Resilience

It is natural for us to want to protect children from life's stresses. But as children get older, the ups and downs of life are inevitable. Big life events like a family break-up, the arrival of a new sibling, a natural disaster, and smaller day-to-day events like a playground accident or a change in routine, all have an impact on children. How well we 'bounce back' from difficult, negative experiences stems from our resilience.

What is resilience?

Resilience is not a fixed attribute; children are not born resilient, and they don't automatically bounce back from times of stress. Children's resilience is influenced by early experiences. Professor Frank Oberklaid, director of the Centre for Community Child Health at The Royal Children's Hospital says, "There's a common misconception that 'what doesn't kill children makes them stronger'. This is simply not true. We need to ensure children grow up in supportive, nurturing environments that equip them with the life skills to cope with stress and adversity."

Right from infancy, children's resilience can be strengthened. Early childhood education and care (ECEC) services play an important role in building and supporting children's resilience.

Risk factors and stressors in children's lives

There are certain risk factors that make some children more vulnerable to stress and make it more difficult for them to bounce back and adapt successfully. And the more risk factors in a child's life, the more difficult it can be for them to cope and adapt.

Risk factors and stressors:

Personal –

- a birth injury or very low birth weight
- disability – their own, a sibling's or a parent's
- early childhood illness
- a challenging temperament (as perceived by the parent or carer).

Environmental –

- poor living conditions (e.g. poverty, overcrowded housing)
- natural disasters (e.g. floods, drought)
- traumatic events (e.g. catastrophes or accidents)
- being new to the country, city, town or ECEC service
- living in a new culture; communicating in a new language
- family break-up
- early separation from the main caregiver
- the birth of a new sibling (especially when under two years old)
- frequent changes in life (e.g. home address, ECEC service, caregivers)
- illness or death of a parent, sibling or other close relative or friend
- violence or tension in the home
- abuse (physical, sexual, emotional) or neglect.

In many cases, parents and ECEC educators will talk about the circumstances in children's lives that might be impacting on their feelings, mood and behaviour while at the service. There will be times though when

educators are not aware of certain risk factors in a child's life. Similarly, it may not always be obvious to a parent when their child isn't coping well away from home. Educators should be mindful of the different kinds of circumstances that might be stressful for a young child, as well as the more subtle signs that children need more support or attention.

The importance of building resilience in the early years

As with so many of life's skills, research has emphasised the importance of early childhood as a time for promoting resilience. KidsMatter, a national childhood mental health initiative, reports that there is a solid body of evidence which indicates that helping children build resilience leads to better mental health.

While some children may be at greater risk than others as a result of their particular challenges, all children need support to build their resilience and improve their ability to cope and bounce back. Outcome one (children have a strong sense of identity) and Outcome three (children have a strong sense of wellbeing) of the Early Years Learning Framework highlight the importance of developing children's 'emerging autonomy, inter-dependence, resilience and sense of agency' and their social and emotional wellbeing. Under the National Quality Standards, ECEC services should develop relationships that are responsive, respectful and promote children's sense of security and belonging, freeing them to explore the environment and engage in learning (Quality Area Five: Relationships with children).

Building children's resilience

Building resilience is about fostering protective factors that act as 'buffers' to stressful situations and events. Parents and educators alike play crucial roles developing protective factors in children's lives. While risk factors can't necessarily be removed from a child's life, it's important for educators to remember that how they respond can make a difference to how well children cope. Educators can also support parents to help them respond positively to their children during stressful situations.

Services need to consider what it is they do, or could do better, to ensure all children and families, especially those at risk and facing stressful situations – big and small – are supported.

Positive relationships and environments that support healthy development are the building blocks for resilience.

Parents and family

Secure attachment to parents is one of the most important protective factors in the development of resilience, and educators should consider ways to encourage and support parent attachment. For example, consider how you could support a parent who consistently responds to their child's behaviour negatively. Try to help them to understand the reasons

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Characteristics of resilient children

The ability to be resilient relies upon internal strengths and external supports; a combination of personal attributes and behaviours, and protective factors from family and the community. These strengths and supports do not prevent children from experiencing negative life events, but rather act as protective buffers against the effects of stress.

At an individual level there are some characteristics and behaviours (protective factors) that have been identified in resilient children. These include:

Temperament	active, affectionate, cuddly, 'easy' and engaging temperament, easy to soothe, alert, low distress/less likely to experience extremes of emotion.
Behaviour and relationships	social, able to elicit support from a caregiver, able to be autonomous and ask for help.
Attitude	self-confident, believes he/she can influence their own environment positively, has positive expectations.
Skills and development	a heightened and developing sense of humour, heightened sensory awareness, a clear and developing understanding of his/her own strengths, able to distance him/herself from a situation – to have a broader perspective, impulse control, has special talents/hobbies.

behind their child's behaviour and suggest ways they can respond more positively.

Family members, including siblings and grandparents, are important providers of stable care and can act as positive role models for young children, and are a major source of emotional support for children.

Educators

The relationships between educators and children are also central to supporting protective factors that build resilience. "The quality of attachment between children and their educators is significantly related to children's social, behavioural and educational competence, and more so when children are disadvantaged" (Luther, 2009 as cited in Linke and Radich, 2010). A useful resource for educators is Early Childhood Australia's 'Research in Practice Series' on children's resilience and the Early Years Learning Framework. The authors highlight the importance of a primary caregiver to help the child develop an internal model of secure attachment. A primary caregiver is someone who knows the child's needs and advocates for them within the service. A primary caregiver helps the child to expect people to be friendly and helpful because this is what they see in their own relationship with their primary caregiver. Children who have a friendly approach are more likely to find it in others. It's especially important for babies to develop secure relationships with primary caregivers. To support this, centre-based services in particular can try to organise work schedules that allow individual educators to form close relationships with infants, rather than have educators just 'take turns' caring for different infants.

A responsive and nurturing atmosphere and an organised, predictable environment with structure, rules and where children are given responsibilities, are all protective factors for children.

Vulnerable children, especially those who have been let down by other adults in their lives, need regular, positive and predictable experiences in their relationships with educators.

What can educators do to build resilience?

In your practice:

- Encourage all children to participate.
- Encourage independence.

- Hold high expectations of all children.
- Keep children safe while allowing them to explore their environment.
- Help families feel a part of your service's community and try to build links with children's own communities.

In your processes:

- Use play to help older children express their fears and encourage them to use art or games to express what they may not be able to put into words.
- Give children choices and allow them to try things so they feel good about managing new things.
- Help children to learn to do things by themselves.
- Give children lots of time to do what they're good at; give them time to succeed.
- Explain the rationale behind rules.

In your behaviour:

- Model confidence and optimism.
- Help children feel they are loved and belong.
- Be responsive and acknowledge children's feelings and skills; attend to babies' needs and respond to their cries and noises.
- Smile and give praise when babies and young children do things for themselves.
- Give children approval and encouragement for trying new things and for having a go.
- Be empathetic and caring.
- Show delight in what children are learning.
- Ask children their opinion and show respect for their own ideas and beliefs.
- Teach children how to solve their own problems.

Educators play a crucial role in developing and supporting the early life skills of the children under their care and developing a sense of resilience is an important part of this skill development. Through positive, warm relationships and environments filled with protective factors, educators support children to develop resilience and help children to grow up healthy, happy and able to cope with life's challenges.

A full list of references and the Parent Fact Sheet can be downloaded from the Centre for Community Child Health website: www.rch.org.au/ccch

Case study: Supporting resilience at Borilla

The Borilla Community Kindergarten is in Emerald in Queensland's Central Highlands district. Home to a mix of professional families, farmers and railway employees, Emerald is now seeing a fresh influx of families and children as a result of Queensland's mining boom. In addition, Emerald was one of the Queensland towns badly hit by the devastating floods in the summer of 2010/11. At the time, the mayor of Emerald estimated that it could take two years for the town to recover. The floods meant that when *Childcare and Children's Health* spoke to Borilla director Jenny Finlay, some of the educators had only been back in their homes for a month. To describe 2011 as a difficult year for the people of Emerald would be a major understatement.

There was significant stress placed on the community, families and children during the floods as Queensland experienced widespread devastation and loss of life. The floods and their aftermath were very unsettling and upsetting for children and adults alike. This stress helped to cement Jenny's belief in the importance of supporting resilience and the foundations of social and emotional health for children.

To help support children's resilience in the wake of the floods, the Borilla educators worked with them and their families as the need arose. Jenny reflects that it is now, later in the year, that they are getting the most response from the children. She notes that 'lots of drawings are coming through, leading to lots of conversations'. Additionally, educators have been provided with ongoing special training related to the floods.

Having started with the KidsMatter pilot program in 2010, Jenny describes the program as really important to validate Borilla's practices. KidsMatter works to support mental health development for young children and resilience is a key factor in mental health. The program confirms the knowledge that Jenny's experience has given her:

that without getting the foundations of social and emotional health and development right, children's cognitive development is more difficult to achieve. Jenny says that 'the very most important thing is creating a sense of community, everyone needs to feel they have a special place and that they belong'. At Borilla, that manifests itself in their 'we have a space for every face' philosophy. A wall bears photos of all the educators and the 88 children who attend across the week. For children and educators who are no longer at Borilla, their photos are still displayed, which prompts talk from the children about their friends who have left the service. Developing that sense of belonging and security for the children as well as for educators and the wider community is crucial to developing resilience. Jenny explains, 'we try and provide support for them. It's very much a holistic, ecological approach.'

This support extends to the educators. As Jenny notes, 'if I want them to be working with children, then they have to be in a good place in order to be able to support the children and their families as well.' For Borilla's educators, this is seen in strong mutual support, which allows educators – who range from school-based trainees up to older and more experienced hands – to draw on each other's strengths.

As Jenny concludes, supporting mental health and resilience 'is not reinventing the wheel, but it is stuff that we need to revisit and remember', as a vital part of caring for children, families and each other.

Including fathers in ECEC services

More than ever before, dads are playing an active part in their children's lives. Unlike in earlier generations when fathers tended to be less a part of day-to-day parenting, new parents now expect that fathers will play an active role in their children's lives. However, most Australian dads return to work within two weeks of the birth of a new baby while most Australian mums stay at home for an average of at least six months before returning to work. For many dads, this reduces the opportunities to be as active a parent as they wish during their child's first years of life.

The challenge facing many Australian families today is how to balance paid work with the time to care for children. For more than 60 per cent of Australian families, both parents are in paid work. This puts additional demands on the time available to get everything done – it also seems to put particular pressure on fathers, many of whom are still the major income earners.

Competing pressures for dads

A little over 63 per cent of fathers in the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children reported that they agreed or strongly agreed that "because of my work responsibilities I have missed out on home or family activities that I would have liked to have taken part in". Around 30 per cent of fathers reported that when it came to caring for children, they would like to do more. These statistics tell us that many fathers feel that they're not able to take advantage of a full range of parenting opportunities because of competing pressures.

Make the most of limited time

One of the ways that fathers can be supported to make the most of their sometimes limited hands-on parenting time, is ensuring that early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings are welcoming for all parents and caregivers. Without realising it or doing so consciously, processes and practices can easily become oriented towards the majority of parents seen at the service – mothers – as well as the majority of educators, which in

Photo: Springvale Service for Children

gender terms, is also females. Consider the images of adults you use at your service – are they mostly pictures of mums? Would this be a welcoming environment for a dad?

The National Quality Standards highlight the importance of collaborative relationships with families as fundamental to achieving quality outcomes for children. The standards and elements outlined in Quality Area Six state that within services:

- 6.1: Respectful supportive relationships with families are developed and maintained.
- 6.2: Families are supported in their parenting role and their values and beliefs about child rearing are respected.

It can be a challenge to include fathers in the communication, family participation and orientation processes at your ECEC service. After all, many fathers who feel they miss out on family activities cite work responsibilities as the reason for this and work hours generally clash with childcare hours. Even if fathers are available for either drop off or pick up, they may not have time

or the inclination to stay at the service for long. As educators, you will well know the importance of drop off and pick up times for developing relationships and exchanging information. Could your service survey fathers to find out their thoughts on ways to help them feel more comfortable and engaged at your service?

A 2008 review of Australian and international studies that aimed to increase fathers' participation in a range of early childhood services found that without significant efforts specifically directed to father inclusion, programs that aim to engage 'parents' or 'families' will fail to engage fathers. Supporting father-inclusive practice as part of your service delivery is part of ongoing service development, rather than a matter of making isolated or one-off changes. Making the commitment to actively work towards father-inclusive services can help to support father-child time and bring significant benefits to children and families.

How can your service be more father-inclusive?

As a starting point, educators should reflect on the role of fathers in the lives of the children at the service and fathers' role more broadly within the service. Are educators' expectations the same as for mothers? This reflection can help drive discussion and the development of strategies that help bring dads in.

The Fletcher review in 2008 identified a range of strategies that services can implement to help make ECEC services more father-inclusive:

- Establish goals for the participation of fathers. For example, identify not only the actual fathers at your service, but the people who can influence those dads and other early childhood practitioners who could be involved.

- Develop professional training in father-inclusive practices and make that training available to educators and all other staff.

- Introduce policy guidelines and management tools to promote the adoption of father-friendly procedures and father-inclusive professional practice. For example, consider the language and imagery you use when speaking to fathers or the displays or communication materials you use at your service. Do your policies in these areas address father-inclusive practice?

The Department of Families, Housing, Communities and Indigenous Affairs has developed a Father-Inclusive Practice Guide for services, which is available online at *www.fahcsia.gov.au/sa/families/pubs/documents/father-inclusive/father_inclusive_practice.pdf.* The guide sets out step-by-step strategies for making your ECEC service more father-inclusive and provides guidance on adapting the general guidelines for your area. Research indicates that services that have, for example, a need to attract CALD or Indigenous fathers should pursue a particular set of strategies.

By taking a strengths-based approach, ECEC services can capitalise on their existing skills and abilities to improve father-inclusiveness as well as outcomes for children and families.

A full list of references and the Parent Fact Sheet (available in different community languages) can be downloaded from the Centre for Community Child Health website: www.rch.org.au/ccch