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## Protective factors and resilience in adolescents: The mediating role of self-regulation

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### ABSTRACT

The main goal of this study was to explore the mediating role of self-regulation in the relationship between protective factors and resilience. The sample was composed of 393 adolescents who attended secondary education. Participants were assessed using the Healthy Kids Resilience Assessment to collect information about four protective factors—school, home, community and peer environment—and resilience. Two dimensions of self-regulation—goal setting and impulse control—were assessed using the Short Self-Regulation Questionnaire. The results indicated that home, community and peer environment predicted significantly the levels of resilience of the students. Home environment was the main resilience predictor. Goal setting and impulse control abilities were also predictors of resilience but no evidence was found for a mediating effect of the self-regulation dimensions on the relationship between protective factors and resilience. Results are discussed and implications for prevention from a developmental perspective are presented.

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### Factores de protección y resiliencia en adolescentes: la autorregulación como variable mediadora

### RESUMEN

El objetivo principal de este estudio fue explorar el papel mediador de la autorregulación en la relación entre los factores protectores y la resiliencia. La muestra se compone de 393 adolescentes de cursos de bachillerato. Los participantes fueron evaluados mediante el *Healthy Kids Resilience Assessment* para recoger información sobre cuatro factores protectores—entorno escolar, entorno familiar, entorno de la comunidad y entorno entre pares—y resiliencia. Dos dimensiones de la autorregulación—establecimiento de objetivos y control de los impulsos—se evaluaron utilizando el *Short Self-Regulation Questionnaire*. Los resultados indicaron que el ambiente familiar, de la comunidad y entre iguales predijo significativamente los niveles de resiliencia de los estudiantes. El entorno familiar fue el principal predictor de la resiliencia. El establecimiento de objetivos y la capacidad de control de impulsos también fueron predictores de la resiliencia, pero no se encontraron pruebas de un efecto mediador de las dimensiones de la autorregulación sobre la relación entre los factores de protección y resiliencia. Se discuten los resultados y se presentan implicaciones para la prevención desde una perspectiva del desarrollo.

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#### Palabras clave:

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Adaptation to adversity is a priority research topic due to its importance to mental health promotion and risk behaviour prevention in children and adolescents. The study of resilience, which can be broadly defined as the dynamic process through which positive outcomes are achieved in the context of adversity (Masten, 2001, 2014), can provide educators and governments with information about the resources that can be mobilised

to promote positive outcomes in adverse environments (UNICEF, 2013).

The effect of risk and protective factors on the resilience levels of the individuals has been widely studied. According to Rutter (1985), risk factors are all stressful life events, such as poverty, family breakdown, experience of some form of violence, emotional loss, disease, unemployment, wars, disasters, or other factors that theoretically increase the likelihood of the onset of a problem or maintain the problem. However, research has shown that mere exposure to risk factors, even in substantial number, does not necessarily translate into risk behaviours (Dillon et al., 2007), given that most people are able to deal with risk quite satisfactorily (Bonanno, Galea, Bucciarelli, & Vlahov, 2007). In fact, several studies actually tend to focus on the effects of the promotion of protective factors, shifting the attention from risks to actions and strategies that are effective in the promotion of positive psychological adjustment and development (Masten, 2001; Rutter, 1985, 2012; Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012). Protective factors are the individual characteristics or contextual/external conditions that work as dynamic mechanisms that help children and young people to resist or to balance the risks to which they are exposed to (Rutter, 1985, 2012). Personality traits, perseverance, determination, self-efficacy, creativity, coherence, and self-awareness are some internal attributes that are positively related to resilience (e.g., Affi & Macmillan, 2011; Smokowski, Reynolds, & Bezrucko, 1999; Waaktaar, Christie, Borge, & Turgersen, 2004). Family support, positive appraisals, and quality interaction with parents (Affi & Macmillan, 2011; Carbonell et al., 2002; Smokowski et al., 1999; Vanderbilt-Adriance & Shaw, 2008), good interpersonal relations (Carbonell et al., 2002; Sameroff & Rosenblum, 2006), teacher and school support (Brooks, 2006; Smokowski et al., 1999), as well as community relationships and resources (Davies, Thind, Chandler, & Tucker, 2011; Sameroff & Rosenblum, 2006) are some of the most studied external protective factors.

A personal competence that looks particularly relevant to the resilience levels of individuals is their self-regulation ability (Dishion & Connell, 2006; Gardner, Dishion, & Connell, 2008). In a recent review, Dillon et al. (2007) point out a number of factors at the personal level that are strongly correlated with the development of resilience. These factors include the ability to: (a) operate a scheme to acknowledge, interpret, and predict potentially dangerous situations that occur in the social context; (b) develop a set of goals and regulate his/her behaviour in order to pursue these goals over time and in different contexts; and (c) promote positive beliefs about his/her self-regulatory capacity, to put his/her decisions into practice by using adequate skills and solve functional problems. Most of these abilities are essentially self-regulation abilities, a process in which individuals take an active role shaping their own destiny even in contexts characterized by a high psychosocial risk (Dishion & Connell, 2006; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998). Despite this evidence, few studies explore the mediating role of self-regulation in the relationship between protective factors and resilience. Therefore, this study aims to explore the existence of this mediating effect in a sample of adolescents, in order to contribute to a broader perspective about the relationship between protective factors and resilience, considering family-, peer-, school-, and community-related factors.

### From Protective Factors to the Mediating Role of Self-regulation in Resilience

Although different definitions of self-regulation exist in the literature (for a review, see Martin & McLellan, 2008), most of them seem to share the idea that this is an ability that involves the capacity to maintain effort and orientation toward a desired

objective, while controlling the immediate impulses that arise (Martin & McLellan, 2008; Neal & Carey, 2005). Successful adaptation to challenges appears then to depend on how individuals manage their emotions, think constructively, regulate and direct their behaviour, control automatic impulses, and act on the environment to change or decrease the sources of stress (Compas, Connor-Smith, Saltzman, Harding Thomsen, & Wadsworth, 2001). Therefore, the study of self-regulation can be particularly relevant to understanding the resilience levels of the individuals, if we take into account the necessity of managing these personal challenges to construct an adjusted life pathway (Buckner, Mezzacappa, & Beardslee, 2009; Gestsdottir & Lerner, 2008; Lengua, 2002). Therefore, self-regulation exerts an effect in the adaptation to adversity, given that it is a process in which individuals take an active role in the activation, monitoring, inhibition, and/or adaptation of their behaviour, emotions, and cognitive strategies to achieve the desired goals (Gestsdottir & Lerner, 2008; Moilanen, 2007).

Some individual and environmental factors, either related with family, peers, or community, are also positively related to self-regulation. Despite the consensus about self-regulation as a stable characteristic throughout age (Buckner et al., 2009; Shoda, Mischel, & Peake, 1990), research has shown that it tends to be higher in girls (Buckner et al., 2009; García del Castillo & Dias, 2009; McCabe & Brooks-Gunn, 2007).

Family environment–family structural conditions, but especially affect, parental responsiveness, and control strategies and the exposure to adjusted models–has also an important impact on children's and adolescents' self-regulation skills (Choe, Olson, & Sameroff, 2013; Colman, Hardy, Albert, Raffaelli, & Crockett, 2006; Karreman, van Tuijl, van Aken, & Dekovic, 2006; Moilanen, Shaw, & Fitzpatrick, 2010). At social level, some studies indicate a negative correlation between self-regulation and peer rejection, problematic or antisocial behaviours with peers (Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004; Trentacosta & Shaw, 2009), but a positive correlation with the involvement and inclusion in the community (Stenseng, Belsky, Skalicka, & Wichstrøm, 2014; Stillmand & Baumeister, 2013). At school level, self-regulation has been positively related to school achievement (Boekaerts, 2005; Duckworth & Seligman, 2005; McClellan & Cameron, 2011; Zimmerman, 1990) and higher levels of self-regulation have been found in students from regular or non-vocational courses when compared to students who attend vocational courses (Jonker, Elferink-Gemser, Toering, Lyons, & Visscher, 2010; Koning & Boekaerts, 2005).

To summarise, individual and environmental factors, related either with school, home, community, or the group of peers, contribute to the development both of self-regulation and resilience in adolescents. Self-regulation also plays a central role in the development of resilience, given its importance in the mobilisation of resources in adverse environments, by setting goals and controlling impulses. In order to contribute to a broader understanding of the dynamics between the protective factors and resilience in adolescence, the goals of this study were twofold:

1. To test the existence of age, gender, and course-related differences in protective factors (school, family, community, and peers environment), self-regulation, and resilience.
2. To investigate if self-regulation mediates the relationship between protective factors (school, family, community, and peer environment) and resilience.

### Method

#### Participants

The initial sample included 404 students, but 11 participants did not complete at least one measure and were therefore discarded

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