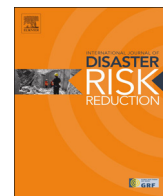




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Building children and young people's resilience: Lessons from psychology



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ABSTRACT

Research in psychology offers insights into the ways resilient people respond to stressful situations, from disasters to day-to-day setbacks. In this article, I review the literature on the psychology of individuals' resilience and suggest that the behaviour and thinking of those who cope, and even thrive, through disasters and challenges provide a useful focus for educators. The literature suggests that concepts such as locus of control, explanatory style, mindset and hardiness provide effective ways to reduce the risk of psychological harm from disasters. The concepts may hold an additional appeal for educators because the evidence suggests that they can use them to prepare children and young people for the certainty of stresses in the everyday world, not just the more remote possibility of disaster. I argue that teachers, parents and youth leaders who are explicit about the concepts and language are more likely to be successful in enhancing the resilience of children and young people.

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1. Introduction

Psychology has a contribution to make to our understanding of the psychosocial well-being of children and young people. Research over the last few decades provides some useful insights into the personal, adaptive abilities humans can draw on as individuals. Many of those insights imply strategies and values that teachers, parents and youth leaders could use in focused and explicit ways to enhance the resilience of children in situations ranging from everyday setbacks to national disasters.

In passing, I must also acknowledge the significance of other contributors to resilience in the context of disasters – particularly the role of relationships and social and political support in recovery from disasters. The contributions families, communities, schools and governments make to recovery are vital [13,51,63].

The article sets out to show that the research in psychology offers some opportunities to strengthen individuals' adaptive abilities. First, it explores the nature of resilience. It then suggests that 'striving for a sense of control' provides a useful theme to link the components of resilience. Third, the article outlines concepts from the research that suggest strategies to enhance children and young people's resilience. I assert, with some support from research, that an explicit, focused approach using evidence-based concepts will be more effective than treating resilience as a

by-product of education and parenting.

All references to everyday resilience and classroom settings, rather than disasters directly, rest on two justifications developed later in the article. The first is evidence that successful resilience in the aftermath of disasters has the same components as everyday resilience. Everyday challenges and setbacks in school and at home may therefore provide opportunities to enhance and rehearse resilient responses relevant to both contexts. The second justification for everyday contexts is based on evidence that resilience improves learning, making education in resilience more attractive to those whose immediate focus is academic achievement. If such training is generally attractive, it becomes a means of building the resilience of nations of children and young people, even when the possibility of disaster seems remote.

This section *Concepts to develop resilience* includes a collection of strategies for developing individual resilience in children and young people. With one exception, no single concept stands out in the literature as providing an obvious and uncontested strategy for teachers and parents to adopt. Each concept and the strategy it implies makes a contribution. For educators, a solution is to select concepts that they can most easily integrate into classroom and family activities and conversations, and their expectations of children.

The exception in the collection of offerings is locus of control. As will be revealed, an internal locus of control (the belief that we can control events in our lives) can be seen as a foundation of resilience for both everyday life and disasters.

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2. The nature of resilience

The general understanding that psychological resilience is the ability to recover from setbacks provides a rough guide to its meaning, but researchers prefer to be more precise.

Bonanno [10] has defined resilience as:

'the ability of adults in otherwise normal circumstances who are exposed to an isolated and potentially highly disruptive event such as the death of a close relation or a violent or life-threatening situation to maintain relatively stable, healthy levels of psychological and physical functioning... as well is the capacity for generative experiences in positive emotions' (P. 20–21).

Bonanno [14] notes that resilience does not normally mean *a response to stressful situations*. He reports that even resilient individuals tend to experience at least some transient distress during or in the immediate aftermath of a potentially traumatic event. Butler et al. [19] found that, initially, even resilient individuals can deny an event is happening or avoid facing the reality of their situation.

Psychologists refer to *coping behaviours* that help to explain resilience. The two most-often cited classifications of coping behaviour are *problem vs emotion-focused* coping and *approach vs avoidant* [29]. A problem-focused strategy would be to develop a plan to resolve a crisis. An emotion-focused approach would be to find a distraction or seek emotional support from a friend.

Emotion-focused coping also has a negative dimension. A response is both emotion-focused and avoidant if the individual denies there is a problem or adopts self-defeating behaviours such as aggression or withdrawal, or sinks into a downward spiral of rumination. Researchers (for example [9,40]) have found a significant association between avoidant coping and depressive symptoms, even after 10 years.

3. Potential for a focused approach

Until this century, resilience was, at best, usually a by-product of education and parenting, rather than a focus. As an example of the secondary role of resilience, the current New Zealand curriculum [64] lists a range of values to be 'encouraged, modelled, and explored'. The listed values include diversity, equity, community and participation. Of the values chosen as examples, only 'persevering in the face of difficulties' relates to resilience and it appears only as an explanation of *excellence*.

Even where resilience has been a by-product of education, teachers, parents and youth leaders have encouraged the resilient thinking and behaviours that appear in the literature. When, for instance, they specifically praised effort, persistence and strategies, they encouraged a *growth mindset* – a significant contributor to resilience [97]. When they allowed children to make decisions for themselves, they encouraged an internal locus of control – a foundation of resilience [[37]]. Locus of control is consistent with the OECD's Competency Category Three *acting autonomously* (OECD) [67]. The OECD states that acting autonomously '... requires individuals to be empowered to manage their lives in meaningful and responsible ways by exercising control over their living and working conditions'.

Research, particularly in the last 20 years, has produced a range of concepts, language and strategies that allow parents, teachers and youth leaders to take a more focused approach to developing the resilience of children and young people (for example, [52,53,54,56],[79]). Many of the findings from the research provide, what appear to be similar observations but, at this stage, it could not be said that the researchers are simply providing different labels for the same thinking and behaviour. (Note for example, the later discussion on the wide range of correlations

between two views of optimism.)

4. Is everyday resilience the same as resilience for disasters?

The literature records many protective factors for everyday stresses. It also shows some to be effective in the aftermath of disasters as diverse as an earthquake in Turkey [94], a hurricane in the United States [1] and rocket attacks in Israel [95,96]. It would be an extrapolation to predict that all the protective factors the leading researchers have uncovered so far would produce similar outcomes in both everyday life and the aftermath of traumatic events. Even so, the research and face validity suggest it is a reasonable working hypothesis.

The implications of similar interventions before and after disasters are significant. If the interventions are effective in both contexts, educators and parents can develop young people's resilience for everyday life and know that they are providing at least some preparation for the aftermath of disaster.

DiCorcia and Tronick [23] put forward, 'The Everyday Stress Resilience Hypothesis' – that successful coping in the short-term develops both children's and adults' capacity to cope with greater challenges. DiCorcia and Tronick support the notion of preparing for disasters through everyday rehearsals with an analogy. They argue that an athlete preparing for a marathon would not run full marathons initially, but gradually increase the distance in training over time.

A training programme involving 1.1 million people in the United States Army provides an illustration of the current thinking on fostering resilience for everyday events and potentially traumatic experiences. The programme is called *Comprehensive Soldier Fitness* (Cornum et al., 2009, [81,82],) and reflects the army's intention to strengthen the resilience of all its active-duty soldiers as they prepare for active service. The conditions in war zones have some similarities to the conditions in and after disasters. Cornum et al. (P.4) describe the conditions of active service as:

"characterised by demanding missions, extreme climates, sleep deprivation, cultural dissonance, physical fatigue, prolonged separation from family, and the ever-present threat of serious bodily injury or death".

The Comprehensive Soldier Fitness programme draws heavily on positive psychology and is not part of the military medical department [22]. The skills the researchers have chosen are the skills of resilience for life, not a special set for potentially traumatic events [22,66].

5. A unifying theme of resilience

Striving for a sense of control, provides a unifying theme. A sense of control can be defined as the subjective belief that we have at least some degree of control over events, or our attitude to them. Concepts such as, explanatory style and mindset have involved some form of control through metacognition, reframing and behavioural changes. Striving for a sense of control is at least implicit in most of the research on resilience, motivation and persistence to date (for example, [84,65], Kobassa, Maddi Khan [49]). Spector [89] found that perceived control was associated with significant benefits, including reduced stress. The striving may be spontaneous or encouraged by parents, teachers and leaders of young people through informal or formal learning.

Human behaviour after disasters also supports striving for a sense of control as a central theme of resilience. An absence of such striving would suggest that survivors of a tsunami in Japan, or an earthquake in New Zealand, would passively accept their diminished circumstances. They would see no point in persevering

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