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Resiliency and Assets: Understanding the Ecology of Youth Development

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For those of us who interact with children and youth on a daily basis, whether in our role as parents, educators or youth development professionals, what tends to get our attention about children is their behavior. Although parents are advised to praise the positive behavior they want to encourage, there is quite often a sense of urgency on their part to eliminate the negative behavior because they are cognizant that aberrant behavior will potentially have negative consequences. Children may find themselves alienated from their peers, possibly harmed and unhappy. These thoughts are frightening because we want our children to become productive, caring and *cared for* people who are contributing members of their community. The focus, therefore, is placed on inappropriate behavior and on utilizing strategies to change it. This comes at the risk of not supporting the very many examples of positive behaviors and qualities a child is exhibiting and recognizing what helped to bring them about, as well as to feelings, on the part of both parties, of

inadequacy and self-doubt. It is a common ongoing issue for parents, educators and youth workers *to remember* to focus on the positive attributes and behavior. By doing so, there is a greater likelihood in bringing about behavioral change and avoiding feelings of self-doubt.

The example of the situation between parent and child is analogous to a trend which has evolved in the focus of youth-serving policy makers and programs. The predominant paradigm which has developed for increasing the well-being and life chances of American

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youth is one that is problem focused, i.e., focuses on naming, counting and reducing the

negative (Benson, 1997b). The 'negative' includes developmental risks (e.g., poverty, family dysfunction) and problem behaviors (e.g., teen pregnancy, violent behavior, substance abuse). This approach reflects a tendency for policy makers to think, plan and evaluate in terms of problems and to reduce or control negative behaviors through prevention, early intervention or other services. However, this approach is limited and incomplete by itself. Attention also needs to be given to recognizing and understanding the needs of youth and promoting positive developmental experiences. The encouragement of the positive (e.g., belonging, engagement, empowerment) will result in fewer high-risk behaviors. As Peter Benson, president of Search Institute and author of *All Kids are Our Kids* states, "The two sides of the coin, reducing the negative and promoting the positive, are not opposites. There is a synergy, an interaction between these" (Benson, 1997a, p.19).

The developmental asset framework is an emerging approach in psychosocial development and its relevance to current youth development work (Benson, 1997a). This framework represents a shift in the language about children and adolescents from a preoccupation with problems, deficits and risks to a vocabulary of what is needed to promote healthy development. The developmental asset approach represents a synthesis of research on resiliency and youth development and offers a conceptualization for promoting positive youth behavior by focusing on the building blocks necessary for a child's growth and development. The asset framework also seeks to establish an approach to healthy youth development which recognizes and incorporates the wide-ranging impact from the various contexts in which youth develop.

Although the developmental asset framework is new because of its synthesis and integration, it builds on the important work of a number of researchers in the fields of child and adolescent development, prevention, youth development, and resiliency. This paper will describe how the asset framework incorporates the research and area of practice seeking to foster the development of resiliency in youth and extends the capabilities of policy makers and youth workers. The purposes of this monograph are to: (1) review the concept of resiliency, and the resiliency literature, (2) introduce the developmental asset framework, (3) discuss the importance of the resiliency research to the asset framework, and (4) discuss the relevance of the asset framework to youth development.

The Concept of Resiliency

Defining Resiliency

The idea or concept of resiliency has been defined in various ways by numerous individuals over the past several years. In general, resiliency is the ability of an individual to respond positively to negative conditions or stressful occurrences, thereby preventing long-lasting damage to the individual. Henderson and Milstein (1996, p.7) defined resiliency "as the capacity to spring back, rebound, successfully adapt in the face of adversity, and develop social and academic competence despite exposure to severe stress...or simply the stress of today's world." Lifton (1993) discussed resilience as the capacity for transformation and change and O'Gorman (1994, p.2) feels "resilience is the ability to recognize our personal power —

to see ourselves and our lives in new ways." A somewhat broader definition of resiliency, "an innate self-righting and transcending ability within all children, youth, adults, organizations and communities," was presented by Henderson, Benard, Sharp-Light and Richardson (1996, p.4). No matter how resiliency is defined, the meaning is derived from a growing body of research from the fields of education, developmental psychology, sociology and related areas. Before reviewing specific resiliency research, some background information may be useful to the reader.

Background on Resiliency Research

Resiliency research has taken on the form of either ethnographic or longitudinal studies of children born into or raised in extreme high risk conditions. The at-risk conditions are either family related (such as abusive, alcoholic, mentally ill, or criminal parents), or are neighborhood or community related (such as war-torn or poverty-stricken communities). Resiliency studies identify characteristics of youth who are able to overcome the high risk factors and develop into successful, competent individuals; i.e., the studies identify the characteristics of "resilient" youth. Also, some studies present information on the characteristics of the environments (families, schools, communities) that help contribute to the development of resiliency in youth.

Resiliency Studies

Probably one of the best-known and often-cited resiliency studies is the long-term longitudinal study conducted on the island of Kauai in Hawaii by an interdisciplinary team of pediatricians, psychologists and public health workers (Werner, Bierman and French, 1971; Werner & Smith, 1977; Werner & Smith, 1982,1989; Werner & Smith, 1992). The Kauai Longitudinal Study, as it became known, studied the development of all children born on the island in 1955. The individuals were followed to ages one, two, 10, 18 and 32 (Werner & Smith,1992). They represented a mix of ethnic groups, mostly Japanese, Pilipino and Hawaiian descent. Most of the children were born into families with parents who had not completed a high school education and who were unskilled or semi-skilled laborers. The study followed a total of 505 individuals to adulthood from the prenatal period.

Approximately one-third of the members of the birth cohort were considered at high risk due to poverty, perinatal stress, parental

discord or parental psychopathology. Of the individuals in the vulnerable group (N=201), two-thirds of them developed serious learning and/or behavior problems by the age of 18. However, one-third of this group grew into what is considered competent, fulfilled adults by the age of 32 (Werner & Smith, 1992).

Four books which describe the Kauai Longitudinal Study in detail have been published; each book has focused on a different component of the study.

- The Children of Kauai* (Werner, Bierman & French, 1971), presents information on the development of the children from birth to age 10, looking at the effects of perinatal stress, poverty and a helter-skelter care-taking environment.

- Kauai's Children Come of Age* (Werner & Smith, 1977), examines the roots of the learning disorders, mental health problems and antisocial behavior exhibited by many of the high risk children in their teens as well as analyzes the "likelihood of the persistence of serious problems into adulthood" (Werner & Smith, 1992, p.2).

- *Vulnerable but Invincible* (Werner & Smith, 1982,1989), compares and contrasts the care-giving environments and behaviors of resilient youngsters in the study with their peers (same age & gender) who developed serious coping problems. The authors also began to look at the "roots of resiliency" and at protective factors.

- *Overcoming the Odds* (Werner & Smith, 1992), explores the high risk individuals from birth to age 32. Long-term effects of adversity on the adult lives of those previously identified as high risk are traced as well as the long-term effects of protective factors and processes.

As a result of their long-term longitudinal study, the authors identified a number of protective factors which differentiated the resilient groups of individuals from those who developed serious problems in childhood, adolescence or adulthood. According to the authors, "one of the most striking findings of our follow-up in adulthood was that most high risk youths with serious coping problems in adolescence had staged a recovery of sorts by the time they reached their early 30s" (Werner & Smith, 1992, p.193). The Kauai study has provided a strong basis or foundation for the resiliency movement and has been a significant factor in shifting the paradigms in education, prevention and intervention from a problem focus to a more positive pro-developmental approach as mentioned above.

Other researchers have come to some of the same or similar conclusions as those of the researchers of the Kauai Longitudinal Study, especially in regard to the presence of "protective factors" and their importance in helping to ameliorate potentially harmful or stressful conditions (Benard, 1991). Other

findings have supported the ability of some high risk "resilient" individuals to turn "their lives around" and be contributing members of their community. Even though the quantity of resiliency research studies is relatively small, it is a rich and diverse body of research conducted by individuals from various professional perspectives and with a heterogeneous mixture of subjects (Werner & Smith, 1992). The studies are with subjects from different countries, different ethnic backgrounds and across socio-economic status lines.

Michael Rutter's (1983,1989) work on resiliency and protective factors, like Werner's and Smith's, has been important to furthering the understanding of this body of research. In a discussion of protective factors, Werner & Smith (1992, p.5) state that "a protective effect is evident only in combination with a risk variable. Either the protective factor has no effect in low risk populations, or its effect is magnified in the presence of the risk variable." They go on to discuss Rutter's (1989) work on protective factors in which he "suggests the effects are catalytic: They may reduce the impact of the risk factor and/or the negative chain reactions associated with the risk situation, they may increase self-esteem and efficacy, and they may lead to the opening up of opportunities" (Werner & Smith, p.5). Again and again in his work, Rutter emphasized that high risk youngsters may be helped if caregivers focus on the protective processes that help an individual move away from risk toward adaptation. Other studies (Block, 1971; Elder, 1974; Furstenberg, Brooks-Gunn, & Morgan, 1987), support the resiliency research presented above, with similar findings of protective factors and change in life trajectory.

A somewhat different, and very exciting resiliency-supporting study is the National Longitudinal Study on Adolescent Health,

which is being conducted by researchers at the Universities of Minnesota and North Carolina. The initial report of the study, which is being called the largest survey of adolescents ever undertaken in the United States, was published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (Resnick et al., 1997). One of the reasons this study is exciting is the manner in which it was designed and conducted. The authors used resiliency literature to identify what they were going to look for in the student's lives. Also, they emphasized the importance of, and power of, protective factors. One major finding from the research is that youth "connectedness" to family and to school is protective against "every risk behavior measure except history of pregnancy" (Resnick et al., 1997, p.823). This finding validates or confirms connectedness or building linkages and social bonds as a major theme of resiliency research, a theme which Benard (1991) and Werner & Smith (1992) discussed in their work.

Another interesting study of resilient youth is presented by Emmy Werner in *Reluctant Witnesses: Children's voices from the Civil War* (1998). Based on the accounts (through diaries, letters & memoirs) of 120 children, ages 4 to 16, Werner tells their stories of involvement in the U. S. Civil War. She speaks of their bonds to family and community, their power of faith, their feelings of importance in the war effort as well as other protective factors which contributed to their resiliency in the face of horrific adversity. Once again, her findings in this retrospective study support other findings seen in resiliency research.

Individual and Environmental Characteristics of Resiliency

In *Fostering Resiliency in Kids: Protective Factors in the Family, School & Community*, Benard (1991) synthesized over

100 resiliency-related studies, books and journal articles. In the article, Benard brings forth attributes of resilient children consistently seen in the research and also presents her findings in the contexts of family, school and the community. In her profile of the resilient child, Benard first presents specific attributes which "have been consistently identified as describing the resilient child" (1991, p.3). The attributes are:

- Social Competence* — includes any prosocial behavior, including empathy and caring, a sense of humor, responsiveness, the ability to communicate well with others, and other behaviors which allow the child to develop positive relationships and friendships.

- Problem Solving Skills* — in general, includes the ability to bring about changes by planning and other means.

- Autonomy* — refers to having a sense of one's own identity and an ability to act independently and exert some control over one's environment.

- Sense of Purpose and Future* — this attribute is related to the previous one of autonomy and includes a number of related factors, including a feeling of confidence, academic motivation, a sense of hopefulness, and other factors which all help contribute to a belief in a bright and compelling future.

Benard states that there are other attributes of resilient children that have been identified but the four attributes presented above " a p p e a r t o

be the common threads running through the personalities of resilient children...— no matter their health or sex status" (1991, p.5). The other important piece of Benard's synthesis is her identification and discussion of "protective characteristics within the family, the school and the community systems that appear to facilitate the development of resiliency in youth" (1991, p.5). Because resiliency research studies individuals at risk in one or more of the three environments, the environments (family, school and community) take on different levels of importance depending on the situation. For example, if a child is living in an abusive home situation, the school and community environments may take on more importance in the development of resiliency for the child. If a child is being raised in an extremely impoverished community, the family and school settings may take on a higher level of importance in the development of resiliency. It also seems to be true that there are protective factors and strengths which contribute to resiliency even in the high risk environments. According to (Benard, 1991), competent families, schools, and communities are characterized by three protective factors. The factors are:

•*Caring relationships* — a caring, supportive relationship with someone, somewhere seems to be the most important protective factor, according to Benard (1997). Social networks or connectiveness with caring peers or friends is also an important factor.

•*High expectations* — high expectations for contribution to family life, for academic achievement, for "the ability to make-it" are all important to the development to an individual's resiliency. Whether in the home, school, or community, the expectation of high expectations needs to be clearly communicated.

•*Opportunities for participation* — providing youth with opportunities for meaningful participation at all environmental levels is an important protective factor which has been well documented in resiliency studies (Benard, 1997). Werner & Smith (1992) found resilient youth to be engaged in cooperative enterprises such as being a cheerleader or being involved in the 4-H program. The authors also found that roles such as caring for a younger sibling or managing the household when a parent couldn't, were powerful protective factors.

The Developmental Asset Framework

The developmental asset framework was conceptualized out of the recognition that in addition to basic developmental needs of youth, the opportunities and relationships that young people experience in their families, schools, and communities provide the foundation on which they develop (Leffert, Saito, Blyth, & Kroenke, 1996). The influences from these sources can be positive or negative as they can work to shape choices and behaviors.

In 1989, after synthesizing research on child and adolescent development, the Search

Institute in Minneapolis began constructing a framework of developmental assets — experiences, opportunities, and internal capacities which had been identified to serve as protective factors inhibiting health — compromising behavior and/or as enhancement factors which promote academic achievement and parallel forms of success (Benson, 1990, 1993, as cited in Leffert, Saito, Blyth & Kroenke 1996). The number of assets has expanded from 20 to 40, currently. The Search Institute has been involved in a national research study of public school students — both middle and high school — in 600 school districts. The research has found that it is normative for most youth in all communities to lack many of the developmental assets and that as the number of assets rises, multiple forms of high risk behavior decrease and multiple forms of thriving increase (Benson, 1997a).

As previously mentioned, the identification of the developmental assets is grounded in extensive research, particularly in child and adolescent development, protective factors, prevention and resiliency. A key interest in synthesizing this literature was to locate those developmental factors known to be predictive of healthy outcomes, i.e., those factors which help to protect youth against involvement in high risk behaviors, those which promote forms of thriving, and those which help youth rebound from adversity.

It was necessary, in the development of the asset framework that both internal (internalized skills, competencies, and commitments) and external (environmental) factors known to promote positive developmental outcomes be included, and that these elements be important for all youth, regardless of social circumstances. Finally, because the assets are about the primary processes of socialization, they cover the kinds of relationships, social experiences, social environments, patterns of interactions, and norms over which a

community of people have considerable control (Benson, 1997b).

Within the two broad categories mentioned above, there are four types of assets:

External Assets

- *Support* (e.g., family, school)
- *Empowerment* (e.g., service to others, community values youth)
- *Boundaries and expectations* (e.g., family boundaries, positive peer influence)
- *Constructive use of time* (e.g., youth programs, religious community)

Internal Assets

- *Commitment to learning* (e.g., school engagement, reading for pleasure)
- *Positive values* (e.g., integrity, caring, restraint)
- *Social competence* (e.g., planning and decision-making, peaceful conflict resolution)
- *Positive identity* (e.g., personal power, sense of purpose)

These eight types of assets are defined by forty individual assets; however, the most important contribution of this framework lies less in the forty individual assets than in the big picture of healthy development. The forty assets serve as reminders that young people can experience each category of assets through a wide array of relationships and experiences (Benson, 1997b). Supportive, empowering relationships with peers, parents, and other adults tend to protect youth from participating in high risk behaviors. Places and opportunities also make a difference; young people who are involved in youth development programs and activities are less likely to be involved in high risk behaviors (Leffert, Saito, Blyth & Kroenke, 1996).

The asset-building approach incorporates longstanding research in human development from the perspective of human

ecology and resiliency. The “ecological model” of human development views development as the result of a series of ongoing interactions and adaptations between the individual and a set of overlapping systems that relate both to the individual and to each other (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This perspective has led to two decades of research on viewing adolescent development in an interactive framework of multiple influences. As discussed above, research on “risk and resiliency”, has identified protective factors that contribute to the development of resiliency in young people, which can help them survive and thrive in high risk and otherwise stressful environments. The ecological model and the research on resiliency, provide a unique contribution to promoting and influencing healthy youth development, as conceptualized in the asset-building approach.

The Importance of Communities for Youth Development

A guiding component of the developmental asset framework is recognizing the influence communities have on youth. Reiss (1995) suggests several reasons to study individual development in community environments:

- there are strong interaction effects between individual or family behaviors and structural and behavioral properties of communities
- there is reason to expect reciprocal causal effects between community structure and delinquent behavior
- there are indications for where, when, and how to intervene to discourage antisocial development and behaviors and encourage prosocial development and behaviors and whether to intervene at the individual, family, or community level or in some combination of individual, family, and community levels.

Beyond families, the three forms of organizations thought to significantly affect adolescent development and behavior are schools, peer networks, and communities. As of 1993, however, no longitudinal study had been able to separately measure individual, family, peer network, school and community effects on adolescent antisocial or prosocial behavior (Farrington, 1993, as cited in Reiss, 1995). Community has been generally treated as a structural property of schools and therefore confounded with school effects rather than treated as an independent source of variation.

Recent research has examined the relationship between the contexts that impact on adolescent development and the effects of those contexts on development itself. A study by Blyth and Leffert (1995), surveyed over 33,000 youth in 112 small and geographically isolated communities (i.e., not parts of major metropolitan areas) for the strengths they experience in four contexts within their communities: family, peers, school, and community. A community was defined as healthier if its youth in grades 9-12 engaged in fewer problem behaviors and less healthy if its youth engaged in more of these behaviors. The definition of a healthy community refers to the health of the youth who grow up in the community based on the presence or absence of the actual behaviors of youth residing in the community (Blyth & Leffert, 1995).

Differences between youth and their community-level domains of family strengths, school strengths, community-involvement strengths and peer strengths or norms were explored. To assess whether or not community contexts impact similar types of youth in different ways, the study examined a youth's vulnerability to problem behaviors by measuring 30 different assets or protective factors that they might possess or be surrounded by. As a way to avoid the

confounding effects of community strengths and protective factors, community strengths and youth vulnerability were not used in the same analyses. With regard to individual benefits from community strengths, results indicated that youth in the healthiest communities were more likely to attend

religious services, to feel their schools were caring and encouraging places, to be involved in structured activities, and to remain committed to their own learning. A community's health is affected more when a majority of youth are experiencing the community strength. Community strengths appear to have power when they become normative rather than the exception. Extracurricular and non-school activities (e.g., youth programs, religious groups) provide powerful benefits to youth and their communities (Blyth & Leffert, 1995).

The Importance of Resiliency and the Asset Framework to Youth Development

Cooperative Extension, as a part of the land grant university system, has a mission to bring university-based research knowledge, through collaborative county-based programs, to people in the United States. In a variety of fields, Cooperative Extension Advisors bring knowledge and assistance to agencies and organizations and individuals. Youth Development Advisors are increasingly active in developing collaborative programs for youth through community-based organizations and 4-H. The 4-H Youth Development Program, as the youth development program for Cooperative Extension, provides a critical context for development; shaping the lives of hundreds of thousands of young people throughout the nation. It contains many of the elements necessary for successful programming for young people. These include offering opportunities for community involvement, opportunities to develop meaningful relationships with adults outside of the family, participation in programs which are geared for school-to-work transitions and career planning, and opportunities for positive peer relationships and leadership roles.

By working with families and communities, 4-H has the potential to make a tremendous impact on its members. Indeed, youth have reported the great amount of satisfaction, knowledge and personal development from participation in 4-H (Quinn, 1995). The developmental asset framework provides a comprehensive paradigm for positive program development. It can provide a basis of comparison for an established, successful program through the incorporation of asset-building criteria and focus on the positive developmental experiences known to keep youth from high risk behavior.

A consistent finding in resiliency studies has been the ability for children identified as high risk to develop into well-adjusted, healthy and competent young adults. All the studies presented above, as well as numerous other studies on resiliency, show this somewhat surprising phenomenon. For example, the research that Rutter conducted on children living and growing up in poverty found "that half of the children living under conditions of disadvantage do not repeat that pattern in their own adult lives" (Garmezy, 1991, as cited in Benard, 1991, p.2).

It is critical that all individuals who care about youth, work with youth or develop programs for youth, remember and keep in mind this "self-righting" nature that children have, even in the midst of extreme adversity. It is crucial that parents, teachers, youth workers, and policy-makers acknowledge this propensity toward resiliency when developing programs for or working with youth. As Henderson (1997) suggests, we must talk to youth about their innate resilience and assist them in becoming aware of both the internal and external characteristics of their lives that they may utilize in times of need. A snap shot in time may show that a child is low in

developmental assets; however, this does not mean the child will not develop into a caring and cared for, competent adult.

It is on this background and foundation of resiliency research, "with the 'resiliency attitude' and with the certainty that most 'asset-poor' kids will eventually succeed" (Henderson, 1997, p.26), that youth development and asset development must take place. Anything that can be done to increase the prevalence of assets in young people will, over the long run, help youth to develop their resiliency (Henderson, 1997).

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