

***Developing Protective Factors for Vulnerable Children in High-Risk Families:
Messages from Resilience Research***
**Highlights and Notes from a Reflective Seminar for
Supervisors in the Child Welfare System***
**Held at the Hubert Humphrey Center
December 9, 2011**

Introduction

We approach concepts in resilience and their significance for Child Welfare with a sense of familiarity. Almost twenty years ago, in a conference report on children in neglecting families, we used a reference to the work of Norman Garmezy, considered to be the originator of resilience research, and as we shall learn, the professor and then colleague of our presenter, today. Garmezy's seminal paper, in 1991, "Resilience in Children's Adaptation to Negative Life Events and Stressed Environments,"** provides our historical link to the topic of this seminar.

We meet at a time of changing frameworks for the Child Welfare system. "Engagement" is a major topic for improving practice. The caseworker's role as "expert" will now become that of "partner," in a collaborative framework that identifies strengths, while acknowledging safety issues. "Interventions" have also claimed our attention. Attention to trauma-informed practice has been introduced.*** Patterns of coping and adaptation from this perspective are becoming a focus of attention in case planning.

To some extent, conceptual frameworks are driven by the search for the cause of disparities. Program and policy interests are now engaged, at various levels, to address the poor educational outcomes of children known to the Child Welfare system. There is a persistent call for practice and policy responses to the disparate presence of African-American, Native

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**Garmezy, Norman (1991), "Resilience in Children's Adaptation to Negative Life Events and Stressed Environment," *Pediatric Annals*, September 20:9.

***Proceedings from "Trauma-Informed Practice: A Reflective Seminar," held March 15, 2011, are available at: http://www.cehd.umn.edu/ssw/cascw/events/past_events/Trauma-InformedPractice.asp

American, and children of recent immigrant families in the reports of children Not Ready for K and in caseloads with deeply-troubled, intergenerational adolescent parents.

Once again, the Child Welfare system has been reminded of its primary obligation: to assure the safety and well-being of children in its responses to reports of maltreatment..

Against this active background of improving the Child Welfare system, we now come to a consideration of “resilience” as an important focus of attention.

Our presenter for this seminar, Ann Masten, Distinguished McKnight University Professor in the Institute of Child Development and the 2011-2012 Fesler-Lampert Chair in Urban and Regional Affairs, is a pioneer in the study of individual resilience and the impact of homelessness. During the next three years, she will continue a long-standing collaboration with Minneapolis Public Schools and People Serving People, a Minneapolis homeless shelter, to identify and test strategies to help at-risk preschoolers bounce back from adverse circumstances.

Messages from Resilience Research: Professor Ann Masten

In the context of mass trauma—war, famine, poverty—pioneering studies emerged in understanding the wide-ranging responses and outcomes in recovery from severe adversities.

Resilience is the capacity of a dynamic system to withstand or recover from significant challenges that threaten its stability, viability, or development.

- Beginning in the 1970’s, we can detect four waves of resilience research on children and youth: the first was descriptive (what?); the second shifted to process (how?); the third focused on interventions to promote mental health and development; and the fourth dealt with interaction across systems—from genetic to neural to behavioral and social levels.
- This is collaborative work: simultaneous intervention and evaluation projects inform science.

- Resilience has an anchor in general systems theory. . . The research work goes beyond theory to what is useful for practice: who does well or recovers well, and why?
- Seventy-five percent of Minneapolis Public School children in third to 8th grades are homeless and highly mobile or qualify for free or reduced lunch costs. The gap in school achievement is there from the beginning of school and continues through high school graduation . . . However, there is tremendous variability in how kids are doing academically.
- Here are some take-home lessons:
 - There are multiple pathways to resilience;
 - Assets and resources matter;
 - “Ordinary magic” works—competence and resilience does not require something rare or special, rather continuous basic protections for safety, and well-being.
- The ecological model is important, here. Protective factors in interacting systems have to be available: health; education, family economic resources, operating within a framework of equity reflecting cultural factors.
- We can promote resilience: there are multiple pathways. For preschoolers, programs that promote “executive function skills” are effective. These are skills that help a child to focus, reason, and plan. These are skills that encourage self-control, an essential factor in a school environment: “managing oneself in order to achieve a goal.”
- A resilience framework for action must be collaborative from inception.

Discussion

At a time of dwindling resources, can the Child Welfare system extend itself beyond its “safety” concerns to devote assets and resources to promote resilience?

Funding for “prevention” is frequently cut. “Services needed but not available” is a growing category. Who is keeping track of “services needed but not available”? How to make use of this list for program and policy purposes should be a focus of attention.

The basic question is, “What is the best use of our dwindling resources?” Have we moved beyond fault-finding and forensics? Can community agencies fill in the gaps in services that public social services in county programs cannot provide?

What does safety look like through the eyes of the child? Should we provide the same training for birth parents that we provide for foster parents?

Are we improving our ability to find the window of opportunity in each of our collaborative systems?

Remarks: Dee Wilson, Director, Child Welfare Services, Knowledge Management Casey Family Programs

The capacity to bounce back after adversity depends, to some extent, on maturity: children have not reached the developmental milestones required to have achieved a set of resources for resiliency. It is, therefore, our responsibility to assure quality care-giving for children in our caseloads: helping young persons to control their behavior—care-givers can facilitate this.

Recovery from trauma and strengthening resilience factors occur for children when “someone believes in them . . .”—someone who is there, as a coach, along the path to recovery from complex traumas. This presence should be provided as part of a case plan.

Conclusion

While promoting attention to factors that build resilience, the Child Welfare system must retain a realistic grasp of the baggage of distress and unhappiness that children suffer in the toxic environment of poverty.

An invitation was extended to join a task force to develop resilience opportunities for growth and development in caseloads of maltreated children.

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