messages that both promote and inhibit resilience. (E. H. Grothberg)

Understanding the risk and protective factors is a first step that you, as a parent or family member, can take to promote resiliency in your child. Bringing together all the people in your child's environment who know and care about him or her is the next step. In fact, collaboration among families, schools, and community agencies may be the only effective means to address the complex problems of many youth.

Parents can be powerful advocates for their children. You can develop partnerships with your child's teachers to get involved in his or her education. The first step is to contact the teachers and arrange to visit the school. Be sure to communicate your desire to join the school staff in helping your child become more successful in school, rather than approach them with an attitude of blame or defensiveness.

Given the many challenges that parents and families face today, raising children to be physically and emotionally healthy can be a daunting task. Single parents, in particular, may need to reach out to schools and community agencies for assistance. You need to take care of your own physical and mental health in order to give your child the attention that he or she needs. Regardless of the particular challenges and risks that your family may be facing, to promote resiliency in your children keep in mind the three key themes: caring relationships, positive and high expectations, and opportunities for meaningful participation. Table 3 lists several specific activities recommended by the International Resilience Project that you can engage in to promote resilience in your child. In addition, you can teach your children the language of resilience.

Resilience is a fairly new concept for describing behavior, and the language of resilience gives us a set

of rules to use in promoting resilience in children. Children can pull from three sources of resilience. “*I am*” is an internal source, the personal strengths, feelings, attitudes, and beliefs within the child. For instance, Derek’s mother can teach him to say, “I am a good brother and son. My mother loves me and appreciates all that I do.” “*I have*” is an external source, the supports and resources that promote resilience. In Derek’s case, his mother can teach him to say, “I have my mother whom I can trust and teachers who care about me.” “*I can*” is a social source, the skills the child can use in interacting with others, especially those who can help. For example, Derek’s mother can teach him to say, “I can tell my mother what is bothering me, and I can ask my teachers for help when I need it.” These three sources—I am, I can, and I have—are language tools that can help your child build his or her resiliency through strengthening internal protective factors.

Prepared by

Christine A. Christle, M.Ed.

Debra A. Harley, Ph.D.

C. Michael Nelson, Ed.D.

Karen Jones

University of Kentucky

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TABLE 1: RISK FACTORS

Family

- Poverty
- Severe marital distress
- Absence of husband or partner
- Low social status
- Minority race
- Unskilled head of household
- Large family; many children
- Parental criminality
- Maternal depression or psychiatric disorder
- Foster placement
- Death of parents or grandparents
- Illness of parent or siblings
- Disabled family member
- Accident causing personal injuries
- Moving, family or friends
- Physical, emotional, or sexual abuse
- Abandonment
- Remarriage of parents
- Murder of a family member
- Neighborhood violence
- Loss of job by family member

School

- Overcrowding
- High student/teacher ratios
- Insufficient curricular and course relevance
- Low academic achievement, apathy, and disruption
- Poor building design that increases isolation and hampers communication
- Weak and inconsistent adult leadership
- Lack of clarity and follow-through in rules and policies
- Few allowances for individual differences
- Less availability of teachers and increase in emergency certifications

Community

- High levels of disorganization
- High mobility rates
- Few adults to monitor children's behavior
- High neighborhood levels of crime and drug and gang activity
- Media violence: Internet, television, and video games

TABLE 2: FAMILY PROTECTIVE FACTORS

- Caring relationship of a family member
- Warm, structured, and positive discipline practices
- Parental monitoring and supervision
- Support from extended family
- Good health and good prenatal care
- Opportunity for children to contribute to the family goals
- Listening and talking to children
- Stable environment and home
- Responding to and accepting children's behavior
- Providing toys and materials
- Providing safe places for exploration and privacy
- Providing positive experiences for children in the community
- Teaching children effective and appropriate problem-solving skills
- Family members who show respect for other relatives and adults
- Family quality time with each other

TABLE 3: SPECIFIC ACTIVITIES FOR PARENTS

- Provide unconditional love and express love both physically and verbally.
- Enforce rules for the child and use removal of privileges and other forms of discipline that do not belittle, harm, or reject the child.
- Model behavior that you would like the child to display.
- Praise the child for his or her accomplishments.
- Encourage the child to try things and do things on his or her own with minimal adult help.
- When language is developing, acknowledge and label the child's feelings and encourage the child to express his or her own feelings and to recognize feelings in others (for example: sad, glad, sorry, happy, mad).
- Use developing language to reinforce aspects of resilience to help the child face adversity: for example, "I know you can do it" encourages autonomy and reinforces a child's faith in his or her own problem-solving skills; "I'm here" comforts and reminds the child of the trusting relationships that he or she can rely on.
- Offer explanations and reconciliation along with rules and discipline.
- Encourage the child to demonstrate empathy and caring, to be pleasant, and to do nice things for others.
- Encourage the child to use communication and problem-solving skills to resolve interpersonal problems or to seek help with them.
- Communicate with the child by discussing, sharing, and reporting on the day's events, ideas, observations, and feelings.
- Help the child begin to accept responsibility for his or her own behavior and to understand that his or her actions have consequences.
- Accept errors and failures while providing guidance toward improvement.
- Provide opportunities for the child to practice dealing with problems and adversities through exposure to manageable adversities and fantasy.
- Encourage communication so that issues, expectations, feelings, and problems can be discussed and shared.