

Supporting resilience in ECE: Strategies for teachers

Zahra Herrmann | New Zealand Tertiary College

Abstract

Stress, adversity and challenge seem to be woven into the fabric of human life. Research suggests that children who have experienced great trauma can be supported to overcome difficulties and mature into highly functioning and productive members of society (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2015). In the face of adversity, some children will suffer the negative impact of exposure to adversity, while others will go onto greater things and do well despite such challenges (Gartland et al., 2019). This article explores definitions of resilience as used in early childhood education discourse and supports educators to understand and identify some of the factors that enhance or hinder children's ability to change, and to make positive adaptations to adversity. Practical strategies that early childhood teachers can utilise to support children and families to develop resilience are also suggested.

Introduction

Imagine a group of children living with risk factors which might undermine their wellbeing and development, such as poverty, parental illness, abuse or bullying (Cahill et al., 2014). Fast forward a few years; some of these children will grow up relatively unaffected by their experiences. While others might face psychological, physical or behavioural difficulties which continue to negatively impact on their quality of life and wellbeing (Center on the Developing Child, 2020). Resilience is one possible reason for such a wide variation in children's responses to adversities (Honor, 2017). Understanding how resilience is built will support teachers to develop strategies that can assist children and families to cope with adversity.

For teachers to support the development of resilience, a clear definition of resilience and an understanding of the protective and risk factors are necessary. This article will explore current literature on resilience with a focus on the kinds of protective measures that can be utilised to mitigate the levels of vulnerability that children and families may be exposed to. This will be followed by a general discussion of teaching strategies that can be used by the classroom teacher for the promotion of protective factors.

Defining resilience

One of the better descriptions of children's resilience has been offered by Masten (2001), who describes resilience as ordinary magic. This 'magic' is defined as children demonstrating qualities such as curiosity and the ability to relate to others, which are instrumental for children and whānau to survive and thrive throughout life's challenges and adversities.

Psychology and psychiatry are two of the early academic disciplines to study the concept of resilience and provide definitions. Studies found that while some children who experienced mental health issues emerged from challenging episodes as more robust and adapted to change, others did not (Giroux & Prior, 2012). In the field of psychology, resilient individuals are considered to be those with internal qualities and traits such as tolerance, patience, self-acceptance, self-efficacy, internal locus of control and optimism, that allow them to function and succeed in the face of adversity (Giroux & Prior, 2012; Gonzalez et al., 2012).

Another definition of resilience is put forward by Hornor (2017), who suggests that teachers must understand what is meant by stress to understand resilience. She defines stress as anything (physical, emotional or both) that threatens an individual's wellbeing. When a person experiences ongoing or severe stress (toxic stress), their health and wellbeing may be affected physically and emotionally. Individuals may perceive, interpret, respond to and cope with toxic stress in different ways (Hornor, 2017). In this view, resilience has been defined as an individual's ability and disposition to cope with stress and hardship, and their capacity to bound back to the previous state of normal functioning (Giroux & Prior, 2012). A different definition of resilience is offered by Biggs et al. (2015) who define it not just as the individual's ability to adapt to change, but to not be surprised by or be afraid of change.

Although generally applied to just adults and older children, another concept used to describe resilience is post-traumatic growth. Hardship, stress and trauma may lead to two different outcomes for individuals (Dekel et al., 2011). According to the authors, on the one hand, experiencing trauma, stress and hardship may lead to a variety of physical and mental health issues. On the other hand, some individuals who experience and survive stress, trauma and hardship may gain significant benefits and transform their physical and psychological abilities beyond their pre-trauma capabilities. Positive psychology theory (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2001) uses post-traumatic growth to describe this positive response.

Ungar (2008) introduces a new dimension to understanding resilience, by stating that resilience depends on the individual's ability to navigate a path towards the resources that will help them cope with the adversity in a way that is culturally meaningful. Therefore, it seems that whether individuals can bounce back or adapt to their experiences of adversity depends on their context, their capacity to find and make use of the resources within their environment, and the ability to access and utilise protective factors (Carver & Connor-Smith, 2010; Coyle, 2011). Ungar (2008) proposes that the concept of resilience can be studied in three different ways. First, by identifying the characteristics of children who, despite being born into or raised in environments where they have experienced hardship and trauma, grow up to be well-adjusted, successful and able to strive for excellence. Second, by considering the level of competency with which children respond to stress. Thirdly, resilience can be studied by examining how well children recover from trauma and stress, and function positively (Ungar, 2008). Ungar (2008) admits that there are overlaps between these three different ways of studying resilience, in so far that they all consider the interaction between the child and their environment.

What are the risk and protective factors?

Identifying risk and protective factors that contribute to children's wellbeing and resilience can support teachers to adopt effective prevention and intervention strategies to support children.

A protective factor is defined as any social, biological, psychological, family or community (which includes culture and peer group) characteristics that reduce the harmful effect of adversity and trauma for children's overall adaptation and wellbeing. Conversely, risk factors are characteristics that may increase the likelihood of a negative impact of adversity and trauma in children's adaptation and overall wellbeing (Pool et al., 2017; U.S. Government, 2021).

Risk factors and negative experiences include the child's exposure to emotional, physical and sexual abuse, lack of social skills, loss or grief, emotional and physical neglect, discrimination and racism, fear and uncertainty about the future, poor self-image, family dysfunctions such as a parent's mental or physical illness, drug or alcohol use, or family violence (Pool et al., 2017). These risk factors may result in diminished individual resources for the child to draw on in the face of adversity; therefore accentuating the child's vulnerability (Dickerson, 2020).

A sobering New Zealand Government report on vulnerable children states that one in approximately five children in New Zealand live in poverty (New Zealand Government, 2021). High risks identified by the authors include low-income families or beneficiaries, single-parent families and exposure to family violence, among others (New Zealand Government, 2012). In light of such statistics, teachers' and caregivers' role in promoting children's wellbeing and resilience becomes more critical.

Early childhood educators can take measures to prevent or intervene to promote protective factors, which will reduce children's vulnerabilities and create a buffer against harmful effects of adversity and trauma. Below, the article will look more closely at some of the protective factors and teaching strategies that can be utilised in an early childhood setting that may lead to more resilient children.

The development of resilience

According to Oliver et al. (2006), far from being an inborn trait, resilience develops over time due to an adaptive process that involves interaction between risk factors, protective factors and the child's prior experiences. This view is supported by Rutter (2012, as cited in Pangallo et al., 2014), who considers resilience to be the product of an individual's interaction with their environment. In this way, resilience can be considered as acting on a pivot, where negative early experiences such as insecure early attachment to a caregiver or poverty (or any one of the risk factors mentioned earlier), will tip the scale towards adverse outcomes. Positive experiences, on the other hand, such as a secure early attachment to a caregiver will tip the scale towards positive outcomes. Each individual's experiences will have tipped the balance in this scale differently. This variation in experience is why each person responds to stresses such as Covid-19 differently (Center on the Developing Child, 2020). This example informs teachers how they can help tip the balance towards positive outcomes by providing an environment that offers positive experiences and opportunities. This may include providing a safe, nurturing environment, creating responsive relationships with children, having supportive relationships with families and facilitating families' access to social support services (Center on the Developing Child, 2020). Over time, these small steps can make a big difference in building resilient children, families and communities (Center on the Developing Child, 2020).

Risk and protective factors

Furthering the discussion on what might support resilience, Luthar et al. (2000) focus on the risk factors and protective factors in a child's life. Some of these factors relate to children's personality, including having a positive outlook, being able to relate to others, being physically robust and being emotionally stable. Others relate to children's social and cultural context, such as membership in a supportive community, being in a loving relationship with family members, and experiencing discipline methods that support self-discipline and self-regulation, as well as cultural norms in child-rearing practices and place of children in the community. Strategies for teachers in providing such stability to foster positive identity are discussed later in this article. However, it is worth mentioning that neither simply the presence of risk, nor the protective factors create resilience in a child by themselves. Luthar et al. (2000) assert that it is in the process of interaction with the two types of factors (protective and risk factors) that the child gains the strengths and skills needed to cope with trauma, adversity and stress. Therefore, it is essential to shift the focus from protective factors to protective processes (during which skills for coping and solving problems can be learned) and consider how such factors may lead to the development of resilience. For example, Dekel et al. (2011) found that experiencing distress and trauma could lead to positive growth only when individuals could ruminate and reflect on their experience intellectually, after the experience. The process of reflecting and trying to make sense of the events happening around a person may lead to positive growth and resilience.

Teachers were responsive to such examples of reflective practice in primary schools and early childhood centres after the Christchurch earthquake in February 2011. According to the Education Review Office (ERO) (2013), children instinctively incorporated the risks they saw in their environment into their everyday play after the earthquake and practised earthquake drills. Their 'shaky times' narratives were captured by teachers and reflected in their learning stories.

Attachment and responsive relationships

People are social beings who thrive when they belong to a social group (Junger, 2016). Although the discussions around attachment are focused on parents, other caregivers and educators can help children develop secure attachments. According to Siegel and Bryson (2020), when parents and caregivers provide stable and predictable levels of care for their children, it supports children to develop:

A: A sense of security and a feeling that their needs will be met.

B: An understanding that they are seen and cared for.

C: An awareness that they will be soothed and supported when they are hurt or hurting.

D: Trust in their parents' or caregivers' ability to provide a safe home for them.

Parents, caregivers and teachers can help children develop secure attachment and resilience, which, as discussed earlier, are some of the predictors of positive social and emotional development and academic outcomes. A secure attachment helps children develop a sense of identity, enhances brain development, supports better emotional regulation, enhances the ability to develop positive relationships, supports the development of leadership qualities, and contributes to greater overall social competence in their lives. While a secure attachment to a parent is considered a protective factor, this relationship can be built with other adults such as members of extended family, caregivers, or other children who may provide the same protective measures (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007; Center for Developing Child, 2020; Hornor, 2017; Vance, 2018). Additionally, positive and supportive teacher-child relationships can also play a protective role in children's lives and support their emotional and intellectual engagement within the learning environment (Cahill et al., 2014; Roorda et al., 2011). Research shows that children appreciate friendly teachers and that teachers' positive interaction and engagement with children positively affect children's wellbeing and social development (Van Uden et al., 2014).

Supportive adults can contribute to the development of resilience by encouraging children, helping children gain skills necessary for adaptation, conveying unconditional love and acceptance, and developing children's strengths. Through these relationships, children develop problem-solving skills, decision-making and self-discipline (Brooks, 2015). It is worth repeating that adults' mere existence in their lives does not help children develop resilience, but the nature and quality of their interactions with children does (Cahill et al., 2014; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2015). While it may be easy to be a supportive adult for children who have good social skills, teachers will need to make extra effort to support children who lack social skills to develop their social competencies. Children can then develop close, trusting relationships with others, as these relationships are one of the essential protective factors for children (Brooks, 2015).

Vance (2018) explains that resilient children often perceive themselves as being loved by others, especially parents. Therefore, if teachers and parents express their love and affection for children, they will be helping children become

more resilient. This position is mirrored in Bronfenbrenner's and Morris' (2007) discussion of the kinds of proximal processes supported by adults through everyday interactions with young children, that facilitate the development of trust and wellbeing in the child, that allows teachers and adults to build on children's competencies and protective factors so that they do feel loved and valued by others.

Emotional intelligence

When facing stressful situations, emotionally intelligent children can calm themselves down. This ability helps them cope better in the face of stressful situations and helps them develop and maintain relationships (Vance, 2018). Teachers can support emotional intelligence development by implementing strategies to support self-regulation, critical thinking, self-management and social awareness skills (Cahill et al. 2014).

Some of the practical strategies teachers can use to promote children's social and emotional intelligence include establishing a trusting relationship, showing warmth and affection consistently, listening to children with full attention, accepting children's feelings, coaching and mentoring, planning activities to promote social skills, modelling appropriate behaviour and offering feedback and support to children (Ho & Funk, 2018).

Hope

Snyder (1994 as cited in McDermott et al., 1997) suggests hope is about children having the belief that they 'can do it' (called willpower) and know how to achieve their goal (called waypower). When experiencing adversity, children who have hope can imagine a better future and positive outcomes, which motivates them to act and take steps towards their envisioned future (Cahill et al., 2014).

Strategies that can be utilised to foster hope in children include exploring children's literature for narratives of overcoming challenges, supporting children to develop decision-making skills through games, dramatic play and role modelling, and encouraging positive self-talk (McDermott et al., 1997). The authors also highlight the need for teachers themselves to feel hopeful in order to create a high hope learning environment. This can be achieved by taking necessary measures to avoid burnout and by examining their own outlook and attitudes, in order to promote job satisfaction and a sense of being appreciated and valued.

Culture

To consider the whole child, it is crucial to consider resilience from a cultural and environmental perspective. Self-identity is defined as an individual being knowledgeable of their own biography and having a clear understanding of their own values and beliefs, which contributes to individuals' overall wellbeing (Rajan-Rankin, 2013). Different contexts and environmental factors within which emotions and identity are constructed will influence how a person copes with adversity. Ungar (2011) asserts that it is not only the processes that may lead to building resilience that are culturally specific, but also different protective factors may play a more or less active role for children from different cultural groups and environments. Cultural awareness is particularly relevant for New Zealand teachers, where there is a high degree of cultural diversity among the children attending early childhood centres. A clash between children's personal and cultural identity, and values, dominant cultural values and expectations can lead to emotional dilemmas and power imbalances for children and families, which may leave them vulnerable (Ungar, 2011). Social support from teachers who role model socially and culturally appropriate behaviour can mitigate the difficulties and stresses the children and families face. Teachers need to show respect for children and their family and cultural background. The early childhood centre may be the first contact of a child with other cultures. Being able to make friends and develop trusting relationships will contribute to children's developing resilience. One of the

main objectives of supporting children to develop their cultural identity and be proud of their heritage would be to help them understand their own history and identity, and understand others' culture and traditions (Ungar, 2011).

Support at family level

Ki te kotahi te kakaho ka whati ki te kapuia e kore e whati

When reeds stand alone, they are vulnerable, but bound together; they are unbreakable.

Considering the profoundly social nature of human beings, any discussion of supporting the development of resilience must naturally include an aspect of family. Teachers have a privileged position of being privy to families' lives, and therefore have a unique opportunity to support and strengthen them. In supporting families, teachers need to regard families as units with specific strengths, abilities and challenges. Partnership with families is essential for supporting children and their families as they work towards developing resilience. The relationship between the children's experiences of risk and protective factors suggests that the more protective factors are developed, the more likely it is that children and their families will be able to survive and thrive in the face of adversities (Foster et al., 2012). Research in the past 20 years has identified several characteristics demonstrated by resilient families (Knestrict & Kuchey, 2009). These are discussed below.

Routines

Resilient families have rules and routines which allow life at home to be predictable for children and provide families with opportunities to spend time, communicate and bond with each other (Knestrict & Kuchey, 2009). *Te Whāriki: He Whāriki Mātauranga mā ngā Mokopuna o Aotearoa: Early Childhood Curriculum (Te Whāriki)* (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2017) encourages teachers to provide predictable routines in early childhood centres. However, Smith (2020) notes that well-considered and minor changes in routine from time to time can also lead to building resilience as it helps children and adults learn to be adaptive to unexpected situations.

Cohesion

Another characteristic of resilient families is cohesion, which means that families develop strategies to work together to make sense of, and cope with adversity. Such families may value loyalty to family, shared vision, trust, faith, respect and caring for one another (Knestrict & Kuchey, 2009). Teachers can also promote a sense of cohesion in the centre when they pay attention to children's non-educational needs and work in partnership with families to increase parental engagement (Newman, 2002).

The power of showing up

Siegel and Bryson (2020), who have spent many years researching attachment science, claim that it is vital for parents to understand that they do not need to be perfect to be good parents. Instead, they need to be consistently present in their children's lives. The best thing parents can do for their children, according to Siegel and Bryson, is to show up. Showing up means that they will be predictably present in their children's lives. When parents are wholly (physically and emotionally) present in their children's lives, it empowers parents and promotes their resilience. Helping parents learn how they can show up in their children's lives and that the ultimate goal of parenting is to help their children develop a secure attachment, is one of the most valuable contributions teachers can make to support developing resilient families (Siegel & Bryson, 2020).

In New Zealand, *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017) encourages partnership between teachers and families in all aspects of their children's learning. Through its principles, strands, goals and learning outcomes, *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017) provides a framework for teachers that positions the child as being at the heart of the curriculum. It reinforces the importance of respectful, reciprocal and responsive relationships, leading to children and their families developing a sense of belonging, self-efficacy and wellbeing.

Another Ministry of Education publication, *He Māpuna te Tamaiti* (MoE, 2019), considers every early childhood centre as a whānau (family) where children are loved, protected and supported. *He Māpuna te Tamaiti* (MoE, 2019) outlines specific and hands-on strategies for educators to support children's social competencies and develop culturally responsive and caring relationships within the learning community to provide a positive and supportive environment for all.

Practical strategies for teachers and families

Early childhood educators and parents can use several practical strategies to support children in developing social competencies, secure attachments and resilience. Below is a list of some of these strategies:

- Establish a predictable and stable routine, and follow it as much as possible. Create appropriate boundaries (ERO, 2013).
- Accept a child's feelings (ERO, 2013).
- Emphasise family togetherness and, above all, allow children to get on with being children through play and laughter (ERO, 2013).
- Be sensitive and responsive to the child's needs. A sensitive caregiver attends to the child's signals, accurately interprets those signals, understands the child's perspective, and responds promptly and appropriately to the child's needs. For infants, teachers might respond promptly and reliably to crying (Bergin & Bergin, 2009).
- Make rules and expectations explicit to children.
- Offer children a predictable environment. In this regard, teachers should offer children a predictable environment, consistent and affective care, and overall, space where their needs, emotional states and rhythms are recognised, respected and attended in response to their differences.
- Offer individualised curriculums (plans) and be flexible regarding the demands made of children.
- Start at each child's level. Identify their interests (Cortazar & Herreros, 2010).
- Help children set goals, define success, and identify their successes (Cortazar & Herreros, 2010).
- Praise children when they succeed.
- Encourage age appropriate responsibility.
- Support children in self-care and life skills.
- Encourage the development of independent values.
- Encourage and support independent choices.

Conclusion

It seems that when facing adversity, the interaction between a child and others in their immediate environment will determine if the child develops resilience and will be able to cope successfully with life's vicissitudes. In this way, resilience is framed as a dynamic process indicating or implying an overcoming of or resistance to risks factors within one's environment (Bowes & Jaffee, 2013; Giroux & Prior, 2012; Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000).

Understanding the role of protective and risk factors motivates teachers to develop a combination of preventative and remedial strategies which will enable children to become more resilient. Teachers can develop strategies to facilitate the development of close relationships among children and teachers. They can also employ culturally sensitive teaching strategies, and responsive and reciprocal relationships to promote a sense of belonging, self-efficacy and self-regulation in children. They can provide a safe, predictable and cohesive learning environment where children's culture is respected and where children can maintain hope in a better future.

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