

Resilience in Street Children and in Victims of Political Violence in Peru

Edith Henderson Grotberg, Ph.D.

Department of Prevention and Community Health

School of Public Health and Health Services, The Medical Center

I have recently returned from a conference in Lima, Peru, held by the Sociedad Peruana de Resiliencia (The Peruvian Society of Resilience). The Society is part of the University, as resilience is seen to be a critical to the education of researchers and service providers in the country. A keynote speaker, I focused on the resilience in Peruvian street children and the resilience in Peruvian children victimized by political violence.

Street Children

As a member of the Street Children Expert Panel, I had examined data to determine the resilience of street children in Peru at the time of entering a program and, again, after having been in the program for varying amounts of time. However, I am only reporting on the resilience these street children demonstrated before entering the program. I am also reporting on the resilience in children and families who experienced political violence in Peru. That information is taken from the work of a colleague, Giselle de Silva, from Argentina. But, first, a bit of background.

The Increasing Incorporation of Resilience into Practice

Resilience, that human capacity to face, deal with, and emerge stronger from experiences of adversity, is increasingly being incorporated into the thinking and practice of

governments, universities and providers of services in the western hemisphere. Even the President's Commission on Mental Health in the United States is focusing more on recovery and resilience for those with mental health problems rather than mainly diagnosis, treatment and maintenance.

The Characteristics of Resilience

We learn a great deal from those who are dealing with adversities, what they do, how they feel, and what happens as a result. My international research on resilience found that external supports, inner strengths and interpersonal and problem solving skills, were drawn on to deal with adversities. I labeled them: I HAVE; I AM; I CAN.

Street Children Demonstrating Resilience

There are many street children in Peru. And a large number of them, mainly boys, (however, I saw 5 and 6 year old girls begging on the streets of Lima) had been living on the streets of Lima. Most of them, ages 14 years of age and under, were using one or more drugs nearly every day prior to entering a program to help them. About one-quarter of them said they had sold sex for money, food, or drugs and about half of those said they seldom used condoms. About three-quarters of the children reported having used a weapon in a fight and most reported that the police had threatened them at least once or twice. Six out of ten indicated they had been beaten at least once or twice by the police. They tended to be from single-parent homes, had little education, and had either skin or respiratory problems when they entered the program. They had been on the streets from one month to 10 years before entering the program.

The amazing thing was the resilience many of these street children demonstrated. Here are examples of how they dealt with the adversities of their lives:

- a. Recognized that they wanted something better for themselves (I AM respectful of myself)
- b. Created a 'tribal community' with other children; helped each other in hunting for food and money; and sharing with others (I HAVE trusting, loving relationships; I CAN solve problems)
- c. Demonstrated courage (I AM confident and optimistic)
- d. Persevered; accepted challenges (I CAN stay with a task; solve problems)
- e. Had energy (I CAN generate new ideas and ways to do things)
- f. Had keen powers of observation, very analytical and perceptive (I CAN solve problems)
- g. Loyalty to those who help them (I HAVE trusting relationships; I AM empathic and caring of others; I CAN reach out for help when I need it)

Now, these street children were also manipulative, always testing themselves and staff to see how far they could get; and they were jealous of new kids, fearing they would lose the attention of the staff. But their resilience kept them alive and functioning as well as they could. Even reaching out to join the program to get help and to learn skills is an act of resilience.

Children as Victims of Political Violence

Peru is not unfamiliar with political violence. And such violence inevitably affects families with children. When the violence in one part of the country became so extensive and destructive, the government moved people to settle on the outskirts of Lima. The issue of interest to resilience was determining the evidence of resilience as the families adjusted to the new environment. The findings were quite clear:

Some families concentrated on the trauma of the violence and their need to escape. They thought only of the past and relived the trauma over and over again. The parents lacked self confidence and feared their isolation; yet they made no effort to adjust to the new environment. The fantasies of the family were always to return to their homes in the mountains.

As a result, most of their children were not resilient. Further, many of the children developed serious mental health problems, problems of self-esteem, and obsessing with thoughts of what was lost. These children, like their parents, were not resilient. One of the factors of resilience is having resilient role models; these were lacking for the children. And substitute role models did not seem available.

Other families concentrated on the new environment and sought opportunities for work, school, and building friendships. The family members often thought of the past and their homes in the beautiful mountains, but saw the value of being in a community that had schools, where their children could learn Spanish, jobs that gave them money, and their children could get work in the summers. Family members would from time to time talk about their losses, but seeing the value of the new environment they were optimistic about the future. These parents were role models for their children, helping them become resilient. Some children find other adults to role model resilience, but the family is a great place to model and promote resilience.