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Resilience in children: Educational significance

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Abstract

Everybody will encounter adversity in life at one point or another. Being able to deal with the situation competently, and move forward, depends on resilience. Psychologists refer to two widely known approaches for dealing with adversity: emotion focused and problem focused, the latter being the more desirable, as the emotion-focused approach has been linked with depression. However, having effective coping skills does not occur automatically and children need some guidance in this respect. Despite, in most cases, parents¹ playing the major role in a child's upbringing, schools also play a significant role. This paper discusses some practical applications for educators which may help foster resilience in children they teach.

Keywords

resilience; adversity; wellbeing; coping mechanisms; education; problem focused; emotion focused; metacognition



Resilience in children: Educational significance

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Everybody will encounter adversity in life at one point or another. Being able to deal with the situation competently, and move forward, depends on resilience. Psychologists refer to two widely known approaches for dealing with adversity: emotion focused and problem focused, the latter being the more desirable, as the emotion-focused approach has been linked with depression. However, having effective coping skills does not occur automatically and children need some guidance in this respect. Despite, in most cases, parents¹ playing the major role in a child's upbringing, schools also play a significant role. This paper discusses some practical applications for educators which may help foster resilience in children they teach.

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Introduction

The main purpose of educational institutions is to equip students with the essential life skills required to become competent members of society, post-school. One of those vital capabilities is developing the capacity to be resilient. From an education perspective, children should understand that things do not always go according to plan, and that remaining positive in these instances can help to ensure the best possible outcome. This paper will firstly define resilience and discuss its relevance to an individual's emotional wellbeing. It will then go on to address some classroom applications and strategies educators can consider to help foster resilience in the children they teach.

What is resilience and why is it important?

In recent years a new line of psychology has emerged under the label of 'positive psychology' or 'postmodern psychology' (Zakeri, Jowkar & Razmjooe, 2010). Whereas traditional psychology focused on abnormality, illness and pathology, positive psychology is concerned with the scientific study of human strengths and capabilities, such as wellbeing, hope, resilience and happiness (Nolan, Tacket & Stagnitti, 2014; Zakeri, Jowkar & Razmjooe, 2010). Resilience is a key focus of this new approach to psychology. Garmezy and Masten (1991) defined resilience as the ability to successfully adapt in a positive way to challenging or threatening

¹ All reference to 'parents' should be taken to include any carer/guardian with a primary caring role for the child.



circumstances (see also, Zakeri, Jowkar & Razmjooe, 2010). Everyone, at one time or another, will experience times of stress, risks and adversity to varying degrees. These challenging times have the potential to have negative effects on an individual's wellbeing and development. The literature has shown that it is resilience that determines the difference between those individuals who continue on successfully and those who, unfortunately, do not (Durlak et al., 2011; Kritzas & Grobler, 2005; Zakeri, Jowkar & Razmjooe, 2010; Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012). These positive or negative outcomes can be linked back to the coping behaviours individuals develop, and choose to employ, in response to challenging life situations. Psychologists refer to these behaviours in an attempt to explain how resilience works. The two most common response actions are *problem* and *emotion* focused (Brown, 2015). A problem-focused strategy, as the name suggests, entails staying positive and developing a plan to resolve a problem, issue or crisis (Kritzas & Grobler, 2005). Conversely, an emotion-focused approach would be to find a distraction or seek solace from a friend or colleague (Brown, 2015). A problem-focused approach has been shown to be the more desirable of the two, as an emotion-focused approach can tend to lend itself to denial and self-defeating behaviours (Kritzas & Grobler, 2005; Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012). Psychologists have found a significant association between emotion-focused coping and long-term depressive symptoms (Durlak et al., 2011). For example, a longitudinal study conducted by Holahan et al. (2005) concluded that cognitive attempts to avoid thinking realistically about problems were linked to long-term depressive symptoms in participants. Therefore, it can be argued that it is imperative children learn the skill of problem solving during times of adversity, rather than try to avoid or deny the stressful situation (Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012).

Fostering resilience in the classroom

There is broad agreement among educators, policy makers and the public that schools have an important role to play in raising healthy children, by not only fostering their cognitive development, but also their social and emotional development (Durlak et al., 2011). A major component of children's social and emotional development is developing their capacity to be resilient, in order to cope with life's challenges. McInerney and McInerney (2010) confirm that statistics for onset of depression and attempted suicide in children point to rapidly rising numbers around the globe. They suggest that in our rapidly changing world, many children and adolescents become alienated as they become powerless in their struggle to cope with their problems (McInerney & McInerney 2010). This helplessness can express itself in such ways as: truancy, dropping out of school, substance abuse, violence, self-harm or suicide. Therefore, educating children in a way that builds resilience and capacity to deal with life's challenges is critical to combat such undesirable and unproductive behaviours.

In most cases, parents play the biggest role in a child's upbringing. However, considering the amount of time the average child spends at school during their lifetime, the influence of schools should never be underestimated (e.g., Howard & Walton, 2015; Vialle et al., 2013). Schools provide environments for children with opportunities for positive peer interactions, significant relationships with adults other than their parents/caregivers, and promotion of social and emotional learning (Graham et al., 2011; Howard & Walton, 2015). It can, therefore, be argued that



teachers contribute significantly to the development of resilience in children under their care. Many schools have well-developed programmes aimed at building resilience that are implemented across the board by teachers (Nolan, Taket & Stagnitti, 2014). For example, ‘KidsMatter’ (Commonwealth of Australia, n.d.) and ‘MindMatters’ (beyondblue, n.d.), are two Australian school health initiative programmes written for teachers, and aimed at helping educators to promote resiliency. Educators can choose to enhance, or add to, these programmes for the benefit of their students, employing various strategies in doing so. The methods used can be either explicit or implicit, however, the common goal is nevertheless the same (Nolan, Taket & Stagnitti, 2014). A selection of some of these strategies in practice are outlined below.

Promoting belonging

As stated previously, the role of educators is not only to develop cognitive skills in students, but also their social and emotional wellbeing. A critical part of this is developing an ability to remain positive in any situation (Nolan, Taket & Stagnitti, 2014). In order to encourage this, educators should develop self-assurance amongst students, to empower them with confidence to tackle these challenges (Durlak et al., 2011). In practicality, this can be attained by developing students’ self-importance and helping them recognise that they are valued. As educators, this aspect can be developed in students by encouraging a sense of belonging (McDonald, 2013). Creating a sense of belonging in the classroom is a vital aspect of nurturing resilience in students and can be attained by following some simple procedures (McDonald, 2013). One way this can be achieved is through deliberate planning of the physical environment. For example, having a designated seat or an individual classroom pigeonhole for work may not seem significant, however, each gives the student a physical and psychological presence in the room and provides a clear indication of their belonging to the class. Just as important as the physical set-up is getting to know each individual student in the classroom (Churchill et al., 2013; Lyons, Ford & Slee, 2013). Finding out students’ likes and dislikes, backgrounds and family situations can prove beneficial when planning activities (Lyons, Ford & Slee, 2013; McDonald, 2013). Another useful way to foster a sense of belonging is through setting up of class rules and routines. Churchill et al. (2013) posit that implementation and evaluation of classroom rules help to promote active civic participation, ensuring equality, freedom and protection for everyone. However, if the teacher’s aim is to create a sense of belonging and trust, then rules/routines and consequences should be devised in collaboration with the whole class, rather than imposed on students (McDonald, 2013). This entrusts students with opportunities to take responsibility for their actions, as expectations of them are made clear. This approach can prepare them for life post-school, as a citizen of society when sometimes rules may not seem fair but there is an obligation to follow them. Creating a sense of belonging and trust amongst students can not only serve as motivation to build a positive learning environment but is also vital in fostering resilience in children (Churchill et al., 2013; McDonald, 2013).

Reducing risk of anxiety through metacognition

Merikangas et al. (2010) suggest that anxiety disorders are the most common mental disorders of children and adolescents worldwide. It is also recognised that anxiety



runs in families (e.g., Negreiros & Miller, 2014; Rapee, 2011). Hettema, Neale and Kendler (2001) conducted a meta-analysis of family concordance for anxiety disorders and concluded that there are definite links (see also Otowa et al., in press). As stated previously, the average child spends a large portion of their life at school and, as such, educators can be agents for change in decreasing the probabilities of students developing anxiety. This can be attained by developing students' metacognitive skills. Metacognition is a word that has become prevalent in education circles. Simply put, the term can best be explained as *thinking about thinking* (Howard & Walton, 2015). However, developing metacognitive skills does not occur automatically; children need to be shown how to analyse, evaluate and understand strategies that enable them to work through problems to achieve the best possible solution (Brenna, 2011; Ewijk, Dickhauser & Buttner, 2013). The teacher, as the 'expert' other, must give students the proper guidance through explicit teaching, by showing students how to: reflect on their learning, know what their strengths and weaknesses are and adapt those skills to every task they undertake (Ku & Ho, 2010). Scaffolding² student learning from a young age can result in competent, independent learners and be instrumental in supporting resilience development.

Developing resilience by encouraging independence

A significant way of developing coping skills is giving children opportunities to make judgements independently, as opposed to with constant guidance (Nolan, Taket & Stagnitti, 2014). There will be occasions when decisions prove correct, while at other times less so. Often in life the best lessons are learnt through trial and error, and children need to become aware of the fact. This can be facilitated by creating an atmosphere in schools where mistakes are an expected and accepted part of learning (Lyons, Ford & Slee, 2013). Pahl and Barrett (2010) suggest that children should be encouraged to process new experiences on a regular basis without fear of failure, and be rewarded for doing so. A practical example teachers could adopt in the classroom context is to explicitly teach children how to deal with mistakes by deliberately making an error, and then talking the class through ways to correct it and move on (Nolan, Taket & Stagnitti, 2014). The main message for educators is to allow students opportunities to make errors, where the student knows they have support if needed.

Sackville (2013) and McQueen (2009) suggest that children today may lack resilience due to the fact they are not being allowed to make errors by over-protective parents. Research has also shown there are some links between parenting and anxiety in children (Negreiros & Miller, 2014; Rapee, 2011). As a result, teachers may need to contemplate working more closely with parents to ensure optimum outcomes for children under their care. That being said, a review of the literature in relation to resilience in children and parenting, revealed minimal discussion on this particular aspect.

² The concept of scaffolding builds on the work of Lev Vygotsky (1978, 1997) and his concept of the zone of proximal development, whereby children/students can achieve at a higher level with the help of a 'more-knowledgeable other'. The level of scaffolding is dependent upon the needs for the task, and is gradually withdrawn as expertise is gained.



Conclusion

Each person's journey through life will be full of peaks and troughs. Having the ability to push through the difficult periods depends on being resilient. Resilience, itself, is multi-dimensional and determined by an individual's upbringing, as much as it is by biological make-up. Therefore, being raised in an ideal environment is vitally important to the development of resilience. Adopting effective coping strategies, especially for young children, is not something that occurs automatically. Children need to be shown how – both parents and educators, have significant roles to play in teaching children effective coping mechanisms with which to handle stressful situations (Nolan, Taket & Stagnitti, 2014). Considering that the way we learn to deal with stress as a child can transfer into adolescence and, ultimately, into adulthood, the relevance cannot be understated.

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