Resilience and Child Traumatic Stress

What is resilience?

Resilience is the ability of a child to recover and show early and effective adaptation following a potentially traumatic event.

What is a traumatic event?

Traumatic events, like sexual or physical abuse, witnessing domestic or community violence, or being in a natural disaster, often cause children to have strong, upsetting feelings and can potentially disturb daily life, development, and ability to function. The effect of a traumatic event depends in part on the severity of a child's experience. All children have some strengths to help them adjust and recover following a traumatic event.

At the same time, some children who experience a traumatic event may be significantly affected. This is not the fault of these children or a sign of weakness or failing. Instead, some traumatic events can overwhelm children's capacity to adapt to them, which affects their ability to recover. In these cases, a child may need additional family and system resources, services, and supports for resilience and recovery.

What does resilience look like in children?

Following a traumatic event a child's pathway to resilience could include these elements:

- Responding with minimal distress or effect on daily functioning.

- Exhibiting a temporary dip in ability to cope followed by an early and effective return to a child's usual level of functioning.

Some children may have problems functioning in certain areas (e.g., school performance), while at the same time showing resilience in other areas (e.g., peer relationships). Family and system resources, services, and supports can help improve functioning in areas where the child is struggling while also supporting and enhancing areas in which the child is doing well.
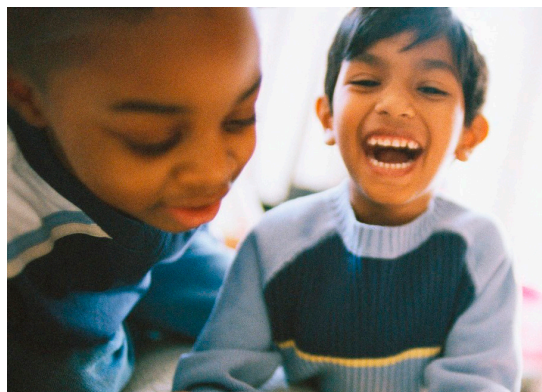
What factors might enhance resilience in children after traumatic events?

Children's resilience may be enhanced by these factors:

- Support from parents, friends, family, school, and community.

- Resources that help to buffer negative consequences on daily life.

- Feeling safe at home, school, and in the community.

- Having high self-esteem—an overall positive sense of self-worth.

- Possessing a sense of self-efficacy—a child's belief that he or she can be successful in different areas of life.

- Having a sense of meaning in one's life, which might include spiritual or cultural beliefs, connections with others, or goals and dreams.

- Possessing talents or skills in certain areas (e.g., the arts, athletics, academics).

- Possessing a variety of adaptive and flexible coping skills that he or she can use in different situations.

Challenging life circumstances or adversities, for example, living in poverty, racism, ongoing community violence, social isolation, or illness can undermine children's resilience.

How do the systems in which children live affect resilience?

Children are dependent on others for their survival, and family, peers, schools, neighborhoods, and communities can provide resources that promote resilience. The quality of the systems and supports in a child's life can greatly assist children's resilient recovery.

Feeling close to or having a sense of belonging with other family members, peers, and community members can help children cope with trauma. When children experience a traumatic event, they often look to family and friends to help make sense of their experience and deal with difficult emotions.

Resilience may be fostered in children who have these:

- A strong, positive relationship with a primary caregiver who acts to ensure safety and protection after a traumatic event.

- A circle of family members who are committed to each other, share time together, resolve problems and conflicts effectively and efficiently, celebrate successes, hold shared values and beliefs, practice meaningful rituals, and have predictable routines.

- A school that provides a positive social environment, works to foster and develop the child's cognitive skills, and promotes student safety and belonging through the support of school counselors, school social workers, school resource officers, teachers, and other school staff (e.g., bus drivers, cafeteria workers).

- A community that ensures access to quality essential services such as childcare, after-school programs, healthcare, and mental health services; has safe neighborhoods; provides green space, quality food sources, and healthy recreational activities; fosters a sense of community and connectedness; and has an equitable and diverse culture.

What are some initial steps to enhance recovery during treatment or services?

- Strength-based interventions that focus on helping youth and families recognize, understand, and value their own strengths in responding to a traumatic event.

- Strength-based assessments that include:

  - Assessing the resources and capacities of the child, caregiver, family, and community.

  - Determining how the provider can support and utilize these resources to improve child and family functioning in the treatment process.

Providers can work collaboratively with the child and family to develop a treatment or service plan that integrates individual, family, and communal strengths to address needs or symptoms, accomplish goals, reduce adversities, and foster growth and development.

For example, a provider could assist a child and family in creating a "strengths family tree." Family members take an inventory of the resources and strengths of the child, family, and community and record these strengths and resources on the outline of a tree. Providers can use the "strengths family tree" as a symbol to integrate personal and communal strengths and resources and discuss ways the child and family can continue to grow in order to accomplish their treatment goals.

An overall strengths-based model includes these goals:

- Establishing an alliance

- Identifying strengths as well as problems

- Instilling hope and encouragement

- Finding practical solutions to presenting problems

- Building strengths and competence

- Fostering empowerment and change

Children *can* overcome the experience of trauma, but this often requires hard work. It is important for providers and families to give children credit for their courage and the hard work they can do to get better.

References and More Information

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