



Reprint of “Shared adversities of children and comic superheroes as resources for promoting resilience”



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Comic superheroes are an untapped resource for empowering vulnerable children☆

An important goal of many health professionals is the betterment of lives within the community. One group given particular attention by health

professionals is children, particularly those who face adversities (i.e., young people living in poverty; those suffering deprivation, neglect, and/or abuse; and orphans, regardless

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of their socioeconomic bracket). One reason for the focus on vulnerable children is that many behaviors and routines established in childhood are sustained into and through adulthood. This tendency holds true for adaptive and maladaptive behaviors, routines, and beliefs.

Among children, those who are vulnerable—including those subject to parental abandonment, neglect, abuse, and other deprivations—have higher rates of maladaptive behavior than their non-vulnerable peers. Indeed, studies find higher rates of risk behaviors (e.g., substance abuse, unprotected sex, truancy, self-mutilation, criminal behavior) among this group. For example, in studies comparing adolescents in foster care to those not in foster care, Donald Thompson and Wendy Auslander found higher rates of unprotected sex, Bessel van der Kolk and colleagues found higher rates of self-mutilation, and Sara Carpenter and colleagues found first pregnancies occurred at a younger age and more sexual partners among the adolescents in foster care.

In addition to these risk behaviors, studies also find higher rates of psychological issues among vulnerable children. For example, in an examination of midwestern foster youth, Sunny Shin found higher rates of conduct disorder, depressive disorder, and anxiety among foster youth when referenced to the norm. In another study, Stine Lehmann and colleagues discovered that more than half the foster children in their sample satisfied criteria for one or more DSM disorders. In a study of adoptees, Margaret Keyes and colleagues noted suicide attempts at 4 times the rate of non-adoptees. Without proper intervention, these behaviors and issues can continue through adolescence and into adulthood.

Resilience

In the field of psychology, the concept of resilience was originally associated with the movement of positive psychology. According to Michael Rutter, whose name in many circles is synonymous with resilience, resilience is not the same as positive psychology. It also differs from competence, and it is not a theory per se. Rather, according to Rutter and other experts in the field (e.g., Norman Garmezy, Ann Masten, Michael Unger, Froma Walsh, and co-author Maria Yunes), resilience is a set of *life processes*. More specifically, resilience is a set of life processes that enable an individual or a group to overcome situations of suffering and adversity with personal or collective strengthening, empowerment, and transformation. These unexpectedly positive outcomes, in the face of extreme adversity, are referred to by Rutter as *steeling effects*, one of the defining characteristics of resilience research.

With regard to vulnerable children, situations of suffering and adversity may be manifold. They may include parental absence, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, physical abuse, scarcity of resources (poverty), and bullying. Within these contexts, resilience building may take the form of promoting positive relationships; interpersonal support; meaningful interactions; order, supervision, and discipline; and task completion. All of these factors are associated with the positive capacity to cope with stress and adversity.

It is important, however, to remember that although resilience was once considered a trait (i.e., the equivalent of *heartiness*), it is now considered a process, and one unique to different contexts and environments. Some scientists, such as Xiao Ying Zhang and colleagues, stress the importance of social capital within this

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