



STRESSES AND SHOCKS

The need for building resilience in child protection

SUMMARY

How do children (and their families) cope with or overcome adversity when their wellbeing is under threat from violence, conflict, and natural disasters? What protects them when their parents and other actors fail them? The phenomenon where children succeed in spite of serious challenges to their development is called resilience. This reader draws on multiple sources to look at the concept and what it means for child protection systems.

Keywords: Child protection, resilience, protective factors, social protection

Introduction

According to UNICEF, globally, more children than ever are forced to live through natural disasters, socio-economic shocks and conflict. The COVID-19 pandemic and its associated socio-economic challenges coupled with pre-existing stresses and shocks have made life difficult for everyone especially children. UNICEF's [Socio-economic Impact Survey of COVID-19 Response](#) conducted between May and August 2020 found that violence prevention and response services have been severely disrupted during the COVID-19 pandemic, leaving children at increased risk of violence, exploitation and abuse. A total of 104 countries out of the 136 that responded reported disruption in violence against children (VAC) related services.

This has brought into further sharp focus the need for resilience in child protection systems. The concept of resilience has gained prominence in different aspects of human endeavour including child protection. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) defines [resilience](#) broadly as “the ability of individuals, communities and states and their institutions to absorb and recover from shocks, whilst positively adapting and transforming their structures and means for living in the face of long-term changes and uncertainty.”

To UNICEF, [resilience](#) is “the ability of children, households, communities and systems to anticipate, prevent, withstand, manage and overcome cumulative stresses and shocks in ways which advance the rights of every child, with special attention to the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children.”

Box 1: Guide for Governments on children resilience

UNICEF and [RET International](#), [Protecting through Education](#) developed the [Actions for Children and Youth Resilience: Guide for Governments](#), which emphasizes the five priorities of the [Hyogo Framework for Action 2005-2015: Building the Resilience of Nations and Communities to Disasters](#). Governments are urged to ensure that public policies which assist in capacity-building should be directed at strengthening processes and mechanisms which develop and/or enhance:

1. **Institutional capacity** - ensuring that disaster risk reduction is a priority in the local, regional and national levels of government, and there is adequate institutional basis for implementation.
2. **Knowledge of risks** through identification, assessment and monitoring of disaster risks, and improving early warning systems.
3. **Understanding and public awareness** - making use of knowledge, innovation and education, and promoting a culture of safety at all levels.
4. **Risk reduction** - by effectively managing the basic or underlying risk factors through planning of land-use, and through environmental, social and economic measures.
5. **Preparation** for unforeseen damage-generating events, to ensure an effective response at all levels

Insights into children's resilience

In an article titled [Resilience from a developmental systems perspective](#), Ann Masten, a professor of Child Development in the Institute of Child Development at the University of Minnesota, writes that a developing child's capacity to "respond to challenges and adversities depends on the operation of many systems, varying from neurobiological stress-regulation systems to families, schools, community safety and health care systems, and numerous other sociocultural and ecological systems." Masten, who studies risk, competence, and resilience in human development, with a focus on understanding how young people overcome adversity to succeed in life, says: "Resilience reflects resources and processes that can be applied to restore equilibrium, counter challenges, or transform the organism."

In [Speaking of Psychology: The Role of Resilience in the Face of COVID-19 with Ann Masten, PhD](#), Masten provides the following insights on children's resilience:

- Resilience of children is distributed in their relationships with the many other people who make up their world.
- Some children coming out of very difficult backgrounds show resilience from an early age. If they do well early, they generally continue to do well later in life.
- Some children struggle in childhood or adolescence, and then manage to turn their lives around as young adults with the help of mentors, new opportunities and a maturing brain (late bloomers).
- Resilience is not inborn. Every single capability and resource that children (and everyone else) have is always a product of their interactions with the environment and people around them.

Building children's resilience

According to Mabelle D. Madsen Thompson and Bart Klika, in their article titled [Increasing Resilience: Primary Healthcare Providers' Opportunities to Promote Protective Factors Before and After Childhood Trauma](#), protective factors are "positive qualities located within the cognitive, emotional, environmental, social, and spiritual experience of the child that are associated with resilience and, when combined, facilitate positive outcomes." These adaptable factors work cumulatively to empower and support children so that they may avoid or successfully work through the trauma associated with adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). Thompson and Klika note that a review of more than 200 research articles and narratives of over 350 adults and children demonstrates that several important protective factors are known to help children who have experienced multiple ACEs. These are:

- *Self-value*: The children's emotional and behavioural self-expressions are positive, accurate, and constructive. Increasing this protective factor focuses on helping children to internally value themselves to keep going and do their best despite setbacks related to ACEs.
- *Self-regulation*: The children are taught and demonstrate emotional and behavioural self-management that helps them resolve difficult situations rather than resort to self-destructive or aggressive behaviour.

- *Hope/future goal setting*: Children are encouraged to engage in high and positive expectations, setting attainable goals in relation to their lives and future outcomes.
- *Problem solving*: The children are supported in their ability to find unique solutions to difficult situations.
- *Supportive belief structure*: Children's personal beliefs and practices that give encouragement and meaning to life beyond the material or worldly are nurtured.
- *Friends*: Children learn to create and foster constructive and reciprocal friendships. Caretakers or mentors facilitate development of positive friendships.
- *Family/caretakers*: The family, caretakers, and close adult mentors provide stable care for the children. This includes meeting the children's survival, health, mental health, and emotional needs. Caretakers can be encouraged to place their children's care as a high priority, become good role models, and set reasonably high expectations in a warm and loving environment.
- *Supported academic functioning*: Children are supported by caring mentors at school and at home who encourage their efforts to work consistently at their ability level and to attain educational goals.
- *Active diversion*: Children are involved in developing and engaging in healthy activities, skills, and groups in the community, school, and/or home. Adults encourage a balance in activities such as sports, music, art, creative writing, etc. to avoid over-scheduling or excessive emphasis on competition, creating more stress.
- *Supportive adults and community*: The community in which a child lives is a secure place to obtain resources that meet children's needs in areas such as mental and behavioural health, and social and emotional development.
- *Safety/fewer and less severe stressors*: Children's well-being, basic needs, and security are promoted across the spectrum of ecological settings at the individual, relational, school, and community levels.

Supporting the development of social protection for preparedness and resilience

There is a growing consensus on the need to establish sustainable national social protection (SP) systems under government ownership and coordination. UNICEF has put forward ways in which it, working together with partners, can support the development of [SP systems that are more effective at preventing and responding to the negative impacts of shocks on children and families](#). These are:

- **Advocacy** for national governments to initiate processes which would make their SP systems more resilient and responsive to shocks and able to address child vulnerabilities.
- **Policy dialogue and advice & capacity development of professionals and organizations**: Provide technical assistance and capacity development to countries to strengthen the linkages between disaster risk management (DRM) and SP systems, and to make the latter more responsive, flexible and resilient.
- **Knowledge generation and child rights monitoring**: Assess current SP systems in terms of their ability to prevent, prepare, respond and recover from the impact of shocks on children, either by conducting new research, by including these aspects in situation analyses, or by using existing evidence by other actors where available.
- **Horizontal cooperation beyond borders**: Support governments, civil society and other actors from countries in the region to exchange experiences and learn from countries that have already better integrated DRM and social protection.

- **Convening partnerships and leveraging resources for children:** Convene partnerships between ministries and institutions, including representatives of civil society and children, to promote the linkages, and enhance coordination between SP systems and DRM and humanitarian response systems.
- **Modelling and testing innovations:** Conduct feasibility studies and, where necessary, support (financially and with technical assistance) the introduction of emergency cash transfer programmes, emergency psycho-social support programmes and other innovative social protection responses to a humanitarian crisis.

Approaches to building children’s resilience

An example worth considering is the [Strengthening Families](#), an evidence-informed approach developed by the [Center for the Study of Social Policy](#) to increase family strengths, enhance child development, and reduce the likelihood of child abuse and neglect. It is based on engaging families, programmes, and communities in building [five protective factors](#):

- **Parental resilience:** Managing stress and functioning well when faced with challenges, adversity and trauma.
- **Social connections:** Positive relationships that provide emotional, informational, instrumental and spiritual support.
- **Knowledge of parenting and child development:** Understanding child development and parenting strategies that support physical, cognitive, language, social and emotional development.
- **Concrete support in times of need:** Access to concrete support and services that address a family’s needs and help minimize stress caused by challenges.
- **Social and emotional competence of children:** Family and child interactions that help children develop the ability to communicate clearly, recognize and regulate their emotions and establish and maintain relationships.

Using the Strengthening Families framework, more than 30 US states are shifting policy and practice to help programmes working with children and families focus on protective factors. States apply the Strengthening Families approach in early childhood, child welfare, child abuse prevention, and other child and family serving systems.

Further Reading

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