RESEARCH
F ACTS and FINDINGS

A collaboration of Cornell University, University of Rochester, and the NYS Center for School Safety

Risk,
Protection,
and Resilience

Why is it that some youth are able to survive difficult upbringings that place them at-risk and become productive, responsible adults, while others cannot? Asking this question provides a new way of understanding the well-established relationship between harsh environments and problems in development. While children who grow up poor, in abusive families, or with serious disabilities are more likely than children in happier circumstances to experience severe difficulties, some children who face precisely the same challenges thrive. By asking what makes such children "resilient," we gain new insights into how to foster development.
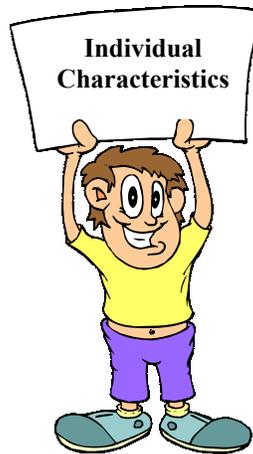
The idea of "risk and protective factors" is central to this orientation. Risk factors are those things that increase the probability of a negative outcome. They can be individual traits, such as a learning disability or attention deficit disorder; or they can be environmental factors such as living in poverty or a high-crime neighborhood. Protective factors-- being intelligent, a good student, having a supportive, loving relationship with parents or another adult-- seem to help youth compensate for and even overcome the risks they face. A resilient child, then, is one who uses or benefits from protective factors in such a way as to overcome risks and be successful in an adverse situation (Richman and Fraser, 2001).

What does this research mean for youth programs? They can be designed to reduce risks for youth while also enhancing protective factors. Some researchers and practitioners feel that more emphasis should be placed on protection, or "building assets," while others seek to balance reduced risk with increased protection. Recent research on effective programs for reducing juvenile delinquency and teen pregnancy focuses on the interplay between risk and protective factors. The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention in its report, *OJJDP Research: Making a Difference for Juveniles* states that "decades of research have shown that the best prevention efforts are those that target risk and protective factors in five areas: individual, community, family, peer group, and school (OJJDP, 1999)." In his research review, *No Easy Answers: Research Findings on Programs to Reduce Teen Pregnancy*, Douglas Kirby reports that, "Adolescent sexual risk-taking behaviors, like the behaviors of adults, are caused by a large number of risk and protective factors involving individuals themselves, their partners, their friends, their families and their communities….this review suggests that to have a more dramatic impact programs will need to effectively address a greater number of risk and protective factors over a long period of time."

Benard (1996) provides a practical summary of resilience research and discusses the foundation it provides for programs that promote positive youth development and community involvement. Consistent with other researchers (Blum, 1998; Garbarino, 1995; Kirby, 1997; Richman and Fraser, 2001), Benard identifies both individual and environmental characteristics that make for resilient youth.

Individual Characteristics

Social Competence—strong relationship skills, flexibility, cross-cultural competence, empathy and caring for others, strong communication skills and a good sense of humor

Autonomy—sense of identity, internal locus of control, self-awareness, resistance skills

Problem-Solving Skills—the ability to plan, insight, critical thinking, and resourcefulness

A sense of purpose and belief in a bright future— goal-directedness, motivation, educational aspirations

Environmental Characteristics

Caring Relationships— supportive caring relationship with an adult, whether in or outside the family

Opportunities for Participation— meaningful involvement and responsibility, power to make decisions, opportunities for reflection and dialogue

High Expectations— belief in the youth's ability to achieve, being respectful, recognizing and building on youth's strengths

James Garbarino talks about youths' vulnerability to what he refers to as the socially toxic environment in which they are being raised. In his 1995 book, *Raising Children in a Socially Toxic Environment*, Garbarino lays out many risks young people face--the elements of social toxicity--such as violence, poverty, break up of family, availability of guns, and the threat of AIDS. What can we do to counter such risks? Garbarino identifies seven themes, many overlapping those mentioned on page 2.

Seven Themes of Successful Coping and Resilience:
(Garbarino, 1995)

Personal Anchors—children need stable, positive emotional relationships with at least one parent or other adult

Cognitive competence—Being of at least average intelligence helps in coping behavior. Smarter children are more resilient

Success—Children who have had successes in their lives believe in their own ability for continued success

Active Coping—Children who actively seek to solve their problems or overcome challenges are more resilient

Positive Temperament—those children who are more active and social (largely inborn traits) tend to cope better and be more resilient

Social Climate—children do best in an open and supportive educational climate, both at home and at school

Additional support—People in the child's neighborhood and community also play a role in fostering resilience.

Research on resiliency offers to all youth workers, parents, friends, and educators hope that they can make a difference. It encourages us to go beyond simply trying to fix problems and to move toward building capacity in our young people. Initially Community Development Partnerships may be most able to influence what Benard calls Environmental Characteristics (above). They can develop ways to involve more people in Caring Relationships with youth--using mentors, intergenerational activities, part time or summer jobs, older kids working with younger kids, etc. Such relationships can and should involve encouragement and High Expectations for young people. Finally, schools and other community organizations and families can provide more Opportunities for Youth Participation in decision-making, work and other meaningful activities.
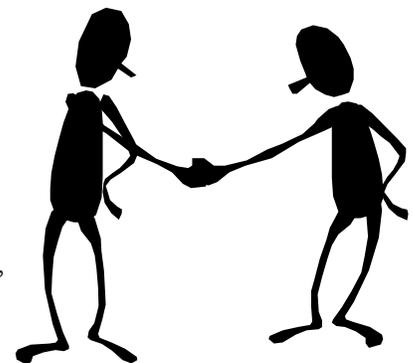
Each young person needs to become attached, to belong, to matter, to make a difference in his/her community. He or she will do so in either positive or negative ways, depending on the opportunities available. In the end, caring relationships, high expectations, and youth participation can provide social nourishment and training to help youth develop the internal components of resiliency--social competence, problem solving skills, autonomy and a sense of purpose.

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