

I Am Safe and Secure

Promoting Resilience in Young Children

Lena, 2 years old, witnessed her father being shot in front of their home. She now lives with her aunt in a new home in a new community. She attends a family child care program.

Jonah, 4 years old, enjoys playing with his older brother, Mikkel, and his friends—the “big kids.” Sometimes, though, the older children think Jonah is annoying and don’t want to play with him. Today, Mikkel and his friends called Jonah a “stupid baby” and angrily yelled at him to go away.

Every day, young children—around the world and in the United States—experience stress or trauma. Some children are exposed to crises such as natural disasters, community violence, abuse, neglect, and separation from or death of loved ones. Many young children experience the more common stresses of harassment from a sibling, rejection by peers, or adjusting to multiple caregivers. These events can cause young children to feel vulnerable, worried, fearful, sad, frustrated, or lonely.

Parents, early childhood educators, and other adults try to keep children safe by preventing stress and trauma. This is not always possible. Adults can, however, promote resilience in young children by fostering protective factors that can buffer the

Peter J. Pizzolongo, MS, is senior director of professional development at NAEYC.

Amy Hunter, LICSW, is a program manager at ZERO TO THREE. ahunter@zerotothree.org

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Peter J. Pizzolongo and Amy Hunter

negative effects of stress and trauma. Resilience helps children (and adults) “overcome adversity with courage, skills, and faith” (Grotberg 2009).

Why is resilience important and what contributes to it?

The American Psychological Association (APA) defines resilience as “the ability to adapt well to adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or even significant sources of stress” (APA 2011). According to Edith Grotberg, a developmental psychologist, “Resilience is important because it is the human capacity to face, overcome and be strengthened by or even transformed by the adversities of life” (1995). Developing this capacity relies on protective factors within individuals as well as in the family and community.

The longitudinal studies of researchers like Emmy Werner have reported characteristics in young children that are associated with “coping abilities under adverse conditions” (Werner

1995, 82). According to Werner, infants who are “active, affectionate, cuddly, good-natured, and easy to deal with” are more likely to be resilient in the face of adversity. Other researchers have noted that infants and toddlers who show resilience are “alert, easy to soothe, and able to elicit support from a nurturant family member” (p. 82). Resilient preschoolers’ characteristics include the ability to be autonomous and to ask for help when needed—characteristics that are also predictive of resilience in later years.

Other studies have found additional factors to be associated with resilience in young children. For example, Breslin has studied children who seem to be adequately “adapting and surviving,” despite the negative life events and stress they experience. She has identified four characteristics that resilient children exhibit: heightened sensory awareness, high positive expectations, a clear and developing understanding of one’s strengths relating to accomplishment, and a heightened, developing sense of humor (Breslin 2005).

National Children’s Mental Health Awareness Day

May 3, 2011

The US government’s Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) sponsors an annual Children’s Mental Health Awareness Day. In 2011, May 3 is set aside for activities to promote the theme Building Resilience for Young Children Dealing with Trauma. Activities will raise awareness of effective programs for children’s mental health needs; demonstrate how children’s mental health initiatives promote positive youth development, recovery, and resilience; and show how children with mental health needs can thrive in their communities. For more information, go to www.samhsa.gov/children.

How can adults promote resilience?

How can early childhood educators help young children to develop the protective factors that support resilience? What can early childhood educators do to help children and families who are experiencing adversity?

Research has emphasized the importance of early childhood as a time for promoting resilience (Masten

& Gewirtz 2006). Positive relationships and environments that support healthy cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development provide the foundation for young children to develop the resources and skills they need to cope and adapt to adversity throughout childhood and the rest of their lives.

Families and communities have a great influence on a child's ability to be resilient. Children who demon-

strate resilience come from families and communities that provide caring and support, hold high expectations, and encourage children's participation (Bernard 1991). When adults provide responsive care to infants, toddlers, and preschoolers, children learn to trust others. When children are held to high expectations by their parents or other caregivers, children begin to believe in themselves and realize that they are capable. When adults encour-

Resources on Resilience

The following resources provide additional guidance on promoting resilience in young children.

General information

American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) Healthy Living includes information for early childhood educators and families on children's development, safety and prevention issues, resilience in children, and other topics. www.healthychildren.org/English/healthy-living/emotional-wellness/Pages/Building-Resilience-in-Children.aspx

Devereux Early Childhood Initiative (DECI) works to create partnerships among early childhood educators, mental health professionals, and families to promote young children's social and emotional development, foster resilience, and build the skills for school success. www.devereux.org/site/PageServer?pagename=deci_about

The Disaster Technical Assistance Center of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) provides information on individual, family, organizational, and community resilience, including factors that promote resilience. www.samhsa.gov/DTAC/dbhis/dbhis_stress/resilience.htm

Head Start Bulletin, Issue 80: Mental Health (2009) includes 13 articles devoted to child mental health; several articles focus on resilience, stress, trauma, and social-emotional development. www.headstartresourcecenter.org/assets/files/HS%20Bulletin%20-%20Mental%20Health%20508.pdf

ResilienceNet provides comprehensive information about human resilience. A panel of experts has reviewed the resilience resources cited in ResilienceNet to ensure the relevance and quality of the sites. <http://resilnet.uiuc.edu>

Search Institute is an independent, nonprofit, nonsectarian organization committed to helping create healthy communities for every young person. The institute has created a framework of developmental assets that are associated with resilience in children. There are 40 assets for children of various ages, which include personal qualities that help young children

thrive. Additional Institute resources include books and other materials that welcome and respect people of all races, ethnicities, cultures, genders, religions, economic backgrounds, sexual orientations, and abilities.

www.search-institute.org

Young Children, January 2005 issue (vol. 60, no. 1) includes two articles about resilience: "Children's Capacity to Develop Resiliency and How to Nurture It" and "Helping Children Develop Resiliency: Providing Supportive Relationships" and a bibliography of resources on resiliency.

Supporting Children Undergoing Stress

ZERO TO THREE's Coming Together Around Military Families (CTAMF) initiative works to increase awareness and collaboration throughout the military community so that parents and professionals can more effectively care for very young children and their families. This initiative works to strengthen the resilience of young children and families affected by deployment-related issues. Through the initiative, families are supported in helping young children cope with the separation that deployment brings. Teachers and family child care providers can assist as well. www.zerotothree.org/about-us/funded-projects/military-families

National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) is a unique collaboration of academic and community-based service centers whose mission is to raise the standard of care and increase access to services for traumatized children and their families across the United States. Combining knowledge of child development, expertise in the full range of child traumatic experiences, and attention to cultural perspectives, the NCTSN serves as a national resource for developing and disseminating evidence-based interventions, trauma-informed services, and public and professional education. www.nctsn.org

age children to participate in the family or classroom by giving them responsibilities and offering them choices about their environment, young children feel a sense of belonging and competence.

Grotberg notes that supporting infants' and toddlers' resilience development includes adults expressing their love for a child both verbally and physically, acknowledging the child's feelings, keeping the child safe while allowing her to explore the environment, modeling confidence and optimism, and encouraging the child do things on her own (2009). To support preschoolers, adults can tell a child that he is loved, acknowledge what he can do, encourage his independence, explain the rationale for rules he is told to follow, and show the child what empathy and caring look and sound like.

Conclusion

Children need high-quality care, opportunities for developing and maintaining relationships, adequate nutrition, and support from families, educators, and communities. When these and other protective factors are in place, children experience positive development in all domains and have the internal adaptive resources to cope with trauma and stress they encounter.

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