Resilience - giving the children the skills to bounce back

Training Early Childhood Educators in Canada to model resilient thinking behaviours in childcare settings has had a positive impact on the teachers, the centres and the children in their care.

Families today are exposed to high levels of daily stress and the incidence of childhood depression is increasing. Introducing children to resilience training that promote accurate and flexible thinking can help prepare them to deal with inevitable adversity and inoculate them against depression.

Resilience is important to succeed and adapt to the challenges faced by all of us. We experience life’s stresses and adversities, steer through troubled waters and bounce back from tough times. Despite our best efforts we cannot prevent adversity and daily stress, but we can learn to be more resilient by changing how we think about challenges and adversities. Research has shown that how we think about adversity and opposition affects our success in school and work, our health and longevity, and our risk for depression.

The importance of promoting resilience in children

Recession-resistant resilient people are healthier, live longer, are more successful in school and jobs, are happier in relationships, and are less prone to depression. Resilience helps people deal with stress and adversity, overcome childhood disadvantage and reach out to new opportunities.

Resilience has been defined as the “ability to persevere and adapt when things go wrong”. Masten and Brooks define resilience globally as “manifested competence in the context of significant challenges and adversity”.

Stress and adversity are an inevitable part of life. Therefore, it makes good sense to introduce resilience-building strategies to children as early as possible.

Resilience promotion programs for children have existed since the 1970s and have focused on increasing school readiness and supporting the parent-child relationship. Most promotion efforts, however, have tended to overlook the importance of thinking processes in the development of resilience and handling of stress and adversity.

None of these programs has led us to diagnose inaccuracy about the world and to inappropriate problem-solving that has been thorough in dealing with difficult stressors and energy-valued resilience resources.

Research suggests that resilient thinking patterns can be achieved by adults and that these patterns can be taught to children.

Skills that aid habitual use of more accurate and flexible thinking can be absorbed by children from a very early age and can optimize development of resilience.

What we know about thinking processes and resilience

An important body of research centres on what we “think” about stresses and adversity. Studies show that people who manage better under stress perceive themselves as capable of influencing certain aspects of their lives and so take action when faced with problems. In addition, they have seen outcomes as opportunities for new learning and growth, commitment and active engagement at work and others are seen as a basis for meaning in life.

The ability to refrain negative events by searching for a perspective that is simultaneously truthful and favourable helps people maintain a realistically optimistic perspective.

For some people, their stress and adversity typically create feelings of helplessness and wanting to give up-like others, in the face of unavoidable life stresses and growth.

How people explain their successes and failures influences whether they maintain their resilience and develop resilience strategies. A helpful response to adversity is an approach to adversity that gives up.

These same skills, which focus on thinking in problems, have been taught to adults in the workforce, college students and adolescents with positive results. Because of the beneficial effect of the resilience training programs, the reactions to the workplace and the alertness, the growth and defence of our minds, the programs are being adopted by educational institutions and businesses around the world, to increase social problem solving and productivity and reduce the risk of depression.

Researchers have taught to researchers at the University of Pennsylvania, thinking processes directly affect many critical abilities associated with resilient thinking patterns, regulation, impulse control, causal analysis, empathy, maintaining realistic optimism, self-efficacy, setting goals, planning and solving problems.

The implication of this body of research is compelling. It suggests that training programs that help people develop resilience abilities can be learned, and introduced to children at an early age. These most intervention programs, those at the most risk for feelings of helplessness and depression benefit most from these new ways of thinking and feeling about themselves.

It is the thinking style that determines resilience - more than genetics, more than intelligence, more than any other single factor.

Social problem-solving capabilities involving perspective-taking, conflict resolution, and anger management, can be influenced positively through the use of more accurate and flexible thinking processes.

Promoting resilience through new thinking skills

We have learned that training that promote accurate and flexible thinking including:

- Helping recognize that our beliefs about adversity affect how we feel, and consequently what we do (the ABC model).
- Giving people tools to reframe what things happen - uncovering our thinking style.
- Developing an awareness of common thinking traps or errors.
- Understanding that our core beliefs about the world may be preventing us from taking opportunities.
- Observing evidence to dispute/support our core beliefs.
- Putting stresses/adversities into perspective.
- Changing and focusing.

These skills help us to regulate our emotions and dispute erroneously held beliefs about ourselves. The use of these skills during times of stress and adversity helps us to step back and think about the situation more flexibly and accurately thus promoting more resilient behaviour.

The Penn Resilience Program (PRP) for schools and the 10-12-12 protocol comprises of cognitive behavioural and social problem-solving components. The PRP skills training helps participants become more aware of their habitual way of coping and develop their explanatory style. Explanatory style thinking habits are shortcuts we reflexively take in order to quickly process things that happen to us. However, these thinking habits may not provide an accurate assessment of the situation and tend to lock us into responses less than optimally. Explanatory style can be viewed along three dimensions: personalization, permanentness, and pervasiveness.

1. Who is to blame? (personalization)
   a. Me
   b. Not me

2. How long will this last? (persistence)
   a. Always
   b. Not always

3. A handicap of my life this effect? (pervasiveness)
   a. Everything
   b. Not everything

For people with a ME / ALWAYS / EVERYTHING style tend to blame themselves and give up easily because they feel they are in situations that are all-encompassing. These characteristics are frequently found in people who are described as being maladaptive in thinking. Ultimately they may view things as hopeless and become depressed.

Those with a NOT ME / ALWAYS / EVERYTHING style tend to blame others and take little responsibility for their role in the adversity. They tend to respond to their stress by becoming angry and view these situations as violating their rights. However, open-minded people, who may be affected by many areas of their lives, there is a sense of a response. An alternative explanation of the situation is possible. They do not get stressed by the stress of events and are more likely to act in a deliberate and purposeful way.

While a NOT ME / NOT ALWAYS / NOT EVERYTHING style is often viewed as the most ‘optimistic’ explanatory style, it can give rise to an inaccurate or over-cautious view of the situation. Most stresses and adversities are not 100% of the time (100% of the world).

We do mean that we do not in any way affect all areas of one’s life. The idea is not to become relaxed in the spectrum, but to view things as a continuum along these three dimensions. The goal is to maintain a sense of ‘realistic optimism’ by thinking accurately and flexibly about the evidence for or against each situation we face by challenging reflexive thinking patterns.

- Realistic optimism is the ability to maintain a positive outlook without denying reality, and appreciating the positive aspects of a situation without ignoring the negative aspects. It also involves working to resolve anxiety and conflict with the knowledge that they won’t happen automatically, but are achieved through effort, problem solving and planning.

Supporting the need for training children in this particular research is a recent study by John Abela at McGill University. He explored psychological and environmental factors related to the development of children’s skills in using social problem-solving skills with and without depression. The study found that children with a pattern of negative and self-critical thoughts were more susceptible to depression than those with a more positive thought pattern. Children whose parents were depressed were more likely to exhibit thinking styles associated with depression. Children in the study who were taught about characteristically pessimistic style thinking of (“optimism training”) with no regular activities. Most adults who had grown up in schools of this type of training to reduce the risk of childhood depression and help children handle daily stress.

Programs that help children challenge their thinking styles have concentrated on school-aged children and adolescents. However, by the age of eight, most children have already developed a preferred mode of explanation of thinking style. And children as young as two to three years are at the beginning of their thinking styles of their primary caregivers.

In Canada, programs aimed at young children to influence emerging thinking processes could be an important introduction to teaching essential resilience skills and abilities. But young children are not promoted to be developmentally capable of thinking about their thinking – nor can these skills be introduced to them.

Seligman makes several suggestions for training young children in this regard. He believes that caregivers should assist children by providing them with opportunities to:

- Use perspective-taking
- Gain a perspective of ‘possibility’ (identity and emphasize positive experiences)
- Remember past successes that is congruent with effort and accomplishment, since a belief in one’s competence is a pre-requisite of effective thinking processes.
- Have positive explanatory styles modelled by adults around them.

Adult modelling of resilient (accurate and flexible) or positive thinking styles can be crucial during children’s early years. Until recently, there was no ready-made set of skills programs to introduce these thinking skills to young children.

The Partnership for Resilience and Family Partnership began to seek for best practice models to promote resilience in young children. The Partnership consulted with researchers at the Penn Resilience Program to develop the Resilience Training (Reaching Out Children’s Trust). This program has been used as a component of the Social Development Partnerships Program, Social Development Canada (SDC) to promote the resilience of young children. A pilot testing was completed and SDC awarded stage-2 funding to RIBO to develop training manuals to expand the program across Canada.

The Child and Family Partnership is the YMCA of Greater Toronto (Family Development Centre), the Child Development Centre (Union Centre), the Toronto District School Board (TDSB), the University of Guelph (Centre for Families, Work and Well-being), and George Brown College (Early Childhood Education Program).
Promoting Resilience in Young Children

The Reaching IN… Reaching OUT Project

The Reaching IN… Reaching OUT Project (RIORO) takes new human knowledge about resiliency promotion and adapt and evaluates the Penn Resilience Program (PRP) school-age model for use with young chil-
dren in childcare. RIORO is helping children learn to "reach in" to new, view them accurately and to "reach out" to take on new
opportunities. The quality of children's experiences opportunities. The quality of children's experiences
of totally new environments is being enhanced as a result of initial special-
ized resiliency skills training of their teachers, caregivers, and childcare
providers. Early Childhood Educators (ECIs) were chosen because of their day-to-day contact with
young children and their parents. The intensive contact places them in a unique position to influence the development of children's minds, bodies, and emotional and "reach in" to new, view them accurately and to "reach out" to take on new
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Research Findings

Early Childhood Educators (ECIs) told us that since training in the PRP model, their approach and language has changed when they are talking with children about conflict and daily frustrations. Before the training they typically would ask children about their feelings when there was conflict in the classroom or between them and another child. Direct activity-based work with the children was easiest to facilitate with children: an important aspect of the new model.

Other ECIs reported that more than 75% of ECIs reported the top three child resiliency skills training had an impact on their interactions with children at their centres. More than 80% reported that ECIs helped dealing with adult communications, understanding their families, as well as friends and acquaintances. These ECIs rated the level of impact as "moderate" to "high" on interacting with children, understanding their overall behaviour, understanding child behaviour and increasing teamwork in the workplace.

Impact of the resiliency skills training on children's development:

- 100% reported the resiliency skills training had an impact on their interactions with children at their centres.
- More than 80% reported that ECIs helped dealing with adult communications, understanding their families, as well as friends and acquaintances. These ECIs rated the level of impact as "moderate" to "high" on interacting with children, understanding their overall behaviour, understanding child behaviour and increasing teamwork in the workplace.

Desired outcomes

We need to introduce children to skills that will support continuing development of children's minds, bodies, and emotional and "reach in" to new, view them accurately and to "reach out" to take on new
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