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Little Moments that Prepare Children for Big Moments

Fostering Attachment and Resilience

by Karen Cairone and Emma McAuley

Right this moment there is a four-year-old child sitting with his elbow propped on his knee, supporting his tiny chin, intently listening to a story about a character learning to express strong feelings in safe ways. The child appears as if he is enjoying the experience; he is engaged and ready to learn.

Imagining this child during this simple moment adds to our overarching vision of hope for every child across the globe. We want every child to have safety, learning, joy, and success in the little moments that will help prepare them for the big moments to come.

But a number of risk factors can interfere with these little moments of hope.

A child's location, ethnicity, socio-economic status, and gender help determine how much risk he is most likely facing (Eckenrode, Smith, McCarthy & Dineen, 2014; Khera, Jain, Lodha & Ramakrishnan, 2013; Martin & Citrin, 2014; Mbagaya, Oburu & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2013; Sedlak et al., 2010; UNICEF, 2015; WHO, 2016). Risks can be daily occurrences that wear down a family, such as regularly not being able to pay bills, having transportation

issues, living in a single parent home, experiencing inconsistent routines, or being in regular contact with a family member or members with a physical or mental health issue (Gilbert, Kemp, Thoburn, Sidebotham, Radford & Glaser, 2009; Martin & Citrin, 2014).

Coupled with these risks might be more major types of trauma such as witnessing or experiencing physical, sexual, or verbal abuse, as well as experiencing physical and emotional neglect. The United States Attorney General's office reports that two out of every three children in the United States were exposed to violence, crime, abuse, or psychological trauma during the study year (United States, 2012).

Other types of risk across the globe include living in a conflict or war zone, or grappling with severe hunger or rampant disease. A child is more vulnerable to violence if he has a disability, is part of an ethnic minority or other marginalized group in his country, is homeless or has no family, or is a refugee (United Nations, General Assembly [UN], 2006). Nevertheless, trauma exposure for children exists in every country, *regardless of culture,*

ethnic origin, class, or income level (UN, 2006). A recent study from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that globally, over half of all children are directly victimized by physical, sexual, and/or emotional violence (Hillis, Mercy, Amobi & Kress, 2016).



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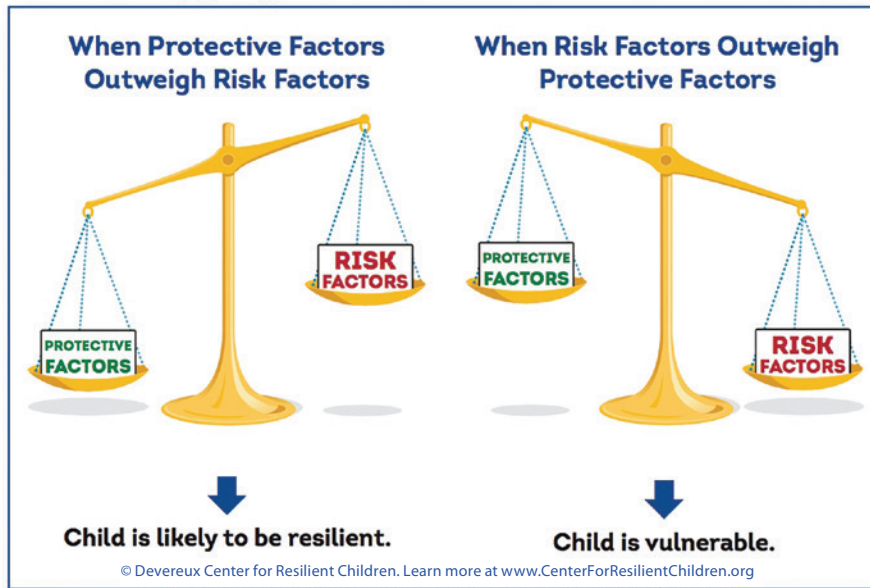
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Tipping the Scale Toward Resilience



What do the words ‘resilience’ and ‘trauma-informed practices’ mean to a child who is literally fighting for his life or living in fear? Many children who are living with chronic trauma will never have the opportunity to experience trauma-informed practices because their cases will likely never come to the attention of the official social welfare services in their countries (Gilbert et al., 2009a). Even in a high-resource country like the United Kingdom, it is estimated that as few as 1 in 30 children who were abused will have their cases investigated and as few as 1 in 250 will receive a child-protection plan (Gilbert, Spatz Widom, Brown, Fergusson, Webb & Janson, 2009b). In countries with few resources, these estimates are much lower (Columbia Group for Children in Adversity, 2011; Marcus, 2014).

It is widely accepted that children faced with a large amount of risk factors are vulnerable to having a more negative life outcome (Werner, 1995). But being vulnerable to a negative life outcome doesn’t mean you are predisposed. There is a huge ‘other side of the scale’ we need to consider. Yes, risk is harmful. Yes, risk can impact how our lives turn out. Yes, there are certain risk factors we cannot control.

But risk alone does not tell the story of a child’s future.

Outweighing Risk with Resilience

Every child, regardless of the minor or major risks surrounding her, has the potential to keep adding to and building the other side of the scale — her protective factors.

This doesn’t require a standardized curriculum or specific steps in a long process. Positive, stable, and safe relationships with adults help children form self-confidence, control aggressive impulses, develop a sense of self, and bolster their overall resilience (Finkelhor, Ormrod & Turner, 2007; Hines, 2014; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child [NSCDC], 2004; Schofield & Beek, 2005). A significant and stable attachment, therefore, can buffer the risk factors the child faces elsewhere in his life (Hines, 2014; Schofield & Beek, 2005).

Studies across the globe agree that a high-quality attachment with either a parent or other adult in a child’s life can dramatically improve her developmental outcomes later, including the ability to

form genuine social bonds with peers, succeed academically, and her ability to manage emotions and use appropriate behavior (NSCDC, 2004; Schofield & Beek, 2005; Timmer & Urquiza, 2013).

How do we help children build these stable, secure attachments? Parents, caregivers, and teachers across the globe know that it is truly the little moments in which children gradually learn how to build relationships, get along with others, and bounce back when faced with risk.

Think back to the child at circle time... he may have severe risk outside the classroom walls in the big moments in his life, but he also has a caring adult working in the little moments to foster attachment and help him learn how to bounce back.

Below are simple, effective strategies caring adults can use to help children foster strong and healthy attachments with others. Whether a child lives in a poor, rural area in the United States, war-torn Afghanistan, or bustling downtown Tokyo, having attachment as a protective factor will help buffer risks and lead the child toward resilience and more successful outcomes.

Building Resilience in the Little Moments

Connect

The Devereux Center for Resilient Children offers hundreds of resilience-building tips in the resource, *Promoting Resilience in Preschoolers* (Cairone & Mackrain, 2012). Central to their work on resilience are protective factors — some that span the ages from four weeks up to adulthood, like that of Attachment/Relationships. When we connect with others, we are more likely to have positive interactions, which lead to more positive moments in life. Some of the tips from Cairone and Mackrain on connecting include:

- Use open-ended questions with children (ask Why? or How? instead of What? When? Where? or Who?)
- Get on children's level when you speak, teach, and play, giving the message of, "I'm right here for you."
- Treat children as individuals, not always one of the group; personalize the program and classroom for each child, and regularly make adjustments that you know will help your children thrive. Make learning not too easy and not too hard to prevent boredom and acting out.

Care

The author of *The Power of the Emergent Curriculum* (Wien, 2014) refers to being "care-aware" as creating cultures of care focused on relating to others and supporting everyone's well-being by being both a willing giver and a willing receiver of care. Wien offers tips to become more care-aware, including:

- Be mindful in observing children and noting their sensitivity to giving and receiving caring responses.
- Seize opportunities to foster empathy and prosocial behaviors.
- Model caring words, body language, tone of voice, and actions.

Calm

Ellen Galinsky, author of *Mind in the Making* (2010) outlines seven essential life skills children need to develop at an early age, including self-control or self-regulation. She stresses that focus and self-control may be as important as a child's IQ as they navigate our over-scheduled, overstimulating, and often overly frustrating world. She suggests simple ways to help children foster self-control, including:

- Only provide as much support as a child really needs to help bring herself under control. In other words, scaffold the child — observe what she needs from you, and what she is able to do herself.
- Narrate what a child is doing as he is gaining focus, control, or calming down: "You are breathing slower now, and your fists are no longer clenched — see?"
- Make self-control and focus activities a 'fun' part of every day, from the freeze dance to sharing a paintbrush to collaborating on a group painting, to a simple game of "I-Spy."

Cooperate

Cooperation, independence, problem-solving — these are just a few skills that Dan Gartrell highlights in his book, *Education for a Civil Society* (2012). Children must learn these skills on their way to developing democratic life skills. Every child is capable of cooperating in some capacity, but what helps one child find success in his interactions while another child falls flat? Try these ideas to foster cooperation in your children:

- Help children recognize the emotions and viewpoints of others. Regularly help children problem-solve and check in with each other about feelings and thoughts and actions: "Why do you think Micah brought Kayla her blanket? How was Kayla feeling?"
- Encourage children to communicate with others and express feelings in appropriate ways. The sooner children learn these skills, the easier their interactions will be as they navigate through life.
- "Provide intentional opportunities for children to engage in cooperative as well as individual creative endeavors" (p. 134).

Adults can use these four simple strategies — Connect, Care, Calm, and Cooperate — to help each child on his journey to develop attachment — central to his development of resilience. As stated by child developmental psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner, "In order to develop normally, a child requires progressively more complex joint activity with one or more adults who have an irrational emotional relationship with the kid" (NSCDC, 2004). Simply put, he says, "Somebody's got to be crazy about that kid. That's number one. First, last, and always" (NSCDC, 2004 p. 1).

Every strategy above will help children — regardless of their geographic location, gender, race, or socio-economic background — to develop strong attachment as a protective factor to bounce back when risks weigh heavy, and the big moments get tough.

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