

Resilience for Tomorrow

Edith Henderson Grotberg, Ph.D.

Georgetown University

Washington, D.C. USA

Presented at the International Council of Psychologists

Convention, Iguazu, Brazil, July 18, 2005

Introduction

Resilience is increasingly recognized and accepted by institutions, professionals, and individuals around the world. However, the major attention to resilience comes from the United States of America, Argentina, Chile and Australia. These countries have incorporated resilience, in varying degrees, into their universities, their services, their research, and their policies. Other countries, such as Spain and England, provide information on resilience, via national web sites and publications, or hold special sessions for service providers, policy makers, other professionals, and families.

This is a slow integration of a powerful concept, as validated knowledge about resilience has been available for some ten years. This slow integration occurs primarily because most nations create policies from the perspective of waiting for presenting problems rather than anticipating and preventing them; from protection against negative effects of problems rather than empowerment to deal with them; from a public health model rather than a human growth and development model.

Resilience, that human capacity to face, deal with, overcome, and be strengthened by or transformed by experiences of adversity, is universal. It adds to the strength and well being of individuals, institutions, and even nations. And, it is promoted when supports and services are provided (I HAVE), when inner strengths such as confidence, optimism, respect, and empathy are developed (I AM), and when interpersonal and problem solving skills are acquired (I CAN). Resilience for tomorrow will become a reality as we promote resilience for today. While many institutions are in a position to develop policies and take actions to promote resilience, three institutions most people experience - the family, the school, and the work place, are used as

examples of promoting resilience today to assure the benefits of resilience for tomorrow. Actions by communities and governments are also needed to assure the promotion of resilience and some countries - Argentina is a powerful example - have already begun that process.

The Family

The family, the basic institution of most societies, is the first place resilience can be promoted and the benefits of resilience realized. As families learn how to promote resilience in their children, and, incidentally, in themselves, there is greater likelihood of increased resilience for tomorrow. And the first thing families learn about resilience is that there is a positive link between promoting resilience and the process of human growth and development. Indeed, some resilience factors reflect the stage of development a person has reached. For example, babies are developing the resilience factor of Trust, which is not only a basic resilience factor, but is also the first stage of development.. Other developmental stages are: Autonomy; Initiative; Industry; Identity; Intimacy; Generativity; and Ego Integrity (E. Erikson. 1985. *Childhood and Society*. New York; Norton.) What can be promoted in resilience is linked to each person's stage of development. And the connection is cumulative, as what is acquired through the promotion of resilience carries through each stage of development. For example, if a person does not develop Trust in others or in himself, he may withdraw from people, fearing them, or he may not trust his own ability to resolve problems, depending on someone else to do that for him.

Resilience and Stages of Development

1. Trust

The first developmental stage is labeled Trust. This means the baby learns to trust care givers to give unconditional love and help and to take care of the baby when hungry, wet, in need of love and comfort, when afraid or angry. The baby learns to trust her own ability to work out a rhythm of eating, sleeping, washing, etc., and to calm herself and better control her body. The baby learns to roll over, stand, walk, play, and to use her hands to manipulate.

Making mistakes can be either a learning experience or a shameful one for the baby. If she cannot learn to do things and the care givers do not provide help, the baby will learn to mistrust

herself, the care givers, and the world.

1A. How to Promote Resilience?

Parents of very young children can promote resilience and reduce the stress of being parents, if they: show patience; make a game of tasks; soothe and reassure the baby; offer attractive alternatives and choices; maintain realistic expectations; provide solutions to problems; encourage continued effort; and praise efforts and success. And, above all, show love.

1B An Example of an Adversity

The infant is screaming, crying, and whining. The challenge is to determine what the behavior is telling the parent. The baby could be saying: "I am physically uncomfortable; I need someone to soothe me; I need some loving, especially by touching, rocking, singing, or holding; I am upset because I feel unloved; I feel I cannot trust you to be there when I need you."

A response that would reassure the infant and help the parent through the situation while promoting trust would be, "Oh, my, you are unhappy. Let's see what's wrong. I don't see anything. Maybe if I hold you and sing to you. .. I love you so much. I wish I could comfort you." (I HAVE trusting, loving relationships; Role models. I AM filled with hope; I CAN express my feelings.) The time spent performing this kind of response helps the parent calm down, helps the infant calm down, and reestablishes trust in the infant. This is often easier said than done!

2. *Autonomy*

The second developmental stage, Autonomy, which builds on Trust, has as a main feature, the child's realization that he is separate from others. And this sense of separateness can bring about behaviors that are difficult for parents to accept or tolerate. They include: having temper tantrums; knocking things over; throwing food and objects; crying, whining; running away from the parents or into the street; yelling or screaming at the parents; and/or refusing to talk or use the potty.

The child's need for autonomy may be stifled when the parents do everything for the toddler. Or if the toddler is criticized for trying to do things alone, the child will feel shame and

begin to doubt his abilities.

2A. How to Promote Resilience

Resilience is promoted by providing unconditional love and expressing love both physically and verbally by holding, rocking, and stroking and by using soothing words to calm, comfort, and encourage the child to calm down (I HAVE: Trusting, loving relationships) ;

Enforce rules and use removal of privileges and other forms of discipline that do not belittle, harm or reject the child; (I HAVE: Structure and rules at home; Role models)

Praise the child for accomplishments such as toilet training, calming self, talking, or making something; (I AM: lovable and I CAN accomplish tasks)

Encourage the child to try things and do things on his own with minimal adult help; (I AM: becoming autonomous)

When language is developing, acknowledge and label the child's feelings and so encourage the child to recognize and express his own feelings and to recognize some feelings in others (for example: sad, glad, sorry, happy, mad); (I CAN): manage my feelings and impulses.)

Use developing language to help the child face adversity: for example, "I know you can do it," encourages autonomy and reinforces a child's trust in his own problem-solving skills; "I'm here," comforts and reminds the child of the trusting relationships that can be relied on;

Be aware of your own and your child's temperament so that you can gauge how quickly or slowly to introduce change, how much pushing, encouragement or modeling, to provide.

Parents can also:

2B. An Example of an Adversity

A two year old toddler is at the store with her mother. She sees some candy, grabs it and starts to eat it. When her mother tries to take it away from her, she shouts, "No! Mine, mine!"

The mother promotes resilience if she removes her toddler from the situation so

she does not disturb others, and explains calmly to her toddler that she cannot take things without her permission, and gives her something else to hold or shows her something else to distract her. The mother helps her toddler understand limits of behavior (I HAVE); helps her feel responsible for her own behavior (I AM); and communicates with her as her toddler listens (I CAN).

The mother does not promote resilience if she just lets her toddler eat the candy of if she hits her and scolds her or if she forces her hand open to take it. This kind of interaction makes her rigid in her behavior and makes her feel unloved and not understood. (After all, her mother has been taking things off the shelves!)

Young children who have experiences that promote their resilience, are assuring resilience for tomorrow. They will become role models of resilient behavior. And those parents who have helped promote resilience in their children inevitably are promoting it in themselves.

3. Initiative

The third developmental stage, Initiative, generally includes children from four to six years of age. During this stage, the child learns about initiating activities and is very busy building things, using his imagination in play, often having difficulty in separating fantasy from reality, and starts many projects without necessarily completing them. The world of symbols becomes interesting and the number of questions asked sometimes seem interminable. But, if the child's questions are dismissed, or if he is unable to take the initiative to accomplish things or is rejected by those he seeks to help, the child may feel guilty, unworthy, or naughty.

3A How to Promote Resilience.

Parents can promote resilience in their children at this stage of life when they: offer help; respect their child's feelings; describe behavior that needs changing; restate rules; stop unacceptable or dangerous behavior; teach alternatives, using such words as, "what else can you do?"; praise efforts and successes; invite the child to express her own feelings; get the child's attention; accept apologies; give a time frame for completing a task; express own feelings about the child's unacceptable behavior; encourage the child to use communication and problem-solving skills to resolve interpersonal problems or to seek

help.

These actions integrate the dynamic interaction of resilience factors from each category of I HAVE, I AM, I CAN. As children grow and develop, the resilience factors are increasingly used together in dynamic interaction, drawing on factors from each of the categories.

3 B. A Situation of Adversity

A five year old girl, Sylvia, is quite willing to argue, tell lies, or break rules, because she wants to be free to work on her latest project. She does not like being expected to do chores and be a responsible member of the family and she feels very guilty for being caught not doing what she is expected to do, so she pretends she has done her work.

Mother: I certainly am upset when you tell me you finished cleaning up your room and I can see toys and clothes everywhere. You didn't even put your dirty clothes in the hamper.

Sylvia: It's clean. I just forgot a few things.

Mother: No, that is not acceptable. You know how to clean your room - you've done it before. So do it now.

Sylvia: I can't now. I'm making a bird nest out of string and I need to find something to put it in. Why do you want me to clean my room when I'm busy making something?

Mother: Oh, so you have a new project. That looks very hard and very fun! I'd like you to show me how to do it, but first you need to finish cleaning your room. Remember, chores come first.

The mother wants Sylvia to know there are expectations of her behavior, so she clarifies them again - probably for the fiftieth time! - but she will continue to do so as long as the expectations continue to need restatement. The mother also points out the undesirable tactics Sylvia uses to avoid doing what is expected of her, and lets her know that they are not acceptable. But her mother also respected Sylvia by recognizing her interest in a project. This kind of response shows love and respect for Sylvia but makes clear that certain chores must be done and are not negotiable. The relationship between

mother and daughter is not impaired because Sylvia's initiative in developing projects is not ignored. In additions, Sylvia is recognized as a person who is able to accept responsibility for taking on certain tasks in the family. She is an important, necessary member of the family! Sylvia has structure and rules in the home (I HAVE), is expected to be responsible for what she does (I AM), and is expected to manage her own behavior (I CAN).

The Family and the School

4. Industry

The fourth developmental stage is Industry, and usually involves children in elementary school. This is the time children are actively engaged in mastering life skills, particularly in schoolwork. The child wants to be successful and have a positive self-image as an achiever. He also wants close friends, as well as peer acceptance and approval. He can complete tasks and do things with others. But if the child is unable to be successful in all this industry, the child feels inferior and becomes extremely sensitive to his limitations. If teachers, parents, or peers communicate that the child is not very able, the child will feel insecure and may begin to doubt his self-worth and ability to succeed in the world.

4A. How to Promote Resilience

Parents and teachers are becoming partners in the development of the school-aged children at this important stage, Industry. Here are some things they can do to promote resilience in the children:

- provide unconditional love; express love verbally and physically in age-appropriate ways (Parents and teachers would use different ways to express caring, with teachers using compliments and statements of approval);
- use calming behaviors and oral reminders to help the child manage and modulate feelings, especially negative feels and impulsive responses;
- model consistent behaviors that communicate values and rules;
- praise accomplishments and desired behaviors, such as sticking with and finishing a hard homework assignment;
- provide opportunities for the child to practice dealing with problems and

adversities through exposure to manageable adversities and fantasy;

- provide guidance in the process, drawing on appropriate resilience factors;
- encourage communication so that issues, expectations, feelings, and problems can be discussed and shared;
- modulate consequences for mistakes so that the child can fail without feeling too much stress or fear of loss of approval and love;
- communicate about and negotiate growing independence, new expectations, and new challenges.

These interactions clearly combine resilience factors from each category as, again, resilience behavior emerges from the interaction of factors from each category of I HAVE, I AM, I CAN. An important point to make, however, is that children from the age of 9 or 10 are able to promote resilience in themselves, not relying on parents and others exclusively. However, they reach out for help more frequently.

4B. A Situation of Adversity

An eleven year old boy felt he was failing to master a certain skill that was important to him and he was not getting much help from the school. He was placed in a language-arts class instead of a foreign-language class, which he would have preferred. His parents spoke Spanish but had not taught it to him, and he had been to Argentina but did not stay long enough to learn the language. He really wanted to learn it.

He came home one day and told his mother that he was a “dummy.” He had heard a teacher say that the reason some students could not study a foreign language was because they couldn’t read and needed to go to the language-arts class instead.

Mother: Bob, what do you want to be when you grow up?

Bob: I want to be a marine biologist. Or maybe a pilot or an astronaut.

Mother: You are smart enough to do any of those things. Now, of the things you might want to be, do you think Spanish will help you?

Bob: Well, no.

Mother: It is important to read in any one of the interests you have. And math is important for some of them. You know you are great at math. You get top grades in it,

and your teachers have told me how good you are. If you want to learn Spanish, we'll send you to Argentina for the summer when you are sixteen or seventeen. You can stay with Uncle Jose. He would love that. You'll know more Spanish after three months than most high school graduates know after four years of Spanish.

Bob: Really, why is that?

Mother: Because you'll have no choice but to speak the language. It's called "language immersion," and it's really the best way to learn. You'll want to read it, too, not only the newspapers, but some books as well. So, get back to your language arts reading assignment!

In this situation, Bob's mother put her son's feeling of failure into the perspective of his great talent for math and her faith that he was smart enough to achieve any of his goals. She also pointed out how he could acquire the language skill he desired and how it could be done in a way that could be better than the school's method. And, finally, she reinforced the need for Bob to master the reading skills so important to everything he was interested in becoming. She was combating feelings of failure while promoting Industry, and also promoting his resilience, drawing on factors from each category.

5. Identity

The fifth developmental stage is Identity. This stage of development involves youth during the teen years. To establish Identity, the youth attempts to answer questions like: Who am I? How do I compare with other teens? What are my new relationships with my parents? What have I accomplished? Where do I go from here?

The benefits of establishing a clear identity include greater skills in: comparing one's behavior with accepted standards; being helpful and supportive of others; reflecting on values, emotions, truths, and ideals; and integrating sexual interests with responsible behavior.

If the teen is not successful in establishing identity, she may experience role confusion, not being sure of her true personality and switching from self-assured to self-doubting.

Not only the home and the school are involved in promoting or preventing resilience in these teens, but the teens themselves become increasingly responsible for promoting their own resilience. They are able to reflect more on the implications of what they plan to do, avoiding the

temptations of the excitement of risk-taking and finding excitement in activities that do not threaten their lives.

5A A Situation of Adversity

A fifteen-year-old boy left the house after his father told him not to. The father was furious, but also worried. What if something happened to his son? What kind of punishment will make sure this does not happen again? What can he do so that he learns from this and becomes more responsible?

5B A Resilience Promoting Response

A resilience promoting response would be this: When his son returns, he asks him the reason for going out and disobeying. He expresses his feelings of concern for his son's safety and how frightening it was for him when he could not find his son. The son can explain what happened and that he is sorry for what he did. The father needs to make clear that his son's behavior is not acceptable, even with his excuses, and that he is responsible for what he did. The father and son may negotiate a punishment and talk about what needs to be done to prevent this kind of behavior in the future. They can then reconcile.

Identity would not be promoted if the father yells at this son, telling him he is 'no good and can't be trusted.' The son would feel guilty, but resentful of such a judgment. This would impact his sense of identity for a long time. The lack of discussion - expression of concern and fear for the safety of the son, explanations for breaking the rules, resolution, and reconciliation - makes sure resilience is not promoted. The son would learn that his father is cold, punishing, and not interested in working things out with him. His resentment would very likely remain and influence future behavior.

A Second Situation of Adversity:

A shy, responsible thirteen-year-old girl was torn between loyalty to her peers and her sense of right and wrong. "One of my classmates was cheating on an important examination. I told the teacher, even though I knew that the classmate and some others in the class wouldn't like what I did. I was angry with my classmate for cheating because it made things unfair for the rest of us. The teacher told the boy not to do it again and also

called the boy's mother to tell her what happened. The boy admitted what he had done and promised not to do it again. I don't know if he knows I told on him, but I felt I had to report him."

A Response that Promotes Resilience

Identity would be promoted if she has a trusting relationship with the teacher (I HAVE), if she feels some responsibility for the values of honesty and fairness and is willing to take the consequences of her behavior (I AM), and when she can analyze the conflicts she was dealing with and take action to resolve the problem (I CAN).

Identity would not be promoted if the teacher tells the boy what the girl said or if the teacher had dismissed the girl as a tattletale. Resilience would not be promoted if the girl had ignored the cheating or did not reflect on the dilemma of the situation. Her willingness to risk the negative reactions she feared added to her resilience status.

The Workplace

Stress is one of the major problems at the workplace. "I am so stressed out I can't think straight." "I am so stressed out I feel sick." These complaints are common. Some stress is good: It alerts you to an adversity. It energizes you to take action. But there is a point at which the stress is too much and it begins to interfere with your thinking and health. You can't deal with any adversity in the most effective way possible when you have stress overload. Being stressed out becomes an adversity. Stress in the workplace is certainly an unwelcome adversity for many. Here are questions that can determine the stress level of anyone in a workplace:

- What stresses do you experience on a daily basis?
- Do they interfere with your ability to deal with the inevitable problems of the workplace?
- What do you do about them?
- Whom do you talk to?
- Is your organization interested in this issue?
- Are your colleagues interested in this issue?

The problem of stress in the workplace has been studied by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, a division of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Here are the identified stressors:

Heavy workload and/or long hours; infrequent breaks; routine tasks with little inherent meaning; non-use of skill; little sense of control; lack of participation in decision making; poor communication; lack of family-friendly policies; poor social environment and lack of support or help from coworkers and supervisors; conflicting or uncertain job expectations, or too much responsibility; job insecurity and lack of opportunity for growth, advancement, or promotion; unpleasant or dangerous physical conditions.

Career Resilience

Those who choose a career of providing services, such as health, education and welfare services, often find that they experience many of the identified stressors. And what they do about them is important. If they are resilient, they are able to seek out those they trust to discuss the problems and identify the stressors. They can ask for meetings with the key decision makers to discuss what are perceived causes of stress and make suggestions for how to address those causes. They can assume the receptiveness of those in authority and that changes will be made. When that is impossible, then it becomes important to decide on whether it is time to take the issues to a higher level of authority or look for another position.

Resilient service providers know how to do a self-assessment to determine their skills, interest, values and temperament, so that the next position they seek is consistent with their self-assessment. A general ignorance of who we are, what we feel, and how others perceive us continues to be a problem for many people. They are unaware of how their style of work affects others or how their interpersonal relationships influence how people react to them. Further, career resilience includes the continuing acquisition of competitive skills. It is important to keep up to date on the newest thinking, the latest materials and methods of providing services. And those who are not aware of new thinking are often not aware of job openings. The use of web sites, talking with colleagues, reading, or even knowing what is going on in the current workplace, are ways to know what is available. Resilience in the workplace is a title to be pursued through searches on Google or other search engines.

Client Conflicts with Service Providers

There are inevitable conflicts of clients with service providers, and these conflicts can interfere with the promotion of resilience. Services have a long history and have developed a culture that

is not necessarily consistent with the promotion of resilience. For example, many who receive services have been expected to be passive, to accept whatever they are told to do, and not to ask questions of the provider. And even pain has only recently been accepted as a legitimate measure of a person's health. Those seeking services are often faced with four major conflicts they have with the providers that are obstacles to the promotion of resilience:

1. Objective (cure-oriented) versus subjective (care-oriented) focus on the problem.

The provider drawing on the cure-oriented focus, looks at the problem, the adversity, objectively, wanting to know what the problem is and what the symptoms are. The conditions are often considered independent of the person. This focus stems from the medical model: diagnose and treat the illness. The patient as an individual is somewhat lost in this formula. The patient or client, however, is more likely to look at the problem - the adversity, subjectively, asking such questions as: Am I in serious trouble? Will I be able to do the things I want to? How long will this condition last? What is the prognosis? Will this affect my job, my loved ones? This way of thinking is care-oriented, and incorporates resilience factors of empathy and caring and recognition of the role of feelings in dealing with adversities.

For other service providers, such as teachers, attention is often focused on subject matter rather than the students as persons. This is particularly true as children enter grade levels consistent with ages around 12 and above. Policies such as Zero Tolerance are made, meaning any behavior not accepted by the school, such as fighting, is not tolerated and those involved are expelled. There is often little interest in the developmental status or needs of the children involved. There is certainly no interest in the concept of resilience. Teachers concerned about the resilience of their students, find out what is happening in the offenders life, involves parents in resolution of behavior problems, and provides services needed to help the offender correct unacceptable behavior and continue on the path of development.

2. Verbal versus nonverbal behavior

The professional focuses on the language of the profession. The client focuses on nonverbal behavior, such as attitudes, attention, empathy, acceptance, and concern. The attitudes of some providers suggest distance from the client or, at worst, even blaming the client for the condition. Many clients report having been scolded.

Attitudes and feelings communicate directly to the client and often determine what the client will do about advice or even about returning for treatment. The client is the vulnerable one in service and needs to feel safe in a caring, trusting relationship with the provider. Many service providers have been taught to keep a professional distance from the client. But often, they fear that the emotions of empathy and caring will blind them to the objectivity needed for determining the problem. From a resilience perspective, it is the sense of empathy and caring that the client needs in order to deal with the presenting adversity. And clients not only fear the coldness of the provider, but often are unwilling to discuss their condition, especially how they feel about it - notably, the fear..

This, again, is also true in the school. Many teachers in the upper grades do not want to be involved with the students need for praise, attention, or help, and remain focused on the lesson for today. In fairness to teachers, however, as the grade levels go up, teachers often have five different classes a day, each with different students. Just providing information, giving tests, going over assignments, and preparing for the next day, certainly limits the teachers' ability to interact with students on a more personal level. But the atmosphere a teacher creates - I am here to help you; I want you all to succeed; I care about you - that is easily noted by students and they are quick to point out their favorite teachers.

3. Controlling behavior

The professional focuses on the management of the client to follow procedures and wants compliance. The authority of the provider is to be accepted without time for explanations or questions. But the client wants and needs to be seen as a participant in decision making and does not want to feel controlled. While the client may not protest, resentment builds and may show up in a failure to follow recommendations or to keep appointments.

Many teachers expect students to accept the assignments given, without much questioning, and to complete them within a specified time. The authority of the teacher is critical, but it does not necessarily consider what the students are experiencing in assignments from other teachers or what their workload is. It is easy to develop a rather indifferent distance between the teachers and the students. Children learn better when they feel accepted and cared about; they see they have supports and help around them; when they feel confidence in

themselves; when they see they are acquiring interpersonal and problem solving skills. The promotion of resilience incorporates those aspects of teacher-student interactions.

4. Professional versus everyday language

Professionals use the language of their profession and it is common to them. However, when similar language is used with a client, the meaning of which is unclear or not understood, fear is roused. What questions can be asked for clarification? Will the client be seen as stupid? Can the client risk questioning the authority figure?

Unfortunately, many users of services, whether health, education, or welfare, do not ask for clarification or ask questions when not sure of what has been said. And even parents often miss the fact that the service provider is talking about her child and her child's problems as though the child were not in the room. This dissociation of the person with a problem from those involved in providing services undermines the person's ability to build self-confidence, make commitments to change, improve. Further, it demonstrates little respect, empathy, or understanding of what it takes to promote resilience in those who are facing an adversity.

Both the providers and the clients of services are involved in the promotion of resilience, and both can face the shared adversities and become stronger as a result. After all, resilience does not develop in just one direction. All participants dealing with an adversity are going to be affected by what is said and done. Here are some suggestions on the role of resilience in provider-client interactions:

In each encounter between a provider and a client, the provider can promote resilience by using resilience factors from I HAVE. These involve the provision of good services and assurance to the client of a trusting relationship. The provider can promote his or her own resilience by having access to the best possible services available to draw on, and trust in their quality.

The provider also promotes the resilience of the client by using resilience factors from I AM. This is done by helping the client be emotionally and personally strong enough to overcome the adversity. One way is to listen for the feelings the client expresses. Once a feeling is recognized, the provider can label it. "You seem angry," or "You seem frustrated. Can I help?" Offering reassurances is important, as is giving time for the client to express his feelings.

Empathy and caring are the emotions clients most want to see in the providers. The provider promotes his or her own resilience by becoming increasingly confident and comfortable in dealing with the problems of clients, recognizing their emotional needs as well as their other presenting needs.

The interactions of teachers and students and teachers and parents are essentially the same; except that the relationship is daily, the needs more general, and the impact, especially on the children, more powerful.

These three institutions are basic and critical to every individual and are ideal for promoting resilience in the largest number of people in any society. However, to achieve the full benefits of resilience, it is important for policy makers at the national, state, district, and community levels, to make their contribution by forming policies compatible with the goal of resilience; i.e., to deal with, overcome, be strengthened by or even transformed by experiences of adversity.