

What We Do Matters

by Tamar Jacobson (Meyer)

Children are not resilient to inappropriate practice and humiliation; they need challenging work and play.

Definition of resilience is:

“Capacity to spring back to the original shape or form after being bent, stretched, or compressed; flexibility; elasticity; **the capacity to rebound quickly from misfortune or illness.**” (Webster’s Dictionary)

What we do with young children will affect them for the rest of their lives. I know this by understanding that, even at age 50, aspects of my personal and professional life are constantly affected by my early childhood experiences. I know this because current research shows the early and lasting effects of children’s environments and experiences on brain development. I know this because the National Association for the Education of Young Children and other organizations work so hard to improve quality care and education for young children (Bredenkamp & Copple, 1997).

In fact, research demonstrates that children who attend poor quality programs can show negative effects while “high quality child care can predict academic success, adjustment to school, and reduced behavioral problems for children in first grades (Bredenkamp & Copple, 1997, pp. 6-7). And yet there is evidence that a large percentage

of classrooms and family child care homes are “barely adequate” or “inadequate” for quality.

Children seem to be resilient. They suffer abuse of every kind, sometimes on a daily basis. We are always amazed and relieved to hear accounts of adults who have survived and succeeded in spite of intense physical and emotional abuse during childhood. It reinforces our belief in humanity’s capacity for resilience to misfortune and illness, and it gives us hope for our own difficult times or personal struggles.

Most of us experienced traditional schooling as children and we seem to have survived. When early childhood experts tell us that traditional schooling is inappropriate practice for young children and ask us to respond from a place inside that remembers our own childhood, many of us have difficulty in understanding the concept of developmentally appropriate practice. It is almost as if we have to “reinvent childhood [because] we don’t know what it feels like” (Carter & Curtis, 1998).

Have we survived? Were we resilient to traditional schooling? How many of us have actually realized our creative potential and fulfilled our dreams? What kinds of choices have we made throughout our lives that have been fulfilling and productive? How many of us realized that we had choices to shape our own lives? Where did we learn about self-confidence or our capacity for challenge and achievement? As a majority of women in the early childhood field, how many of us really chose this profession? Or did we fall back to it having been socialized that women must love and care for children and want to do it for low pay forever? I know that I wanted to become a political analyst and journalist when I was young. I loved to sing and dreamed of developing a career as a singer. However, I was most sure that I was capable of caring for young children. It felt like a safe and sure bet for me. Taking risks was not something I had been taught in traditional schooling.

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Young children have little control over their lives. They are dependent on adults for physical and emotional survival. This is necessary to protect them from illness and misfortune. They are small and vulnerable, which reminds us to love and cherish, cuddle, and play with them. On the other hand, we often forget that children are capable of making choices, constructing knowledge, and thinking seriously and deeply about many different things. Children learn by modeling and imitating significant adults in their lives.

Often it appears that children are resilient to inappropriate practice. Many young children work diligently and tirelessly with dittos and worksheets. Some are capable of sitting for long circle times seemingly interested in topics like the weather, counting days of the week or months of the year. In so many of these situations, teachers expect young children to understand abstract concepts without providing them concrete, developmentally relevant experiences. We become confused thinking that if children are capable of enduring boredom it does not mean that they are challenged by the topic. I think it has to do with the way most of us experienced schooling when we were children. "It did not hurt me so it won't hurt them." I suggest that most often young children are intent on pleasing significant adults in their lives by doing what they are told to do. Seeming resilient and pleasing those in authority is often the way children handle feelings of powerlessness. Sometimes it is just the way to get through the day without being hurt or humiliated. Speaking out or asking difficult questions does not often make children popular with teachers in a traditional, authoritative schooling environment.

As children are dependent on us, they will need to please us to survive and acquire our love and admiration. Recently I heard Margie Carter and Deb Curtis speak at a national conference. They suggested that "we herd children and interrupt them" (Carter & Curtis, 1998). How do children express to us when they feel unchallenged or trivialized? Frustration, resentment, rebellion, and apathy might be some of the ways a child calls out for help trying to tell us that she is not as resilient as we think to inappropriate practices. Teachers often term these behaviors as a child's "behavior problem."

Children will not feel the need to seek control in a desperate way if they are given appropriate choices. Some of these choices might include being allowed to pour milk or water into one's own glass at snack time, deciding which materials to use for a project, or choosing between wood-working or pottery clay. There will be greater opportunity for children to develop critical thinking skills if they are

provided with meaningful and relevant educational experiences — for example, if children are encouraged to explore a topic in depth that is interesting to their lives.

It is so important to genuinely listen to children when they express their ideas to us. That way they learn that their opinions are genuinely valued. So many times we burst into laughter when a young child tells us something meaningful to herself. How does a child learn to feel valued and respected when her ideas are laughed at trivially or termed "cute"? Children have the potential to become responsible and fulfilled adults if we trust them to make decisions and take risks. This is a difficult task indeed. Many adults feel paralyzed when making decisions, focusing on pleasing others rather than understanding their own choices.

Teachers often become uncomfortable and are afraid to trust children to think for themselves. How can we trust when we were not trusted ourselves? Most of us, and especially women, were taught to be helpless. For some of us, it takes years of struggle to believe in our capacity to think critically and take responsibility for the choices we make.

Critical thinking, asking uncomfortable questions, and taking risks are necessary skills for activism and taking a stand against bias. Martin Luther King Jr. said that the silence of good people is worse than bigoted acts. It is most difficult to take a stand against prejudice and injustice when one has been taught to obey and please those in power. Teachers have power with young children. They are capable of supporting children to think for themselves, ask difficult questions, and take risks that challenge their decision-making abilities. On the other hand, they can teach young children to be helpless, fearful, and unquestioning of obedience.

The definition of resilience describes our capacity to rebound quickly from misfortune or illness. The idea that children are resilient to inappropriate practice is confusing. Children survive obstacles in life, including traditional, authoritative schooling, and learn many things along the way. What, in fact, are they learning and in what way do they survive? How do children rebound from inappropriate practice as they develop into adults? What types of scars, memories, defense mechanisms, and fears have they developed? More importantly, what labels have children been given that they come to accept and suffer about themselves for the rest of their lives?

As directors and administrators, we are challenged to support teachers as they struggle with the understanding

that traditional, authoritative schooling might be harmful for young children's development. Our challenge is to understand how our own childhood has affected the way we think, what we believe in, and how our values were learned. Coming to terms with our own scars, memories, defense mechanisms, and fears will help us support teachers with theirs. Most of us have survived in one way or another. Some have not. School dropouts, violence, hate crimes, and prisons tell us that story if only we are prepared to hear it. The ways in which we teach young children will affect them for the rest of their lives.

We cannot afford to think that children will rebound from anything they have endured. Children remember. We must think deeply and critically about how they will bounce back. Sometimes we must ask difficult questions even if these questions do make legislators, parents, and members of governments uncomfortable. Remember, they were children once as well!

References

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