

## Building resilience: A multifaceted set of skills and attitudes

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### Abstract

In today's modern, fast-paced and often uncertain world, people have access to vast amounts of instant information from a variety of sources, such as the internet and social media, which give exposure to a wide range of values and influences. People of all ages are barraged with disturbing images of catastrophic natural disasters, global warming and now the impact of the deadly coronavirus. To help cope with these sometimes overwhelming messages of loss and disaster, it is important to have resilience. Without resilience, such traumatic episodes can engulf people and disrupt their emotional and mental balance (World Health Organisation, 2020). Though the skills for building resilience can be learnt at any age, they are best developed in early childhood (Harris, 2016). This article will look at key aspects of resilience, how it develops and how kaiako (teachers) can foster resilience in early childhood education (ECE) settings.

### Introduction

Resilience is an umbrella term for a set of skills and attitudes which include adaptability, confidence, perseverance, problem-solving, empathy, relationship skills and having a positive attitude (Petty, 2014). Resilience helps people cope with the kinds of adversities, traumas and challenges that seem intrinsic to the human condition (Harris, 2016). Without resilience, emotional and mental health are affected (Petty, 2014). Young children may experience a range of direct challenges in their lives, such as enrolling in an early childhood centre or moving house. They may also experience challenges further removed from their immediate environment, such as natural disasters, shifts in government policies or changes to their lifestyle due to the Covid-19 pandemic. While children can be very flexible and many children can often happily and naturally adapt to their environment, this is not to be presumed for all children (Linke, 2010).

### Why is resilience important and what does resiliency look like in children?

Resilience enables people to protect themselves and cope with change in order to maintain emotional balance. This prevents negative effects such as stress, and impacts on the way a child acts, thinks and feels. The effects of severe stress can become apparent later in life, resulting in feelings of insecurity, anxiety and depression. Some of the effects of severe stress can be irreversible and can be so overwhelming that it can change the hardwiring of a child's brain (Sciaraffa et al., 2018). Children who have resilient skills are seen as confident and adaptable: they feel a sense of responsibility, thrive on setting themselves goals, and learn from mistakes and experiences (Ginsburg, 2015, as cited in Harris, 2016). Resilient children have the attitude that challenges can be overcome rather than accepting defeat, blaming others, harbouring resentment or feeling sorry for oneself (Collet, 2017; Harris, 2016). Resilient children have the confidence to ask for help when it is needed, rather than leaving it until they are overwhelmed (Harris, 2016; Petty, 2014). The skills and dispositions that are included in building resilience are relationships, trust, attachment, executive function, self-regulation and self-efficacy. These skills are not necessarily characteristics people are born with, but rather a set of "behaviours, thoughts and actions that can be learned and developed" (Collet, 2017, p. 24). Therefore, teachers play a crucial part in fostering these skills and positive learning dispositions (Bredenkamp, 2018).

## Relationships and trust

Relationships and trust are central concepts within *Te Whāriki: He Whāriki Mātauranga mō ngā Mokopuna o Aotearoa: Early Childhood Curriculum (Te Whāriki)* (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2017). O'Connor (2017) details that positive, empathetic responses and empowering experiences evoke trust and build positive self-image, contributing to the development of resilience. In building trust, it is important for rules, boundaries, expectations and routines to be consistent. This gives the child a sense of logical predictability, and therefore control over themselves and their situation (Collet, 2017). When children have a sense of control, they can gain the confidence and trust to persevere through adversity, and therefore act, make decisions and problem-solve independently.

## Attachment

Positive attachment is a main component in the development of resilience; especially emotional resilience (Bredekamp, 2018; MoE, 2019; O'Connor, 2017). It is imperative for kaiako to thoroughly understand the importance of attachment, ways to foster the development of positive attachment and the consequences this has for the child's emotional security (O'Connor, 2017). Primary caregiving and consistent teaching practice are good ways of supporting a child's sense of security, thus fostering a trusting relationship (O'Connor, 2017; Sciaraffa et al., 2018). John Bowlby's theory on attachment explains that attachment for the child is not only instinctive in searching for protection, safety and security (O'Connor, 2017) but also in eliciting sensory stimulus such as touch and validating responses (Cekaite & Bergnehr, 2018). When children are consistently and reliably soothed when upset, touch helps the body to relax and calm down (Cekaite & Bergnehr, 2018). This supports the child to develop trust that they can overcome the challenge, fostering emotional regulation and resilience (O'Connor, 2017).

Two important dispositions kaiako need in fostering attachment are consistent emotional availability and responsiveness, which is about being 'in the moment', compassion and intent (Bowlby, 1973; Ritchie & Howes, 2003, as cited in Cooper et al., 2017). Because the teaching role can be demanding, emotionally and physically, it is important for kaiako to develop stress relieving techniques as meditation and relaxation to ensure they are able to manage their own responses to children's behaviours and situations effectively. This supports attachment needs in responsive, positive and compassionate ways (Cooper et al., 2017).

## Executive function

Bredekamp (2018) describes executive function as the epicentre of cognitive processes; it functions to manage working memory (where information is stored temporarily when doing a task and sorting information during problem-solving), follow directions, being able to be flexible, thinking ahead and control of emotions (self-regulation). Higher-order executive functions "control cognitive functions including problem-solving and reasoning" (Bredekamp, 2018, p. 41). Executive function skills can be developed and fostered through reciprocal relationships, routines, consistency and promoting and modelling positive social skills. In an early childhood setting this could be achieved through creating a learning environment based on the prior knowledge of the child, enabling them to construct their own learning.

## Self-regulation

Self-regulation, supported by executive function, is concerned with regulating and managing behaviours, emotions and reactions that foster the child's ability to respond in healthy and appropriate ways, or even delay reactions when and where needed (Bredekamp, 2018). Children with well-developed self-regulation skills are able to cope with negative emotions, such as frustration, in more positive ways (Burcak et al., 2018). Kaiako can support the

development of emotional regulation through promoting reciprocal relationships, compassion and through applying a soothing touch (MoE, 2019).

### **Self-efficacy**

Another main concept supporting the development of resilience is self-efficacy. According to Bandura (as cited in Bredekamp, 2018), self-efficacy is the self-belief in one's own capacity or capability to do something. Self-efficacy fosters the ability to be flexible, adaptive and to regulate or sooth oneself, thus, supporting the skills in emotional regulation (Bredekamp, 2018). Kaiako can foster self-efficacy in the child through praise. However, kaiako need to be mindful of the ways in which they praise a child as it can have an impact on the development of resiliency. When praising a child, it is important for kaiako to praise by recognising the hard work, the effort and even the dispositions demonstrated (for example: "I like your persistence") to support their intrinsic motivation and perseverance (Collet, 2017). This supports children to learn that success and progress takes effort, determination and perseverance, which in turn supports self-efficacy (Collet, 2017).

### **How to create an environment that supports resilience**

When children have a sense of belonging and are seen as being capable, competent and having agency, this constitutes an empowering environment in which trust and resilience are built. In a free play environment where children are trusted to choose their own play equipment, kaiako should support children who find this freedom challenging; ensuring the interactions between children are caring and affirming, and ensuring that any one child does not dominate others excessively. This balanced environment fosters skills within resiliency, such as creativeness, goal-setting, self-determination and self-efficacy. A play-based curriculum ultimately provides opportunities for children to take risks cognitively, emotionally and physically, thus enabling children to learn from their mistakes (Harris, 2016). This type of curriculum offers opportunities to develop empathy and compassion, patience, appreciation and acceptance for themselves and others (Lickey & Powers, 2011 as cited in Harris, 2016; Petty, 2014). A play-based curriculum also provides children with strategies to make informed choices about their decisions and behaviours (Linke, 2010).

### **Promoting risky play**

A common interest that naturally occurs in the preschool age is superhero play (Harris, 2016). Superhero play has been found to be particularly good for the development of resilience when the main protagonists show kindness, helpfulness and compassion to others and are in control of changing the situation from the 'baddies' (Bredekamp, 2018; Harris, 2016). This reflects the similarity in characteristics between resiliency and superheroes. Allowing risky play in an early childhood setting is beneficial because it is created in a safe way, allowing opportunities to take risks and make mistakes within a safe environment. Studies are also starting to show evidence of the benefits of nature play in building resiliency (Burcak et al., 2018). Burcak et al. (2018) discuss that nature play fosters fantastic opportunities to develop crucial skills in resiliency such as problem-solving, independence, agency and using initiative. These are aligned with dispositions and characteristics such as self-awareness and an enjoyment of challenges; all of which build resiliency.

### **Spiritual awareness and mindfulness**

Spiritual awareness is important in fostering resilience as it brings value and purpose to people's lives (Miller, 2015 as cited in Harris, 2016). Spirituality is a grounding and foundational factor in resiliency, which includes dispositions

and characteristics that constitute resiliency such as empathy, compassion, meaningfulness and kindness (Harris, 2016). The Wellbeing | Mana Atua strand in *Te Whāriki* includes spirituality – *wairuatanga* (MoE, 2017). Kaiako can promote individuality, inclusiveness and having an open mind in accepting others' views and ways, thus highlighting the importance of cultures being valued. Burcak et al. (2018) adds that cultural identity is grounding and empowering, and children need to have the opportunity to be immersed in an environment where home languages and cultures are valued.

Responsive environments and respectful teaching practices support children who have a sense of control over their own learning. Children feel heard, validated, appreciated and valued when they have kaiako who understand and know them, and support their desires, plans and goals (Linke, 2010). When children are responded to and their needs are met in a timely manner, they develop a sense of security. This security enables children to self-set goals, practise and develop leadership, and overall, develop responsibility and resilience (Linke, 2010).

### **Conclusion**

This article has identified that in today's uncertain times, there is a vast need for resilience. As the umbrella term 'resilience' is made up of a complex range of concepts that work together holistically and are developed, nurtured and fostered through a range of responsive learning experiences and interactions, kaiako need to have a good understanding of skills and strategies that foster the development of resilience. The many skills within resiliency will enable children to respond to change and challenges in proactive ways, while managing and maintaining a healthy sense of balance in their own lives.

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