Resilience: concept, factors and models for practice

Fiona Mitchell

Key messages

- Resilience frameworks for practice unify and expand upon developmental, attachment and ecological approaches and can enable a more holistic focus on what children and young people need in order to fulfil their potential.
- Resilience is built upon the complex interaction and operation of risk and protective factors at individual, family and community levels.
- It is important to understand resilience as a process rather than a particular character trait.
- Three fundamental building blocks of resilience are identified in the literature – a secure base, good self esteem and a sense of self-efficacy.
- Attention to different domains in children’s lives – secure attachment relationships, education, friendships, talents and interests, positive values and social competencies – can help practitioners to appraise and identify ways to strengthen these building blocks.

Introduction

Theories of attachment, child development and resilience are core to understanding and improving the conditions and circumstances that facilitate children to achieve their potential. Identifying, and understanding the operation of risks to children’s physical, cognitive, emotional, and social development is an evolving field. A notable recent advance in knowledge is our increasing understanding of early brain development, and its consequences for the realisation of children’s emotional, behavioural, cognitive and social potential. Knowledge of factors and processes that can moderate risks to child development is also growing. This briefing draws on reviews of empirical research and applied practice literature focused on resilience to highlight its utility for child care and protection practice.
Resilience: concept, factors and models for practice

Why is this issue important?

Within society, people face many adversities or stressors in their lives. “Resilience is important because it is the human capacity to face, overcome and be strengthened by or even transformed by the adversities of life.” Biographical accounts as much as empirical research suggest that resilience, as an outcome, exists. Developing an awareness of the empirical work, exploring factors and processes that affect resilience, can assist practitioners in assessing children’s needs and in the application of resilience-based approaches in practice. The weight of evidence suggests that incorporating resilience-promoting strategies in services to children and young people can make a difference. For families too, a comprehensive understanding of the factors that foster family resiliency may serve to inform the development of more holistic policies and programmes to support optimal outcomes for families.

What does the research tell us?

Conceptualised as “doing better than expected in difficult circumstances”

The research does not provide clear definitions or clarity in the terminology used to conceptualise the meaning and operation of resilience. Clusters of meanings are associated with “doing better than expected in difficult circumstances.” Commonly cited definitions include: “Normal development under difficult conditions” and “the process of, capacity for, or outcome of successful adaptation despite challenging or threatening circumstances.” Resilience is conceptualised as an outcome (relatively good functioning or well-being), as well as a set of qualities or processes that enable a person to make use of internal and external resources (adaptability in the face of adversity). The personal, familial and environmental features that are associated with resilience in children are well explored but less is known about what contributes to parental or family resilience. Less attention has been paid to evaluating the effectiveness of resilience-promoting strategies in practice, which is a key priority for future research.

Incorporating concepts of adversity, risk, vulnerability and protective factors

Explorations of the concept of resilience are typically framed with reference to adversity, risk, vulnerability and protective factors. Types of adversity considered in the literature vary along different dimensions, including from severe or exceptional to common or everyday; from specific to community wide; from material to non-material; from multiple to single; from inter-familial to external. “Risk,” sometimes used as an alternative to adversity, also has multiple, overlapping meanings. It can perhaps most helpfully be understood as something that increases the chance of a specified (negative) outcome. The interaction between risk factors, the accumulation of risk factors, and the timing of exposure to risk factors is important to consider. Vulnerability can be understood as a feature that renders a person more susceptible to negative consequences of adversity. Protective factors can be understood as “circumstances that moderate the effects of risk” in a positive direction. Like risk, they too, are cumulative. Most factors that threaten or protect children are largely inert by themselves; “Their toxic or prophylactic potential emerges when they catalyse with stressful events, especially where these are prolonged, multiple and impact on the child during sensitive developmental stages.”

Resilience as a dynamic process

Emphasis is placed on understanding resilience as a process rather than a particular character trait. Resilience is seen as being built upon the complex interaction and operation of risk and protective factors at individual, family and community levels. Protective factors can be seen as operating on dimensions that are intrinsic (internal) and extrinsic (external) to individuals. These factors vary in their malleability – some are more amenable to change while others are immutable – which provides some opportunities for strengthening factors and processes that can be protective for children and young people’s well-being in the longer term.

Factors associated with resilience

The factors that have been shown to be associated with resilience are listed opposite in relation to the age of the child and in relation to an ecological framework.
Resilience: concept, factors and models for practice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Individual</th>
<th>Family</th>
<th>Community</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Infancy</strong></td>
<td>» Female</td>
<td>» Close bond with at least one person</td>
<td>» Neighbour and other non-kin support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>» First-born</td>
<td>» Nurturance and trust</td>
<td>» Peer contact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>» No birth complications</td>
<td>» Lack of separations</td>
<td>» Good nursery experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>» Full term</td>
<td>» Lack of parental mental health or addiction problems</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>» Easy sleeping and feeding</td>
<td>» Close grandparents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>» Affectionate</td>
<td>» Family harmony</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>» Drive and vigour</td>
<td>» Sibling attachment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>» Socially responsive</td>
<td>» Four or fewer children</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>» Actively reaches for others</td>
<td>» Sufficient financial and material resources</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>» Secure attachment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>» Advanced in communication</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>» Alert and cheerful</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>» Adaptable</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>» Fearless</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>» Seeks out novel experiences</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>School years</strong></td>
<td>» Female</td>
<td>» Close bond with at least one person</td>
<td>» Neighbour and other non-kin support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>» Sense of competence and self-efficacy</td>
<td>» Nurturance and trust</td>
<td>» Peer contact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>» Internal locus of control</td>
<td>» Lack of separations</td>
<td>» Good school experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>» Empathy with others</td>
<td>» Lack of parental mental health or addiction problems</td>
<td>» Positive adult role models</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>» Problem-solving skills</td>
<td>» Required helpfulness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>» Communication skills</td>
<td>» Encouragement for autonomy (girls)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>» Sociable</td>
<td>» Encouragement for expression of feelings (boys)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>» Independent</td>
<td>» Close grandparents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>» Reflective, not impulsive</td>
<td>» Family harmony</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>» Ability to concentrate on schoolwork</td>
<td>» Sibling attachment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>» Autonomy (girls)</td>
<td>» Four or fewer children</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>» Emotional expressiveness (boys)</td>
<td>» Sufficient financial and material resources</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>» Sense of humour</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>» Hobbies</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>» Willingness and capacity to plan</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Adolescence</strong></td>
<td>» Male</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>» Responsibility</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>» Empathy with others</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>» Internal locus of control</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>» Social maturity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>» Positive self-concept</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>» Achievement orientation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>» Gentleness, nurturance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>» Social perceptiveness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>» Preference for structure</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>» A set of values</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>» Intelligence</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>» Willingness and capacity to plan</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reproduced and summarised from [16,17]
Approaches to applying resilience theory in practice

Research into factors associated with resilience has led to the development of a number of guiding frameworks for intervention. There is some consensus in the articulation of these frameworks with agreement in the need for practitioners and service designs to focus on12,26:

- Altering or reducing a child’s exposure to risk
- Reducing the “chain reaction” or “pile up” of risk exposures
- Creating opportunities or increasing resources available to children
- Processes, for example, in improving attachment, self-efficacy or self-esteem, or “resilience strings” that can have a knock on effect

It is suggested that the most effective intervention programmes involve “multi-faceted paradigms [that] attempt to reduce modifiable risk, strengthen meaningful assets, and recruit core developmental processes within the child, family and the broader community”26, p10

Models for practice

Child welfare academics who have focused on developing models for the practical application of resilience theory identify three fundamental building blocks of resilience1,12,14:

1. A secure base whereby the child feels a sense of belonging and security
2. Good self-esteem, that is, an internal sense of worth and competence
3. A sense of self-efficacy, that is a sense of mastery and control, along with an accurate understanding of personal strengths and limitations

Alternatively these can be expressed as “I HAVE…, I AM…, I CAN…”5. Attention to different domains in children’s lives – secure attachment relationships, education, friendships, talents and interests, positive values and social competencies – can help practitioners to appraise and identify ways to strengthen these building blocks5,12,13,14,15. It is argued that such resilience frameworks unify and expand upon developmental, attachment and ecological approaches19 and can enable a more holistic focus on what children and young people need in order to fulfil their potential9,10,11. The framework fits closely with the aim of Getting It Right for Every Child to encourage practitioners to draw on what family, community and universal services can offer.

Further resources

Understanding resilience – IRISS learning resource (http://content.iriss.org.uk/understandingresilience/index.html)
Fostering resilience – IRISS learning resource (http://content.iriss.org.uk/fosteringresilience/flash/fullscreen.html)
Providing a secure base
Gillian Schofield and Mary Beek at the University of East Anglia have developed “the secure base care giving model” for use in child placement practice which may have wider application for work with parents (http://www.uea.ac.uk/providingasecurebase?mode=print)
Daniel B and Wassell S (2002) have written three practice guides available from Jessica Kingsley Publishers:
- The Early Years: Assessing and promoting resilience in vulnerable children 1
- The School Years: Assessing and promoting resilience in vulnerable children 2
- Adolescence: Assessing and promoting resilience in vulnerable children 3
Resilience: Concept, Factors and Models for Practice

References


Resilience: concept, factors and models for practice

1. **Introduction**

Resilience is built upon the complex interaction of factors and processes that can moderate risks to child development. The concept of resilience has been integral to the work of researchers and practitioners for over 40 years, aiming to improve the conditions and circumstances that facilitate children to achieve their potential.

2. **Ecological approaches**

Resilience frameworks for practice unify and expand upon developmental, attachment and psychosocial theories. They take a holistic view of resilience, focusing on the interplay of individual, family and community factors that contribute to children’s capacity to adapt to adversity.

3. **Three fundamental building blocks of resilience**

- **A secure base**
  - Secure attachment relationships are critical for children’s development.
  - These relationships are predictive of other relationships children form later in life.

- **Education**
  - Good school attendance, engagement and performance are linked to better outcomes.

- **Positive friendships**
  - Strong, positive relationships with peers are fundamental to children’s development.
  - These relationships contribute to their capacity to regulate emotions and respond to challenges.

4. **Positive values and social competencies**

- **Good self esteem and a sense of self-efficacy**
  - Children who feel good about themselves are better able to face challenges and setbacks.

5. **Recent research and knowledge**

- **Early brain development**
  - Our understanding of early brain development is growing.

- **The importance of adversity**
  - Adversity is a fact of life, and resilience is needed to navigate it.

6. **The science of early child development**

- **National Academy of Sciences**
  - The science of early child development is an evolving field.

- **Scottish Government (2010)**
  - Practice Briefing 5: Using the National Practice Model Ill: Analysing Information using the Resilience Matrix.

7. **Promoting resilience in children**

  - From neurons to neighbourhoods.

- **Scottish Government (2008)**
  - A guide to Getting It Right for Every Child.

8. **Resilience frameworks for practice**

- **Promoting Resilience: A Resource Guide on Working with Children in the Care System**

9. **Research briefings**

- **Daniel B and Wassell S (2002)**
  - Fostering care and protection workers.

10. **Child and Family Social Work**

- **Adolescence: Assessing and promoting resilience in child placement practice and planning**

11. **Child and Family Social Work**

- **Promoting resilience in fostered children and young people: Resilience factors and resilience**

12. **National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect Information**

- **House – Child abuse, neglect and welfare**
  - childtrauma.org/images/stories/Articles/state_trait_95.pdf

13. **Handbook of Early Childhood Interventions**

- **Masten A (1994) ‘Resilience in individual development’**

- **Masten A (1990) ‘Protective factors and individual resilience’**
  - In Meisel (ed), Handbook of Adolescent Psychology, 35, 231–257.

- **Brofenbrenner U (1989) ‘Ecological systems theory’**


- **British Journal of Psychiatry**
  - 178: 589–611.

15. **Promoting resilience in fostered children and young people**

  - Adoption and Fostering, 21, 1, 12–20.

16. **Fostering care and protection workers**

- **London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers**

17. **Institute for Excellence**

- **Gilligan R (1999) ‘Enhancing the resilience of children and young people in public care by mentoring their talents and interests.’**

18. **Newman T (2004).**

- **SCCPN**
  - Scottish Child Care and Protection Network (SCCPN), Fiona.Mitchell@stir.ac.uk

- **About this briefing**

  Written by Fiona Mitchell, Coordinator for the Scottish Child Care and Protection Network (SCCPN), Fiona.Mitchell@stir.ac.uk

  With reference to the Scottish policy context, SCCPN research briefings draw out key messages for practice from recent research and signpost routes to further information.

  This briefing was reviewed by Brigid Daniel, Professor of Social Work, University of Stirling. July 2011.