

## Early Childhood Relationships and the Roots of Resilience

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### **Topic**

[Resilience](#)

### **Introduction**

As the expression of competence in contexts of adversity, resilience is of great interest to researchers and practitioners in its own right, as well as for what it can tell us about development in contexts of security. Indeed, processes that compromise or engender positive adaptation despite prior or concurrent adversity are more similar to those that support typical development than they are different.<sup>1</sup> Nowhere is this more apparent than in the role of relationships as central risks and resources for understanding resilient adaptation.

Whether in contexts of adversity or security, early relationships form the foundation for cognitive, affective and neurobiological adaptation.<sup>2,3,4</sup> Whereas relational vulnerabilities engender distress and maladaptation, relational resources foster emotional health and competence.<sup>5,6,7</sup> In the context of safe and responsive relationships with caregivers and others, young children develop core regulatory and processing capacities that enable them to maximize developmental opportunities and effectively negotiate developmental challenges.

### **Subject**

Efforts to identify the relational roots of resilience can reveal modifiable developmental influences that can be harnessed in the service of positive youth development. Prevention and intervention efforts can protect, restore or provide positive relationships in contexts of risk. When taken to scale through community-based mentors, after-school programming, or other systematic support services, relational resources will foster children's capacity to reach age- and culturally-significant milestones. Thus, as prominent gateways to both positive and problematic adjustment, relationships are a key focus of resilience research.

### **Key Questions and Recent Research Results**

*Which relationships are important for understanding resilience?*

Relational resources are variable in both form and function over development. Parents, age-mates (e.g., siblings, peers, partners) and nonparental adults (e.g., teachers, mentors)

vary in their relative influence across developmental time and contexts. While peers are of particular salience during the school and adolescent years, for example, their influence is later subsumed by that of romantic relational partners in early adulthood. Despite these variations, however, the roots of relationships and, to a significant degree, of resilience are grounded in the foundational experiences of early childhood.

In the context of the early caregiving relationship, children develop core regulatory and relational capacities. In addition to the basic substrates of stress reactivity and regulation, patterns of exchange in the early caregiving relationship form the template for the child's emerging expectations of the self and others.<sup>6,8</sup> Over time, relationships with siblings, peers, and other adults may further canalize or challenge these early relational schemas. Thus, children's successful adaptation in contexts of adversity (i.e., resilience) reflects the combined influence of multiple relationships, with a unique role accorded to early caregiving experiences.

Although we typically think of the early caregiving relationship as originating in the recurrent exchanges that typify the caregiver-infant relationship, recent evidence from attachment research directs our attention even earlier in development, to the prenatal period. As assessed during pregnancy, mothers' relational representations of their own childhood experiences predict the quality of the mother-infant relationship one year later.<sup>9</sup> Beyond mothers' own childhood experiences, Siddiqui and Haggloff<sup>10</sup> demonstrated that mothers' representations of their unborn child just three months into the pregnancy were related to the quality of the mother-infant relationship three months postpartum. Thus, the relational roots of resilience may reach from prior generations to support and frame children's negotiation of contemporaneous and prospective developmental issues and challenges.

#### *How do relationships contribute to resilience?*

Resilience research has identified several mechanisms by which protective and vulnerability factors operate to increase or decrease the probability of competence in contexts of adversity, respectively.<sup>11</sup> As noted previously, sensitive caregiving engenders adaptive neurobiological, behavioural, and cognitive organization in early childhood.<sup>4,8</sup> Thus, positive relationships contribute to resilient adaptation by promoting resources, such as self-esteem, self-efficacy and coping capacities. A second mechanism of relational protection is the reduction of risk impact, such as when a sibling provides sensitive supervision to a younger sibling at a time when the parent is unable to do so. Third, relational processes may stymie the progression of negative chain reactions, such as when the presence of an alternate caregiver may quell the series of negative consequences that might otherwise befall a child in the wake of parental loss.<sup>11</sup> Finally, relationships may serve as conduits to new avenues and opportunities for positive adaptation,<sup>12</sup> such as when a mentor exposes a young child to positive outlets for expression and connection through new interests, art or sport.

As discussed earlier, the salience of specific relational partners (e.g., parents versus peers) varies over time. Similarly, the content and meaning of relational qualities vary by context. Resilience research highlights the need for a contextually- and culturally-sensitive view of development. Sensitive and responsive caregiving engenders positive

youth development, but the specific features that constitute high quality care may look different across cultures.<sup>13</sup> In contexts of heightened risk, relational factors that are associated with poor outcomes in low-risk contexts may engender positive development. For example, studies have shown that authoritarian parenting (i.e., high parental control, low warmth), which may be detrimental in typically developing youth,<sup>14,15</sup> can be protective for children who are at-risk due to their environmental and/or behavioural profiles.<sup>16,17</sup> Similarly, although parentification was once conceived of as an inherently detrimental phenomenon,<sup>18</sup> children's provision of care to parents and kin may be associated with heightened self-esteem and achievement among some groups and depends strongly on the culture and value judgments of individuals within the family.<sup>19</sup>

Relational processes may vary in their importance across different contexts and individuals. Mentoring relationships, for example, appear to be more influential for positive outcomes among at-risk youth than they are for typically developing youth.<sup>20,21</sup> Relational processes associated with competence (i.e., positive adaptation in conditions of normative risk) may be distinct from those associated with resilience (i.e., positive adaptation in conditions of adversity).

### **Implications for the Policy and Practice**

The quality of the early caregiving relationship has an enduring, though not definitive, impact on a child's development. Thus, efforts to support this relationship are central to most prevention and intervention programs in early childhood (e.g., home visitation programs,<sup>22</sup> parent-child interaction therapy<sup>23</sup>). Even in contexts of extreme adversity, such as out-of-home placement, supporting a positive caregiver-child relationship is vital to successful intervention in infancy and early childhood.<sup>24</sup> To that end, several factors are central to support the relational roots of resilience.

First, prevention and intervention efforts must start early, perhaps even before birth. Working with expectant parents, biological or otherwise, is essential to support positive development, particularly for children at heightened risk due to parents' own legacies of loss and trauma and/or contemporaneous stressors, such as domestic violence or war.<sup>25</sup> In early development, support services may expand beyond the caregiving relationship to consider siblings, peers and teachers as resources for protective relational processes.<sup>26,27</sup>

Second, relational supports must extend beyond the childhood years to ensure positive youth development. Early relationships are special, but not determinative. Just as opportunities for righting maladapted trajectories remain in later development, so, too, might early positive trajectories be derailed by subsequent adversity. Positive relationships should be supported and protected across the life course, particularly as they become contexts in which the relational roots of resilience for future generations may flourish or flounder.

Finally, applied policy and practice must be sensitive to individuals' developmental and cultural contexts. Individuals may value and interpret experiences, including presumed adversities, very differently as a function of their developmental and/or cultural context. Thus, researchers and practitioners alike should attend to individuals' unique solutions to

the challenges of adaptation, and remain open to the possibility that relationships may have multiple dimensions of meaning. Even a presumably negative or deviant relationship (e.g., criminal association in gang activity) may confer some relational protection to vulnerable youth (e.g., safety and connection). As demonstrated in a recent investigation of resilience among former foster youth),<sup>28</sup> empirical research may also benefit from person-oriented approaches, which begin with the experiences of individuals, as a complement to knowledge afforded by variable-oriented perspectives, which focus on mean differences across groups of individuals.<sup>1</sup> By studying individuals in context, we are beginning to understand the complexity of resilience as a developmental construction over time and in the context of lived experience.

### Conclusions

Resilience is a relational process that reflects organization among systems and among people. It is not a personality or genetic trait, and is not something one has or lacks. Resilience reflects dynamic processes of adaptation that can be engendered or compromised by relational processes to a significant degree. Relational partners and processes differ in salience over time and context. Applied efforts that are appropriately sensitive to developmental, cultural and contextual factors have tremendous potential to harness the power of relationships to support positive development for all children.

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