



# thinking children

A NEWSLETTER OF THE **Learning Resource Network**

## Resilience: A Developmental Perspective

It is by now widely accepted that children will develop more successfully, that they will be healthier and better able to confront the challenges of living, if they have been spared excessive stress. In these pages we have also developed the idea that some stress is beneficial to a child's development. We have given this idea the name *Optimal Struggle* to suggest that there is, in principle, an ideal range within which children feel secure but challenged, a range wherein they are encouraged to work through difficulties even while they are protected from those that would be overwhelming. For some years now, however, it has been noted by observers of child development that this range of optimal or even manageable stress is not the same for all children. There are significant individual differences in how various children cope with difficulty. The term that has emerged to signify the quality that some children exhibit to successfully handle a higher level of stress than others is *resilience*.

A book entitled, *Overcoming the Odds: High Risk Children from Birth to Adulthood*, written by Emmy Werner and Ruth Smith, played a significant role in calling our attention to the fact that certain children who might be expected to have difficulties in their development because of a combination of unusual stressors in fact overcome the odds and manage to handle their circumstances successfully. That is, they exhibited an unusual degree of resilience. This has led to much study and speculation about this trait. What accounts for this extraordinary resilience that is apparent in certain children? Can it be learned or are people just born with it? Is it a pervasive trait in the sense that a resilient child will always be so in any and all circumstances, or does it vary over time and context? Can it be measured, i.e. can we reliably test children for resilience and predict how they will handle stress in their later lives?

The legend of the resilient child who overcomes the odds and succeeds in the face of enormous obstacles has fueled stories from Dicken's *Oliver Twist* to the more recent film *Slumdog Millionaire*. It is a mythic tale that resides in our collective imagination as something magical and yet occasionally true. It is an idea that has particular resonance now in this time of extraordinary economic uncertainty and fear. We can all use a healthy dose of resilience and are hoping that the world economy can muster it up as well.

Like many traits, resilience is a characteristic that all people share — although its expression varies widely in strength and reliability. Everyone melts down under sufficient stress and can regroup or rebound when conditions are "all clear" again. And like many other traits, this desirable quality develops through use and repetition. By successfully rebounding after a destabilizing crisis, the child learns that such a thing is possible and indeed learns to trust that

For over 100 years, the Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services, Inc. has been at the forefront of providing help and support to New Yorkers in need through a wide range of child and family programs. The Learning Resource Network is one such program, offering consultation and support services to assist parents concerned with child development and learning issues.

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## Resilience: A Developmental Perspective


CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

he or she will be able to muster that response in the future. The key is experiencing that possibility in the first place. Earlier rebounds make later ones more likely. This is where parenting comes into play. By being sensitive to a child's breaking point, allowing the child to approach or even cross over that line on occasion, and then being a reassuring presence while the child regroups, parents can foster the development of resilience. Neither overprotecting nor abandoning a child in moments of collapse is likely to be as effective in fostering resilience as the sort of benign and encouraging tolerance that we are recommending. In this sense, resilience develops in the context of relationships that strike the balance that we have recommended before, whereby the child experiences difficulty as challenging but not overwhelming.

Certainly there are ample opportunities to foster resilience during infancy. It is a time when children are particularly dependent upon an adult's response to their distress, whether that adult allows the infant to struggle enough while not leaving it alone in distress for very long. This has led many to conclude that either one develops this trait at the very start of life or not at all. While we agree that infancy can be an important time for fostering resilience, it is our view that the story does not end there and there are ample opportunities for fostering this quality later in a child's development. Although it isn't always used this way, the word *crisis* actually means a turning point or decision. It is not a disaster as much as an opportunity for change. In this sense of the term, child development

proceeds through various moments of *crisis*. Moving through each of them affords the child an opportunity for not only growth and development but also discovering the possibilities of resilience in finding a successful resolution after a time of uncertainty and doubt.

The various steps of separation during early childhood, the mastery of increasing levels of independence and autonomy in the next phase, the entry into increasingly complex social relationships, and ultimately moving out beyond the family into the social world itself are all crisis points where a child experiences a difficult and potentially destabilizing level of uncertainty and stress. The presence of supportive family relationships and ultimately the internalization of that support into a confident sense of self allows the child to tolerate that uncertainty with the expectation that it will be possible to rebound and regain a sense of balance on the other side.

Resilience is found along a continuum. There are those who seem to be blessed with it in abundance, but it is a quality that we all share and that all children have some access to. By being aware of this universality and by trusting that it can be fostered and increased in any child, the parent can look for ways to strike the optimal balance for each child — the balance that allows for that particular child to not only work through the particular crisis of the moment but also learn something about the possibilities for working through crises in the future. 

— DAVID LICHTENSTEIN, PH.D.

*“Resilience is found along a continuum. There are those who seem to be blessed with it in abundance, but it is a quality that we all share and that all children have some access to.”*

### THINKING CHILDREN GOES DIGITAL

*Thinking Children* is going green and offering email distribution of our newsletter. In addition to the current hardcopy, readers can now receive an email alerting them to the latest issue with summaries of all of the articles. *Thinking Children* has always been available online at <http://jbfcs.org/main/thinkingchildren.html>, where all seventeen back issues are available for free download. Please email [lrrn@jbfcs.org](mailto:lrrn@jbfcs.org) to join our email distribution list or to share any comments with our staff. We look forward to continuing to serve our readership in the most efficient, valuable way possible.

## Resilience Within Reach

***“Parents can help their children explore their options, understand their own motivation and feelings, and implicitly teach how relationships can empower children to feel strong, capable, and resilient.”***

**R**esilient individuals have not necessarily led charmed lives, but they have developed the capacity to respond to stress with adaptation and growth. A developmental approach to understanding resilience suggests that this capacity evolves as a result of and in relation to life experiences, circumstances, and personal characteristics. Even the presence of medical illness or learning disabilities does not preclude the development of resilience. This developmental perspective is ultimately an optimistic one, as it leaves room for positive outcomes without optimal conditions. For parents and adults working with children, this means that there are endless opportunities throughout the life span to increase and expand children’s capacity to respond resiliently.

In a study of adolescents who have endured significant life stress, entitled *Out of the Woods: Tales of Resilient Teens*, by Stuart Hauser, Joseph Allen, and Eve Golden, the authors highlight three characteristics that help differentiate the more resilient teens from their peers: a positive view of relationships, a sense of personal agency or self-efficacy, and a capacity for self-reflection. These characteristics surface in other studies on resilience as well and provide us with some important points of entry for developing resilience in children.

Children’s capacity both to view people as essentially helpful, supportive, and nurturing and their willingness and ability to connect to others forms the basis for a lifelong ability and desire to seek, find, and maintain relationships. In infancy, a parent or caregiver who responds to a baby with love begins to model how significant others can be relied upon to soothe, support, and encourage. As children grow, there are many people who help in the nurturing process, including parents, siblings, teachers, friends, neighbors, and coaches. We can often reflect back on a teacher whose encouragement was critical in the process of self-discovery or the friendships that made long days at school more palatable. A belief in the importance of relationships does not mean that they will always go smoothly — in fact, it is guaranteed that they won’t. There will be friends who are mean, teachers who are difficult, and parents who lack patience or understanding. By providing love, empathy, and support, parents can model a healthy sense of relationships and help children find and negotiate their own relationships as they grow.

The characteristic of self-efficacy is the ability to see oneself as capable of creating change in one’s life, often despite seemingly insurmountable circumstances. Along with this sense of self-efficacy is the drive for mastery, easily seen in the preschool child who wants to do everything herself, the child who works towards a goal in school or some activity, or the high school student exploring different interests and avenues of expression. It is important to note that a sense of self-efficacy is not the same as competitive achievement. Not every child will be an academic, sports, or artistic star, but every child can feel a sense of accomplishment and learn the ability to set and reach goals. Ironically, developing this sense of self-efficacy in children means allowing them to try, succeed, and fail on their own. When difficulties arise, the idea that one can exert control to help change the course of one’s life reflects the coping characteristic of resilient people.

Finally, the capacity for self-reflection is another characteristic of resilience that intertwines with the other components. Children’s ability to check in with their own thoughts and feelings and to understand their own role in both positive and negative developments in their lives allows them to take action and control. The capacity for self-reflection at best fosters a sense of self-efficacy, as children learn to note how their own actions and reactions can make a difference. It is equally true that the capacity for self-reflection allows people to view relationships as active, dynamic processes that can be shaped and influenced in powerful, positive ways.

There are numerous implicit and explicit ways to promote the growth of resilience in children. In part, parents need to know their individual children and understand where they need to stretch and where they need protection. The characteristics of more resilient children suggest that children need the opportunity to work out at least some minor difficulties on their own, but there is no exact road map. A middle school-age girl figuring out the social ins and outs of her peer group needs to work out these issues with loving support from her parents, while a child who is being bullied requires direct adult intervention. Students in middle and high school need to learn how to develop their own capacity to consult and negotiate

# Recognizing the Resilience

— ELISA BRIER CRUZ, PH.D.

## Danny

(age 7)

Danny has generally been the “easygoing” child in his family. He successfully managed kindergarten and first grade, and, despite moving twice in the past few years, he has made friends easily and continued to mature. Danny is now in second grade, however, struggling academically and exhibiting some concerning behaviors in class. Most notably, Danny has been caught stealing small items, such as erasers and pencils, from his classmates. At home, his older sister has been diagnosed with juvenile diabetes, and her moods have become extreme and unpredictable. At the advice of his teachers, Danny and his parents are seeking the help of a therapist.

## Danny's Teachers

Danny is a sweet and well-liked child. He cries often, so we try to be gentle when discussing things with him. Danny is very bright, and, in turn, we didn't immediately notice that he was struggling to master reading and writing skills. When he started stealing from his classmates, we began to look more closely at his behavior and progress. We then recognized a pattern in the objects he had stolen — they were all common classroom materials that his classmates needed to do their work. It would seem that Danny did not want to be left behind.

## Danny's Parents

Danny has become an especially sensitive boy in recent months. We're not quite sure how to approach him regarding his sister's illness, so we have generally chosen to avoid the subject completely. We feel that children his age shouldn't be concerned with such “grown-up” problems. We tell Danny that the only thing he needs to worry about is his job of working hard in school, and we will take care of the rest. We have been so focused on moving and getting help for his sister that we didn't realize Danny was having problems in school until his teacher called us in for a meeting. Although we've done our best to hide the stress at home, it is now clear that he is picking up on our anxiety. How much, if anything, should we tell him? After all, he's only seven!

## Danny's Therapist

It is crucial to recognize how well, in many ways, Danny has coped with the numerous familial stressors taking place — in other words, the family needs to recognize Danny's resilience. Despite his struggles in school, he has remained well-behaved at home. He has coped admirably with leaving friends in several neighborhoods, and he has weathered his sister's unpredictable moods with only tears of empathy and concern. Behaviors which had been interpreted as indicative of Danny's sensitive nature appear, upon more thoughtful consideration, to be healthy and appropriate reactions to complicated situations. Danny is trying his best to understand and deal with the events taking place around him with little guidance or support, and he is doing a rather commendable job.

## Moving Forward

Reframed from this perspective, Danny's resilience and capacity to persevere became more prominent, and some of his difficulties were able to be viewed within the larger framework of his many strengths. Emphasizing these strengths to both Danny and his parents, and discussing ways to capitalize on them, altered his parents' approach to how they treated him and helped empower him to have his needs met in more productive ways. His parents realized that speaking directly to Danny about the events taking place would allow him to draw correct conclusions, feel more certain about areas of life which were in his control, and rely less on his own imagination when attempting to understand the rather chaotic world around him.

Danny was also provided with academic support and encouraged to seek assistance when he was struggling. He was given words to understand how one could be very smart, but have difficulty with particular skills in school. This knowledge alone helped improve his academic self-concept and prompted him to take more appropriate academic risks; with greater opportunities for practice and feedback, his skills began to slowly improve. Danny's minor “thefts” also ceased once he was able to verbalize his worries and frustrations to receptive parents and school personnel, rather than relying on indirect means of drawing attention to his struggles. Danny's parents formed what they referred to as “Team Danny,” a gathering of school personnel, family members, and the psychologist, and they reminded Danny often of this team that was always on his side, supporting him whether he felt strong or weak, whether he needed a big boost or a small smile. When treatment with this psychologist terminated, Danny happily told her that, as “President and CEO of Team Danny,” he would have his mom call if he needed a hand.

## Creating A Safety Net

— JANE PALEY, PSY. D.

### Melissa

(age 10)

A few months into fourth grade, Melissa's already slow progress in reading seemed to be grinding to a halt. Equally troubling was Melissa's eroding sense of self confidence, academically and socially in her classroom. At one point, she was overheard referring to herself as a "dummy." Like many children, Melissa hated the idea of being treated differently than her peers and became upset when she received a reading assignment that was different than the one given to her friends. Completing homework had become a nightly struggle as Melissa began to buck the demands placed on her and needed more and more of her mother's attention. Melissa's mother, Eleanor, was unsure about how much to help and found the evening homework time and Melissa's distress increasingly trying.

### What was done

Eleanor sought the help of a reading tutor who was more than willing to collaborate with Melissa and her classroom teacher. The adults developed a plan to help bolster not only Melissa's reading skills but also her decreasing self confidence. Eleanor's ability to handle the situation in consultation with the teacher and tutor served as a model that ultimately increased her daughter's resilience.

Eleanor made sure to attend to and remind Melissa of her many areas of achievement, noting often that each person has a unique pattern of strengths and weaknesses. She patiently but matter-of-factly reminded Melissa that her learning struggles were a product of neither laziness nor stupidity, acknowledging that sometimes her problems were exacerbated by adult mistakes (such as an inappropriate book choice). At the same time, Eleanor was honest with her daughter that she would simply need to "work harder" than many of her peers to get the same results. Eleanor also demonstrated problem solving, negotiating skills, and patience that Melissa would need to weather future crises.

Melissa thrived with the supportive safety net created by her mother, tutor, and teacher working in tandem. Eleanor was better able to accept Melissa's feelings of frustration, worry, and vulnerability when they arose, yet simultaneously provided a structured framework for moving through difficult moments. Melissa's hardworking approach and generally uncomplaining stance continued to expand. She developed a greater tolerance for uncertainty and difficulty, accepted her areas of strength and vulnerability alike, and knew exactly when she needed to turn to adults for support. Even though her reading difficulties continued to make school and homework stressful at different junctures, Melissa's capacity to respond with resilience continuously stretched and evolved.

## Buckling Under Pressure

— GAYLE STRIAR HERMAN, PSY.D.

### Ashley

(age 17)

It was the spring of Ashley's junior year of high school. She was smart, motivated, and consistently earned high grades and accolades from her teachers. Socially, Ashley was popular and well-liked, with a close-knit group of friends. She was actively involved in extracurricular activities, earning a leadership position in student government, a starting position on the school soccer team, and fulfillment in community volunteer activities. Ashley's parents described her as delightful, outgoing, independent, and well-adjusted. Ashley had always been their "easy child," dealing well with changes and managing her way through life with little more than a hiccup.

This season, however, was not all roses for Ashley. She slept and ate little, committing all her time to studying for college entrance exams and worrying intensely about applications, scholarships, and grades. The smile that characteristically graced Ashley's face vanished as her thinning body appeared wrought with tension. Rather than conversing animatedly during family dinners, Ashley appeared moody, irritable, and overwhelmed. Ashley, who had always appeared so resilient, was starting to crumble. Ashley's parents panicked—what was happening to their perfect child? And more importantly, what should they do?

### What was done

Ashley and her parents consulted with the school psychologist, Dr. Martin, who helped put things in perspective. First, Dr. Martin normalized Ashley's experience, helping the family understand that many students experience

## Resilience Within Reach

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3

with teachers, yet when a teacher is unresponsive or doesn't know important information, parents may find it appropriate to step in. Each child is different in their capacity to learn how to act independently, and parents need to gauge their approach both to the developmental stage and the individual needs.

In a recent television commercial, a girl proudly displays her karate medal while her parents affectionately and with humor acknowledge her accomplishment winning fifth place. Without over dramatizing the importance of a commercial, there is much to learn from a resilience perspective. Relationships are central to how children filter their experiences, and the warm, accepting approach of these parents provides an important signal to the child that she can rely on others to share in her good feelings. The emphasis is on accomplishment for its own sake and the pleasure of achievement at whatever level attainable. Fifth place was acknowledged with no attempt to whitewash the achievement, allowing it to be savored as her personal best.

Of course, life is never as neat at home as it is on a television commercial. Perhaps as typical is a child in tears because he lost, one who felt humiliated by a tough instructor, or one who decided to quit. A resilient approach may indeed mean that an activity is dropped or a friendship isn't pursued, or that it is fine for one child to sit on the bench the whole game while it is intolerable for another. Parents can help their children explore their options (fostering self-efficacy), understand their own motivation and feelings (fostering self-reflection), and implicitly teach how relationships can empower children to feel strong, capable, and resilient.



— BARBARA GOCHBERG, PH.D.

## Buckling Under Pressure

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 5

similar academic pressures and anxiety about the future. She reminded them that development is not a straight trajectory and sometimes children appear "off course." Presently, outside pressures were weighing on Ashley's typically secure self confidence. Dr. Hope encouraged them to be a reassuring presence for Ashley, monitoring her well-being but not hovering, so she could adapt to this uncertainty and rebound. Dr. Martin felt confident reassuring Ashley's parents that she would ultimately find a balance since she had displayed signs of resilience in the past.

Dr. Martin led Ashley through guided self-reflection, so she could identify her positive dispositional characteristics and previous success in dealing with stress. Ashley recognized the helpful relationships in her life — a caring family and good friends invested in her success, as well as positive social and community ties. Dr. Martin reminded Ashley that the feelings of belonging and connectedness that provided satisfaction and joy in her daily life could help support her during this time of stress. In pursuit of self-efficacy, Ashley needed to call upon her personal strengths and ask for help from others during moments of distress. In addition, Dr. Martin educated Ashley about the negative effects of poor nutrition and sleep habits; Ashley identified strategies to take care of her body, so she could feel a sense of mastery and continue to perform at her best. (\*See *Resilience Within Reach*, page 3)

### THINKING CHILDREN

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