

By supporting children's resilience, educators help students who have experienced trauma benefit from learning programs and environments.



# *Building* **RESILIENCE** **CAPACITY** *in Young* *Children*

## **Practical Insights for Early Childhood Educators**

Children have the right to live in an environment that enables them to grow and flourish. In the world's current physical and social climate, however, children's risk of experiencing trauma and hardship has been increased by war, climate change, and the pandemic. The impact of these trials is amplified by diverse social situations—millions of children are born into disadvantaged homes and experience poverty, homelessness, abuse, and violence. Layered upon this reality is the concept of *intersectionality* as children may be discriminated against based upon factors such as ethnicity, race, social class, gender, and disability.

Building resilience is emphasized in early childhood curricula as a path to ensuring children from all backgrounds achieve positive health and well-being outcomes. The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia:

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Outcome 1 calls for children to “*develop their emerging autonomy, inter-dependence, resilience and sense of agency.*”<sup>1</sup>

This article discusses what resilience is and how to think about resilience from intersectional and neuroscience viewpoints. It provides practical resilience-building strategies that educators can apply in the classroom. Understanding resilience from different perspectives will help early childhood educators build resilience capacity in young children so they can be best prepared to handle the traumas and hardships that occur in their lives.

### **The Impact of Hardship and Trauma on Young Children**

Across the world, promoting child well-being is a cherished goal. Children consider well-being to be feeling good about themselves and being happy and content without feelings of sadness or emotional distress. Children also greatly value positive relationships with friends and family. This well-being is at risk when children are faced with trauma and hardship through negative experiences, such as natural disasters (e.g., fires, floods), living in war zones, being forced from their homes, or suffering physical or verbal abuse.



Children experiencing such negative experiences may suffer from high levels of stress, which negatively affects their health and well-being. For example, lockdowns and school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic have increased stress and challenges for children. It is important to prioritize resources for families and build a child’s resilience capacity to help them cope and adapt to such trauma and negative experiences.<sup>2</sup>

### **What Is Resilience?**

Resilience is essential for human survival and has been described as:

- A strength, desirable characteristic, or asset that enhances achievement, health, or well-being
- Having the ability to live successfully despite being subject to higher risk factors than others
- Being able to adjust to hardship or trauma without displaying typical negative outcomes (e.g., negative emotions, loss of self-efficacy).

Building resilience capacity allows children to respond and adapt to challenges and short- and long-term risks. Child individual differences, such as personality or cognitive abilities, can influence their resilience capacities to handle trauma or hardship. Rate of exposure, timing of stressful or traumatic events, physical health, and levels of fatigue also impact upon children’s resilience capacity, with resilience being positively related to a child’s self-esteem and attachment to their parents. Children who have built resilience capacity can thrive despite adversities, alleviating the negative impacts on their well-being. Strong resilience allows children to not only “bounce back” from adversity but actually “*bounce forward.*”<sup>3</sup> Such an approach enables children to learn and thrive and take advantage of a better environment that can sustain their health and well-being.

### **Characteristics of Resilience**

Resilient children trust their own judgment; demonstrate confidence, perseverance, moral reasoning, and courage; and proactively engage in new or challenging activities.

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Resilience includes the ability to form positive relationships with others, display self-regulation, and demonstrate problem-solving skills. Children may face challenges when they come to school, such as making friends or learning a new language. A resilient child will demonstrate the capacity to actively seek out and accept assistance to handle such challenges.

Providing children with opportunities to build resilience capacity at home, in school, and within their community is essential to foster improvements in academic learning outcomes and social-emotional development. For example, fostering children's sense of belonging and building positive relationships with parents and carers helps children manage stress and even thrive when they encounter trauma or hardship.

### **Neuroscience Behind Resilience**

Insights regarding the neuroscience that underpins resilience can help us understand the biological factors that drive young children's capacity to build resilience. The cortical networks of a child's brain contain key chemicals that enable social-emotional regulation, flexibility, and adaptation to environmental challenges. The brain chemical oxytocin plays an important role in how children develop resilience capacity and a sense of belonging. The feelings of attachment with parents and carers that form early in life are very important for building children's oxytocin networks, which influence resilience capacity and ability to cope. In the absence of close bonding experiences in the first seven years of life, children's oxytocin



networks may not develop normally. This then may impact a child's ability to develop resilience capacity, manage stress, and build future relationships. Thus, young children's early experiences can have direct effects upon their brain development, which, in turn, influences children's capacity to build resilience capacity and overcome adversity.

### **Intersectionality and Resilience**

Intersectionality is an analytical framework for understanding how aspects of a person's social and political identities combine to create different modes of discrimination and privilege. Gender, disabilities, age, race, ethnicity, class, and religion are all factors that can lead to marginalization in one's community. Resulting inequalities can persist over generations.

Resilience can be viewed through an intersectional lens when considered from a strengths-based perspective of the interconnectedness between the different systems that can help strengthen cultural identity, family relationships, and engage social groups, services, and community.<sup>3</sup> Inclusive practice that considers intersectionality can help provide children and their families with a voice and agency over decisions made about their daily lives. Such an approach requires policymakers, schools, and community programs to emphasize the importance of intersectionality, risk reduction, and building resilience capacity.

### **Practical Ways to Build Resilience Capacity in Young Children**

The early years is a critical window for helping young children build their resilience capacity. Early childhood teachers play a key role in understanding children's unique backgrounds and the potential challenges they face at home, in school, and in their community. Gathering this background knowledge assists teachers and schools in monitoring and helping children build resilience capacity so they can feel safe, form positive friendships and relationships, and learn about their world.

Children also need to be given voice and agency to build their self-efficacy

and self-identity, and have the confidence to handle a range of situations. Practicing decision-making and working with others through negotiation and collaboration are key to being flexible in times of hardship and stress. Providing opportunities for children to learn routines or rituals at home and school, such as singing songs together, will foster a sense of identity, belonging, and attachment to a caring community of learners.

Building resilience capacity in the early years classroom should adopt an intersectional and strengths-based approach, where children's strengths are used to help them handle difficulties and challenges. Practical strategies for building resilience capacity in the early childhood classroom are described below:

- Create a classroom and playground learning environment that is safe, healthy, stimulating, warm, inviting, and sensitive to children's needs, where they feel comfortable and free to be themselves. Maintain strong cultural links and home-school partnerships with families and community.
- Build, nurture, and cultivate strong relationships and respect for others through encouraging friendships between peers and provide opportunities for children to help one another and understand what empathy means. This can involve teaching appropriate verbal and non-verbal communication skills (e.g., facial expressions, body language, how to initiate conversations, and word choices).
- Help children develop positive perceptions of themselves and their own worth, and develop an awareness of their own strengths and weaknesses. Teach self-regulation skills by helping children interpret and describe their emotions and how to express themselves in reasonable, flexible, and appropriate ways.
- Encourage self-talk, mindfulness activities, breathing techniques, and taking the time to pause and think before responding to situations. This is especially important in challenging contexts. Help children take responsibility for their thoughts and behaviors.



- Teach children problem-solving, negotiating, and decision-making skills across curriculum areas through engaging and interesting topics and scenarios, brainstorming sessions about current issues, question-and-answer conversations, storytelling activities with quality children's literature, and art activities. Engage children in role play, drama, and puzzle-solving activities.
- It is possible that striving to be over-resilient could have negative outcomes.<sup>4</sup> Children who have overly high expectations and unrealistic beliefs in their capacity to overcome a challenge

may feel disappointment and feelings of failure when they don't meet those expectations. Using scaffolding strategies to extend children's resilience capacity with goals that are developmentally appropriate for each individual and unique child, but not too challenging or frustrating, may help support positive child outcomes.

### Conclusion

Early childhood educators play an important role in helping young children build their resilience capacity. Developing a deeper understanding of resilience is key to



fostering children's health, well-being, and development, especially in the current global context of pandemics, wars, and climate change. It is critical to view resilience from an intersectional lens that considers the diverse backgrounds of children and the neuroscience underpinning resilience. Such an approach will empower young children to "bounce forward," rather than just "bounce back" from experiences of trauma and adversity.

#### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Early Years Learning Framework: Department of Education and Training. (2009). *Belonging, being & becoming - The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia*. [www.acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2018-02/belonging\\_being\\_and\\_becoming\\_the\\_early\\_years\\_learning\\_framework\\_for\\_australia.pdf](http://www.acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2018-02/belonging_being_and_becoming_the_early_years_learning_framework_for_australia.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Njeze, C., Bird-Naytowhow, K., Pearl, T., & Hatala, A. R. (2020). Intersectionality of resilience: A strengths-based case study approach with indigenous youth in an urban Canadian context. *Qualitative Health Research*, 30, 2001-2018.

<sup>3</sup> Manyena, B., O'Brien, G., O'Keefe, P., & Rose, J. (2011). Disaster resilience: A bounce back or bounce forward ability? *Local Environment: The International Journal of Justice and Sustainability*, 16(5), 417-424.

<sup>4</sup> Mahdiani, H., & Ungar, M. (2021). The dark side of resilience. *Adversity and Resilience Science*, 2, 147-155.

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#### Additional Resources:

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