

## Family resiliency: A strengths-based, relational and community approach to early childhood education

Trish Thomas | New Zealand Tertiary College

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*Teaching in the early childhood education (ECE) sector compels practitioners to work closely and in collaboration with parents, families and whānau. Positive, caring and inclusive dispositions are necessary for teachers to genuinely welcome and embrace whānau into their centres on a daily basis and uphold professional responsibilities (Aspden et al., 2019; Education Council New Zealand, 2017). Teachers also have a unique and important opportunity through their work to contribute to strong and resilient families and communities. In 2021, we are living through a global pandemic that brings additional stress and uncertainty, and not surprisingly, the challenges being faced and the support required for many of our families and communities has intensified (Prime et al., 2020; Walsh, 2020). This article explores the concept of family resiliency, its relevance and applicability to education, and considers a range of family resilience perspectives that can guide teachers' work in promoting and protecting human rights and social justice (Education Council New Zealand, 2017). This article proposes that all early childhood services regardless of philosophy, model or structure, can firmly establish their focus to be both child and family/whānau-centred.*

### Resilience

In *Te Whāriki*, our early childhood curriculum, evidence of children's wellbeing is said to include the "capacity for self-regulation and resilience in the face of challenges" (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2017, p. 27). Anne Masten from the University of Minnesota who has been researching and writing on the topic of risk and resilience in children and families for over three decades, suggests that interest in human resilience is surging in an era of social and economic disparities, political unrest, environmental uncertainties and an increased awareness associated with adversities experienced in childhood (Masten, 2018; 2019). Research in resilience is relevant to all fields and disciplines concerned with human development, wellbeing and promoting strengths-based approaches. Not surprisingly, resilience as a "capacity to withstand and rebound from disruptive life challenges" (Walsh, 2016, p. 313) has also been gaining noteworthy attention in the education of young children. Learning more about resilience for children and the families teachers work with, therefore, is incredibly important.

The Latin origin for resilience is *resilire* - to recoil or rebound (Mirriam-Webster, 2021), hence bouncing back from adversities and positive adaptation from stressors. The notion of resilience in relation to children and family nevertheless, must be cautiously approached and critically considered (Ungar, 2012). An expectation or example of a person's resilience might, for instance, imply that suffering or distress is a matter of personal or individual responsibility, or that being vulnerable is an indicator of fault or failure. Rather, Ungar (2012) advises viewing resilience as a relational process; an outcome of positive interpersonal relationships and community connectedness that is established in supportive environments. Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that social, economic and political impacts such as recession, unemployment and redundancy, currently being witnessed in significant numbers throughout the world, lie well beyond the responsibility of individuals and families (Ungar, 2012).

Consequently, amid global, social, environmental and political concerns, research-based literature on resilience in the adaptation and development of family systems is increasing (Geens & Vandenbroeck, 2013; Masten, 2018, 2019; Ungar, 2012; Walsh, 2012, 2016). Resilience science itself was established within the field of mental health post World War II and into the 1960s, where it was recognised that a number of people experiencing significant risk factors subsequently progressed well and in many cases, flourished (Masten & Monn, 2015). Masten (2018) positions family resilience within systems theory and defines resilience as “the capacity of a system to adapt successfully to significant challenges that threaten the function, viability or development of the system” (p. 16). Resilience therefore can be applied to a range of systems including individuals, families and communities; along with whole ecosystems and economies. Resilience of these smaller microsystems, for example a child and family, is dependent on the resilience of their wider exo and macro-interconnected systems. Furthermore, Masten (2019) emphasises that “human resilience is embedded in relationships and social support” (p. 101). Importantly, these relational and systems theories and perspectives closely align with the sociocultural, bioecological and kaupapa Māori theories and curriculum aspirations followed in *Te Whāriki* and across Aotearoa New Zealand’s educational and social service sectors (MoE, 2017; Kalil, 2003). They also align to the cultural competences for teachers espoused within *Tātaiako* (Education Council, 2011) and *Tapasā* (MoE, 2018), that prioritise whānau and local community relationships, and uphold equity at individual, institutional and sector levels.

### Family resilience in early childhood education

*Te Whāriki* and other contemporary early childhood perspectives view children as rich in potential, strong, powerful, competent, active and curious about the world (MoE, 2017; Thornton & Brunton, 2015). Sidestepping the deficit lens of what children cannot achieve; strengths-based perspectives are guided and inspired by children’s interests, strengths, and growing and holistic capabilities. This strengths perspective can also be applied to the context of families and communities where early childhood services are a space for social support and social cohesion (Duncan & Te One, 2012; Geens, 2015; Geens & Vandenbroeck, 2013). For teachers and teacher educators, this means engaging in professional learning and collaboration around human resilience, and learning more about the links between child and family resilience (Masten & Monn, 2015). It requires teachers to consciously foster authentic relationships, empathy and compassion in their teaching role, build awareness around their own identity, their sense of vulnerability, and how they co-construct and negotiate resilience in their own lives (Gomez & Lachuk, 2017; Ungar, 2012).

Family resiliency has been defined as “the capacity of the family, as a functional system, to withstand and rebound from stressful life challenges - emerging strengthened and more resourceful” (Walsh, 2016, p. 315). Froma Walsh (2016), another expert in this field, suggests that the principle of systems theory underpinning family resilience is when serious crises and life challenges impact on the whole family, and when important family processes support the necessary adaptation of individual family members, the relationships within and overall family functioning. Walsh (2016) continues that when called upon, proactive measures from within the family and its closest community connections work to counter highly stressful disruptions and conflicts, and positively contribute to adaptation, a greater sense of knowing, and resourcefulness in addressing and negotiating future transitions and social challenges. More than simply managing or coping with stress and uncertainties, it is critical to acknowledge that resilience creates the potential for relational positive growth and transformation over the lifespan, and across generations (Masten, 2018; Walsh, 2012; 2016).

Without a doubt, early childhood services in Aotearoa are an important space of social support and many early childhood services are working with families in exceptionally supportive ways (Duncan, 2012; Shuker & Cherrington, 2016). ECE centres offer a space of belonging, connectedness and social cohesion for the families and communities they serve (Duncan & Te One, 2012; Garrity & Canavan, 2017; Geens & Vandenbroeck, 2013). Duncan and Te One

(2012) argue that EC teachers, managers and services should reorient their focus and philosophies from child-centred and involving or partnering with parents, to one that encompasses and positions ECE services at the heart of the community; and whānau in the centrality of their work. Duncan and Te One (2012) assert:

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services can, and should, play pivotal roles in building democratic communities, family resilience and family wellness; in presenting possibilities for inclusion, while challenging heteronormativity, racism and language barriers; and in providing a range of integrated services that ensure that children and their family and whānau can access the education, health, and social services they need (pp.1-2).

As EC teachers, it is important that we recognise that families can experience a lack of control and levels of vulnerability when bringing their children to early childhood settings. Garrity and Canavan (2017) through their research into the parent-teacher relationship in Ireland, report that parent/teacher relationships can on the one hand involve only brief or surface-level contact, significant tensions and a power differential, or at the other end of the scale, ethical, inclusive and reciprocal relationships that actively foster trust, responsiveness and communities of care. Duncan and Te One (2012) refer to a shift away from traditional views of involving or partnering parents, where the relationship in many cases is directed by teachers (attending field trips, contributing to children’s assessments and fundraising) to ECE services being positioned “as the heart and hearth of the community” (p.1), a shift that emphasises reciprocity, thereby empowering and enriching families and the communities as a result. Michel Vandebroek (2017), whose research within diverse urban areas of Belgium, adds to these perspectives stating that there has been a historical distrust, singling out and patronising of parents within the ECE context “especially directed at parents who are in some way different, with a focus on ethnic minority parents and parents living in poverty” (p. 408). He goes on to say that having an equal power relationship or partnership with parents is an illusion that simply masks existing inequalities and suggests that many parents cannot or will not speak up for what they want or need from teachers due to discomfort, unfamiliarity within the setting, a lack of trust, isolation or language barriers. Vandebroek (2017) also challenges early childhood teachers and services to engage in and emphasise reciprocity, whilst acknowledging the unequal power relations that exist. Creating an inviting environment for families to enter and stay, teachers who are open and accepting of “the unexpected and the unconventional” and mutual adaptation, ensure the child and whole family are thoughtfully transitioned into a setting that prioritises “belonging, confidence and fairness” (pp. 412-413). To support families with both anticipated and unforeseen challenges, early childhood teaching teams require a strong presence, compassionate attitudes, preparedness and vision in working with, and alongside families to build system capacity through community connectedness and a family’s own unique, valued and recognised resources (Masten and Monn, 2015).

### **Community connectedness**

The early childhood education sector in Aotearoa New Zealand is diverse in terms of the range of philosophies that are provided and the diversity of families and teachers that are included (Shuker & Cherrington, 2016), and needless to say this diversity is to be respected and honoured in teachers’ work (Education Council, 2017; Ministry of Education, 2017). Families and their circumstances are complex, diverse and varied. Single-parent families, same-sex parent families, blended families and families who are new immigrants to Aotearoa New Zealand for example, may experience unique challenges in the early childhood education environment, necessitating unique forms of support (Duncan, 2012; Shuker & Cherrington, 2016; Waldegrave et al., 2016). Smith (2013) reminds us that the presence of others is essential to strengthening family resiliency, and given that early childhood care and education services are both meeting places and spaces for social support, an important contributor to family resilience is the support and

mutuality gained from other families too (Duncan & Te One, 2012; Hamer & Loveridge, 2020; Geens & Vandenbroeck, 2013). Garrity and Canavan (2017) acknowledge that families with young children are often quite mobile, relocating away from established support networks. Early childhood care and education services therefore frequently provide families with a sense of belonging and a place of support, often reciprocated by an appreciation and recognition to early childhood education teachers who work closely with their children.

Garrity and Canavan (2017) found that through the transition process, early childhood teachers came to know each family well and responded to their wider needs. Parents indicated that the early childhood care and education service was an important part of their family lives through the close bonds that they developed. These social encounters and events also provide an opportunity for learning about the local community; including a range of support networks from both teachers and family members themselves, and in doing so achieve a form of social anchoring (Garrity & Canavan, 2017). From a neural perspective, these supportive social environments are found to strengthen the capacity to cope with stress and counteract adversity as the “development of the resilient brain seems to be closely tied to the emergence of intact social networks, and to positive individual traits such as positive coping, self-esteem, and optimism” (Holz et al., 2020, p. 13). Early childhood teachers and services should have a good knowledge of their local communities and referral resources such as family counselling and family development programmes, and help families gain access to them (Duncan & Te One, 2012). It is also important not to assume that families are sufficiently informed about the support networks available or confident in approaching them (Walsh, 2012). It is therefore helpful for early childhood services to partner with local community-based services in an ongoing, integrated and trustworthy basis, so that their presence in centres is normalised, and to support and value teachers to work within their roles, responsibilities and limitations (Education Council, 2017; Masten & Monn, 2015; Cherrington & Dalli, 2017). These bonding and bridging opportunities help to establish relationships in a positive environment, which can lead to improved family wellbeing and building of social capital (Duncan & Te One, 2012; Theiss, 2018; Vandenbroeck, 2017). When ECE environments serve as authentic physical and social spaces for support and work to provide meaningful community connectedness and collaboration, there is an increased potential for families to navigate the resources they need and negotiate the support they require (Geens & Vandenbroeck, 2013; Theiss, 2018; Ungar, 2012). The following points as part of a systems and relational view of resilience can be applied to early childhood contexts here in Aotearoa New Zealand:

- Humanising and contextualising stressful situations as understandable; not deserving of shame, blame or judgement.
- Viewing early childhood centres as a safe haven for open sharing, trusting relationships and community connectedness.
- Acknowledging adversities and uncertainties whilst being encouraging, optimistic and fostering confidence and hope – envisioning and re-storying new or different possibilities and meanings.
- Affirming strengths and courage alongside vulnerabilities in support of healing and growth.
- Cultivating a collective culture that promotes reciprocity, mutual support, compassion, listening, empathy, positivity, love, appreciation, gratitude and at times humour - for all children, families and whānau.
- Drawing on family, community and spiritual resources within the extended family/whānau, local community, in nature, through cultural and faith-based connections, and as part of centre and family routines and rituals (Theiss, 2018; Vandenbroeck, 2017; Walsh, 2012; 2016).

As acknowledged at the beginning of this article, living with the Covid-19 global pandemic has brought more stress and uncertainty for a large number of children and families across the world. Here in Aotearoa New Zealand our impact thus far, to some degree has been minimised due to our island location and proactive measures by not only

our government, but by the collective efforts of communities. Walsh (2020) has outlined major impacts from her experiences in the United States as a cascade of disruptions, isolating constraints, financial insecurities and loss of normalcy, hopes and dreams. She applies resilience perspectives and suggests that shared values and beliefs within families support them in times of crisis to search for ways to make meaning from their difficult experiences and regain a positive outlook, to rise above the hardships. These deeper values and spiritual beliefs have the potential to create new priorities and purposes, and enrich family bonds. She maintains that by supporting each other and facing our vulnerabilities, we are better placed to overcome the challenges we encounter (Walsh, 2020).

### Concluding thoughts

Hamer and Loveridge (2020) point out that how we conceptualise community is directly related to how we view the role and purpose of early childhood education and the relationships in and outside of each setting. All educational settings, and especially early childhood centres, are spaces where families regularly meet together and have the potential to establish a sense of community membership and locally placed connectedness, alongside opportunities to support and learn from each other (Duncan & Te One, 2012; Geens & Vandebroek, 2013; Vandebroek, 2017). It is important to acknowledge that there are too many children and families in Aotearoa living in poverty, and educational and health disparities continue to hit Māori and Pacific children and families the hardest (UNICEF, 2020; Duncanson et al., 2020). These inequities need to be tackled both at a policy and family and community level, and some EC services may require a shift to the possibilities of resilience achieved through community connectedness. It is the intent of this article to challenge teachers and leaders of early childhood care and education services to reflect on their collective commitment, individual and wider social relationships, and the daily practices they have with families. Critiquing any power imbalance or privilege, equity questions and re-affirming their commitment to communities of care through a climate of trust. Early childhood policies and curriculum aspirations that empower and advocate for children, families and whānau require critically reflective, inclusive, ethical and culturally responsive teachers that can envision resilience and leverage opportunities for growth. In the challenging times we encounter today and in our uncertain time ahead, early childhood and community social services must be willing to examine the support they provide to families, engage in ongoing professional dialogue and exchanges, collaborate, cooperate and integrate with each other, and prioritise family resilience as a relational opportunity and priority within their local community context. To enact a family resilience approach requires practitioners to be committed to all families as a central focus of their work (Duncan & Te One, 2012).

Both Te One and Duncan (2012) and Geens and Vandebroek (2013) assert more recognition is required to the enormous potential of early childhood services as spaces for enhancing wellbeing of families, whānau and communities. In these globally trying times, early childhood centres as meeting spaces can back strong and resilient families and whānau, and together provide the resources for children to thrive (Duncan, 2012; Walsh, 2012). It is also the intention of this article that all services inclusive of their philosophy, model or structure should be recognised more significantly for the work they do in their communities. Government, the private sector, professional development and teacher education providers, need to amplify their recognition and boost their resources to invest into the significant role early childhood teachers commit to and shoulder in building family resilience and strong-connected-communities. In light of significant current global concerns alongside advances in technology, it is vital to push forward with integrated professional learning communities that bring valued expertise together, to collaborate on best approaches in building and supporting resilient children and families within each sociocultural context. Early childhood services are in a unique position to significantly contribute to this important work.

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