

Building Resilience in Young Children

By Tom Lottman of Growing Sound

Life's lottery places many children in environments dominated by potent risk factors. Poverty and its after-effects build toxic levels of stress for families and children. Lack of adequate support and daunting stressors hamper parents' desire to be their child's first and best teacher. We can't always mitigate environmental and family risk factors, however we can help to foster internal protective factors in young children. When we become intentional about promoting within-child protective factors we turn children at risk into children with hope.

Masten (2001) reminds us that all young children can be taught to be resilient. "What began as a quest to understand the extraordinary has revealed the power of the ordinary. Resilience doesn't come from rare and special qualities, but from the everyday magic of ordinary, normative human resources in the minds, brains and bodies of children, in their families and relationships, and in their communities."

Resilience Theory, as developed by the Devereux Foundation, contends that resilience can be learned and should be taught as a cornerstone of every preschool curriculum. Normally when teachers or other professionals think about either protective factors or risk factors for children, they often overlook the presence or absence of protective factors within the child herself. While there are many internal qualities that would make a child more resilient, the Devereux Foundation has identified three protective factors as being the most critical: attachment, initiative, and self-control. The child who develops early in life an attachment to caring adults, a personal sense of initiative, and is able to properly express emotions through self control is more likely to bounce back from the stresses of a changing world.

Attachment

If in the early years a child learns to form secure attachments to parents, teachers and other significant adults, he feels free and safe to explore his environment, confident to move from mystery to mastery. The world is not to be feared but embraced and adults are seen as sources of hope and guidance.

From the moment that the newborn baby is held in the mother's arms, the child is learning to belong. Strong, secure attachment to caring adults is the foundation for all social emotional learning. As adults we simply love the child. This is certainly easy at first when the infant is so adorable. But very soon the child begins to reveal a temperament, not to mention a timetable, which may be very different from our own. Even though the temperament of the child and the caring adult may be very different, the attachment between them can be strong and lasting. The adult's responsibility is to meet the child in every situation with care and compassion, demonstrating over and over again that the bond of love is

stronger than any and all situations that may arise. We belong to each other. I can count on you and you can count on me.

As the child grows and interacts with other children, the secure foundation of care between adult and child is extended to peers. A securely attached child is more likely to be kind and considerate, share and take turns. The child mirrors the love of the care giver when interacting with all others. Teachers and other authority figures are respected sources of hope and guidance. The feeling of belonging sets the stage for positive social emotional growth in all other areas.

Initiative

Early on the securely attached child begins to venture out and explore. We are all naturally curious and seek new experiences in order to understand the world and our place in it. From the “everything in the mouth” stage to building with blocks to understanding letters and numbers, we are wired to gather and process information. As these experiences become more complex and challenging, the child’s ability to continue to seek new experiences, stick with a task when it becomes difficult, and see things through to the finish are essential. A confident child believes she makes a difference. She acts on the world and isn’t simply acted upon. She has been taught that continued effort eventually gets the job done and has learned to be joyful in the process.

One important area of research that should impact early childhood classrooms is the idea of learning orientations and how they are formed. Educational researchers distinguish "mastery orientation" from "learned helplessness orientation" (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). The child with a mastery orientation seeks challenging tasks and responds to failure with more strategies and effort. On the other hand, the child with a learned helplessness orientation worries that failure or even a lot of effort is evidence of not being smart. If success does not come right away, they conclude, "I can't do it." When we consistently praise a child's effort, we are much more likely to see persistence and problem solving.

Self Control

The young child often seems to be a mass of undisciplined feelings and actions. A moment of joy and happiness can be immediately followed by a screaming melt down. The young child will test emotional limits, both within himself and with his caregivers, in order to understand where and how he fits in to the emotional landscape. As adults we need to help the child recognize and accept every feeling and help set loving limits for each emotional expression.

Self control is a process that develops over a lifetime. As caregivers we must nurture the seeds of self awareness that lead to self regulation and eventually to self control. We must encourage an awareness of internal emotional states and an acceptance of every emotion. Body control, the observance of rules, recognizing uncomfortable emotions in others, caring and sharing are skills that, when developed early, lead to a happy, healthy life style.

I can count on you. I can do it. I can settle down. These are the statements and abilities we want our young children to build throughout early childhood. The goal is school readiness and life success. The knowledge that someone is there that we can count on, that we belong, is the sure foundation. The confidence to initiate actions and see them through to completion is the building material. The ability to recognize and express one's emotions and get along well with others completes the necessary tools that make a child ready for school and ready for life.

References

Masten, A. (2001). Ordinary magic: Resilience process in development. *American Psychologist*, 56, 227-238.

Dweck, C.S. & Leggett, E.L. (1988). A social-cognitive approach to motivation and personality. *Psychological Review*, 95, 256-273.

Growing Sound develops research-based children's music that promotes social and emotional development. Their most popular product, *The Songs of Resilience*, uses the power of music to build attachment, initiative and self-control in young children. The music of Growing Sound can be purchased by visiting www.growing-sound.com. The Songs of Resilience product line is sold exclusively through Kaplan Early Learning Company at www.kaplanco.com.