

Fostering Resilience in Families Coping with Depression

Practical Ways Professionals Can Help Families Build on Their Power to Cope

For Early Childhood Professionals



Research on young children, birth to six, whose families face adversities, including depression, has shown that many children do surprisingly well. The word resilience has been used to describe the characteristics of these children. Dr. Ann Masten, one of the leading scholars on resilience, described it as “ordinary magic,” a quality that shows itself in

children’s curiosity, in their ability to relate to others, and above all, in their ability to survive and be successful even though their lives include many challenges. Identifying strengths in children and families and building resources at multiple levels are ways of fostering resilience and two of the principal goals of early care practice.

Understanding Resilience

Resilience can be understood at four levels: the individual, the family, the care giving system, and the larger community. Important qualities and factors supporting resilience were identified in studies of older children who grew up with the stressors of a depressed parent, living in poverty, or being isolated, yet managed to do well. These qualities were found within people and within the systems that surround them.

At the **individual level**, these children were able to:

- **Engage in age-appropriate activities**, such as going to school or participating in community or religious activities;
- **relate well to others**, either to peers or adults;
- **understand their family life**, in particular, the fact that their parents were depressed and that they were not to blame. Repeatedly, these young people said that understanding that their parents had an illness, that it represented a change from usual behavior that was not their fault, and that they were free to go on with their lives, helped them a great deal.

At the **parenting level**:

- Despite depression, many parents remain deeply committed to parenting, and indeed are able to be good parents. Parents may think or say, “I will do what I need to do to take care of my child when I am depressed, even if I cannot do anything else.”

- There are many good parenting programs that can be delivered in Head Start and child care settings.

At the **teaching and caregiving level**:

- Child care, preschool, schools, and health centers are vital in building strengths by providing comprehensive services for those facing adversity. Early care and education settings are a vital part of this caregiving system.
- Strong, positive relationships between parents and providers can help build resilience.

At the **larger community level**:

- Risk factors like community violence, unemployment, or lack of access to resources can make depression more likely. On the other hand, safe neighborhoods, strong social ties, and shared purpose, a sense of civic engagement and, for many, involvement in their faith communities, can build resilience. A strong and well-functioning early care setting serves as an important community resource and buffer against adversity.

What Promotes Resilience?

The study of strengths and resilience in children has shown the importance of positive caregiving relationships and the capacity children have to change and adapt in the face of adversity. Even in the most difficult life situations, there are many pathways to healthy

development for every child. This knowledge provides hope for parents. It is important to emphasize that schools, health clinics, and community centers can also provide help and support. In a child's early years, early care programs can play a vital role for families.

It is important to recognize resilience in children, in parents, in oneself as a professional, and to understand which systems in the community promote resilience. In the work of Head Start and child care, resilience can be recognized and fostered at these four levels.

Four Levels of Resilience

Level One: Individual Child

- Supporting a child's capacity to learn, to relate to others, to use imagination, and to see himself or herself as part of a community.
- Encouraging the child's relationships with their peers, their teachers, and their parents.
- Helping the child accomplish tasks and have a sense of mastery.

Level Two: Families

- Understanding the varied culturally-based ways families can show strength and resilience is one of the great opportunities for early care programs.
- Encouraging parents in their efforts to be more effective by following regular routines with their children, such as reading together.
- and have a sense of mastery.

Level Three: Teaching and Caregiving

- Encouraging consistent positive attachments with children and making parents feel welcomed and comfortable.
- Enhancing teachers' cultural awareness and attunement in support of families.
- Understanding depression and resilience in the families they work with can help teachers be a resource to families and more effective in their work.
- Having positive, supportive relationships among staff members.
- and have a sense of mastery.

Level Four: Community

- Understanding what exists and what is missing in community resources is an essential step to better parent outreach. Once community resources and gaps are identified, approaches can be used to strengthen what exists or to address what is missing.
- Sharing knowledge and experience with families to find the right service or information from a variety of settings, including health clinics, schools, places of worship, and community centers.
- and have a sense of mastery.

Strategies for Early Childhood Professionals to Promote Resilience

Recognizing and identifying strengths and resilience is a crucial part of the daily work of early childhood professionals. In reaching out to families, supporting the growth of children, and encouraging parents to be the best they can be, early childhood professionals do the important work of fostering resilience. Equally important is for staff to take care of themselves individually, take care of their families, and take care of one another. These activities are both a way to model promoting resilience and essential to the wellbeing of early childhood program staff.

A plan to build an early childhood program's capacity in this area requires shared goals, training, and support, including the following:

- **Gain knowledge.** Get to know each family well enough so that you can pinpoint strengths in both children and parents. Learn about the signs of depression and distress to aid in recognizing challenges and, where appropriate, getting help for parents with depression.
- **Be culturally informed, aware, and attuned.** Identify and honor the unique cultural dynamics within your early childhood program's community, and take conscious steps to educate yourself and others about the ways in which individual and family resilience is understood in those cultures.

- **Focus on supporting relationships.** Having strong, supportive, caring relationships with others is an important part of resilience. Having good relationships is an important preventive strategy for depression. Positive and productive child-to-child, teacher-to-parent, and parent-to-child interactions are the building blocks of resilience.
- **Celebrate strengths.** Work with parents and their children to help them recognize and name their own strengths. Helping families to see the positives in their children's lives, despite their own struggles and depression, is a powerful preventive activity.

In reaching out to parents, it is important for early childhood professionals to communicate a message of hope that encourages growth.

Three key messages for parents are:

1. **“You and your child have strengths.”**
Parents welcome information about resilience. Asking parents what they like best about their child or what makes them happiest about their child is a good starting point.
2. **“Reflect on what you need – then let's problem-solve about how to obtain it.”**
Asking a parent “What do you need?” may seem simple, but it is not. Many parents require support in understanding their needs before they can ask for resources. Encourage parents to think about how their current experience compares to how they

would like things to be before asking them what resources they need. This means reflecting on “the now” and imagining “the future”—something that families facing adversity may find difficult to do. Depressed parents may need extra support when trying to imagine their options because depression can make it challenging for a person to think beyond their day-to-day coping. Building trust in their relationships with families is an important strategy for early childhood professionals to encourage reflection and join in supporting their problem solving.

- 3. “Take care of yourself.”** Many times, parents will move toward changing their lives in the name of being a better parent. Let parents know that energy invested in self-care can have positive results for their children as well. Encourage parents to consider how they are taking care of themselves. Offer examples of “first steps” for better self-care. For instance, a goal to change one’s diet can be started by eating more fresh vegetables or cutting back on candy. A goal to exercise more can start with taking the stairs rather than the elevator. This is true for staff as well. Taking care of yourself is vitally important in being able to take care of others.

Additional Family Connections Resources

Short Papers

The Ability to Cope: Building Resilience in Yourself and Your Child <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/ability-to-cope.pdf>

The Challenges and Benefits of Making Parent Connections <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/challenges-benefits.pdf>

Better Parent Communication: What Do I Say When a Parent Tells Me Something Difficult? <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/better-parent-communication.pdf>

Understanding Depression Across Cultures <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/understand-depression-across-culture.pdf>

Trainings

Module One: (All Workshops) <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/training-module-1.pdf>

Module Four: A Better Home Visit <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/training-module-4.pdf>

Other Resources

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