

## An In-Depth Look at Resilience In Children Raised With Trauma



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## Focus?

### Personal

- Parenting biological
- Parenting adoption/foster
- Special needs situations
- Extended family
- Mentoring/Coaching
- Other

### Professional

- Early intervention
- Mental Health
- School
- Medical
- Case manager
- Social services
- Parenting

## Resilience

### What it means:

Resilience is combination of protective factors and adaptive responses that allow for someone to overcome serious adversity and hardship.



## Resilience:

Is it an elaborate magic trick? Aren't you born with it? Doesn't it just happen when the trauma ends??



## Resilience: Where does it come from?

We now know resilience can be learned and strengthened in both children and adults.



## The Little, Ordinary Things

- "Simple, everyday, relational interactions...make a difference to children's capacity to deal with difficult issues" (Johnson 2008, pg 387)
- "What began as a quest to understand the extraordinary has revealed the power of the ordinary. Resilience does not come from rare special qualities, but from the everyday magic of ordinary, normative human resources in the minds, brains and bodies of children, in their families and relationships and in their communities" (Ann Masten 2001 p. 235)

## The Core Ingredients

- 1) The availability of at least one stable, caring and supportive relationship with a committed adult. Ideally this is a parent or caregiver, but can be a coach, neighbor, social worker, therapist, teacher, etc.
- 2) Develop a sense of belonging. Connection to family, faith, cultural traditions, youth sports, school or community.
- 3) Developing strong executive functioning skills and self-regulation skills.
- 4) Having a sense of competency in oneself.
- 5) Building a sense of mastery and belief in their own capacity to overcome hardships.

SOUNDS EASY, RIGHT?



Trick question



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## Scope of the Problem

### Big Picture: Timing is Critical



- A healthy, responsive environment in the first three years of life is protective for a lifetime.
- Optimal time to lay down the neurological foundations and network for the all critical skills across all domains of development.
- Developmental tasks build on themselves sequentially over a series of "sensitive periods".
- Through repeated stimulation, simply circuitry is established and stabilized.
- Over time more complex circuitry is built upon this simple layer, which allows for the development of highly specialized functions.
- Years are needed to build these skills (sustained attention).

## Sensitive Periods



When these optimal time periods for wiring are met with minimal stimulation, weak foundational circuitry is established.

As that critical time comes to a close, the brain becomes less responsive to environmental input for that particular area.

So what was built, was built, regardless of the quality or frequency of stimulation. The circuit is formed, good or bad, and the brain moves on.

Weak areas remain vulnerable.

As the child grows, more complex skills are layered upon these foundational weak circuits.

These layers are undeniably influenced by weak foundation and the developmentally trajectory has now been influenced.

To get back on track, accommodations have to come from higher level circuitry.

Takes **INTENTIONAL** effort, as those lower levels are no longer as flexible or responsive as they were when their windows were open.



## What Builds this Circuitry?

Micro "serve and return" interactions between infant and caregiver are the strongest, most influential, building blocks for the construction and stabilization of all brain circuitry. We are built in our relationships.



Image: lekkyjustdolt/Adobe Stock

## Circuitry is Intertwined



- The brain is also designed to become a highly integrated organ.
- Typically learn about developmental areas as separate, but they are deeply intertwined.
- A rich and responsive environment is crucial for deepening the inter-connectivity between each of these specialized areas.
- Critical for processing and integrating information

## Circuitry is Intertwined



Language ex: Requires multiple skills, such as adequate hearing, ability to link meaning to words, sustained attention, ability to differentiate and reproduce sounds, ability coordinate one's tongue, and ability to engage in meaningful and reciprocal interactions with adults, etc.

- Countless repetitions of sound stimulates the speech and language centers of the brain.
- Synapses are formed and strengthened, which allow cooing, sighs, and vowel sounds to emerge between 2-8 weeks of age
- Children "serve" with the sounds and parents "return" via the same kind of sounds and it goes back and forth
- This underlies the development of babbling and consonants sounds, which emerge at 5 to 6 months of age
- Reinforcement of this babbling at 5 to 6 months leads to first words around 10-12 months and burst of language seen between 15 and 18, then 18 and 24 months.
- Vocabulary at 24 months correlated with future language skills, reading skills, writing skills, etc.

## Expected Skills for Entering School

- Sustained attention
- filtering distractions
- managing emotions
- managing behavior
- completing tasks (perseverance)
- communicating needs verbally
- taking turns
- share
- remembering instructions



## Repeated exposure to stress affects core strengths even when the trauma has ended:

- In early childhood, toxic stress undermines the foundational templates for these critical skills by directing brain development towards survival responses during optimal brain responsiveness.
- Overtime, these underdeveloped skills become increasingly obvious next to peers – undermining one's overall sense of competency and adding to the stress response. This undermines the ability to practice and build these skills.
- Moreover, by adolescence, the discrepancies between those with underdeveloped skills and those with strong skills can feel insurmountable. While it is critical to continue to develop and practice these skills, excessive stress will overload these systems, leaving youth to rely on their overdeveloped survival systems.

The more we are aware of the micro-skills that underlie resilience, the easier it becomes to focus our interventions, support and connections.



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### Core Ingredient #1:

**The availability of at least one stable, caring and supportive relationship with a committed adult**

(Leads to Core Ingredient #2, #3, #4, and #5)

*This ongoing, stable and supportive relationship is the medium through which another can develop the ability to stabilize, regulate, connect, find security, explore, learn and heal.*

In order for this critical factor to be protective, the individual must be able to take in and respond to relationships.





## What it means:

Attachment refers to the capacity to form and maintain strong affection-based bonds with another person.

It is as fundamental and emotionally critical as oxygen

(Powell et al., 2014 pg. 11).

Attunement refers to the ability to be aware of and responsive to another person's cues.

The level of attunement determines the quality of attachment.

## Why is it important?

Attachment and Attunement are the cornerstones for all of our development

## Attachment and Attunement provide the context for our earliest relationships

It is here that we start to learn:



- Separate entities (me and you)
- Attachment styles/patterns
- Anticipation of others
- Control over body and coordination of muscle groups
- Basic non-verbal and verbal skills
- Basic affect regulation and stress reduction skills
- Understand and interpret our experiences (self-reflection)
- Basic executive functioning skills
- Awareness of how bodies move in space and around nearby objects
- Understanding we can impact the environment
- Understand how the world works
- Understand how to get our needs met!
- That we are valuable, interesting and matter!

Healthy, responsive and attuned matters!

We learn that other's matter too!  
Children aren't as egocentric as we once believed

The ability to perceive and recognize that other people have different preferences is online in healthy toddlers by 18 months of age (Repacholi and Gopnik's work).



## How Secure Attachment is Used

Attachment behaviors activate when child feels unsafe or overwhelmed



Exploratory behaviors turn on, allowing for learning and mastery

"Healthy attachments allow a child to love, to become a good friend, and to have a positive model for future relationships. As a child grows, other consistent and nurturing adults such as teachers, family friends, and relatives will (continue to) shape his or her ability for attachment. The attached child will be a better friend, student, and classmate, which promotes all kinds of learning"

(Perry, 2002 Pg. 3)



## Micro-Skills Associated with Attachment

## ARE HUMANS GOOD OR BAD?



Ability to seek safety in people rather than isolation

Ability to take in safety

Ability to let others help

**1<sup>st</sup>:** are these present at least some of the time?

## Perception of Safety

- Important to respect being self-sufficient as a means for finding safety.
- We as adults need to shift our focus to our own attunement skills and less to their attachment skills. This allows space and time to assess how safe we are.
- Important goal to help teach assessing safety, not just danger.



### Form relationships

- Ability to give and receive love (invest in self and others)
- Ability to see others as separate and valuable
- Ability for bi-directional interactions (give and take)
- Ability to have respect, compassion and empathy for others
- Ability to make and sustain friends, including work through disruptions

### Affiliation

- Ability to join with others – usually based on similarities.
- Ability to be part of a group
- Ability to listen, share, show interest and learn from one another
- Ability to feel included, connected and valued and see these things in others

### Attunement

- Ability to recognize other's needs, feelings, interests, strengths and values, even if complex and unspoken.
- Ability to recognize differences and similarities, and find value in these.
- Ability to be responsive to others.
- Ability to read one's environment
- Ability to read non-verbal cues via listening, being attentive, and being aware
- Ability to self-reflect
- Ability to recognize impact on others
- Ability to self-regulate
- Ability to encourage and support

• Allows for a variety of relationships with different degrees of intimacy

## Self-Reflection Is Critical

- Self-reflection allows us to recognize and understand of our own experiences
- Helping parents create coherent narratives about themselves and their experiences facilitates development of self-reflective processes.
- This underlies the skills needed to observe, reflect and understand their interactions with their own children.





“When you have reflection, **and** you have relationships that are caring and connecting, you actually stimulate the growth of integrative fibers of the brain. These are the fibers that allow you to have resilience”.

- Dan Siegel, MD. Ted Talk 2012.

## Strong Attachment, Attunement & Affiliation Skills lead to:

(i.e. Goals)



Key Ingredient #2 and #4

## Socially competent children

- Are developed in the context of attuned parenting
- Are able to consider body language and verbal communication
- Have ability to consider other points of view
- Can adjust their own behavior based on the circumstances
- Can anticipate other's reactions to their words or actions
- Can take responsibility for their actions.
- Can resolve interpersonal problems
- They can think through a situation
- Are adaptable to new situations
- **Feel like they belong or can belong**

A Strong Friendship....



accept respect



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## Core Ingredient #3:

Developing strong executive functioning skills and self-regulation skills.

Developed by Core Ingredient #1 and #2  
Leads to Core Ingredients #4 and #5

## Strong Executive Functioning and Regulation Skills

What it means:

A collection of cognitive and self-regulatory processes that enable us to problem solve, plan, self-monitor, flex and control our attention, emotions and behavior.

### Executive Functioning:



### Self-regulation:



Best to understand these as overlapping skills:

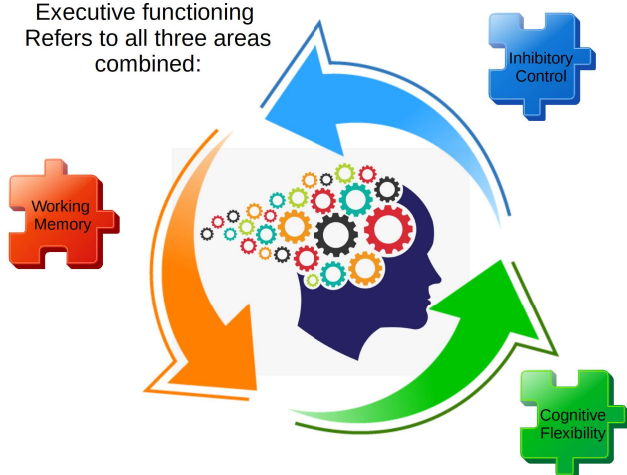
Working Memory  
Inhibitory Control  
Cognitive or Mental Flexibility  
Self Regulation of Body/Behavior  
Attention  
Emotions  
Sensations



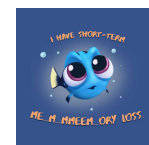
## Executive Function Skill Overview

- Ability to hold, manipulate and process information within the mind
- Ability to inhibit impulses and resist hasty action especially when feelings present
- Ability to sustain attention and focus on what's important at any given time, despite multiple streams of information coming at us
- Ability to self-monitor and reflect
- Ability to anticipate
- Ability to generalize learning
- Ability to shift attention back and forth between tasks
- Flexible thinking
- Ability to make plans, stick with it and carry them out
- Ability to revise plans as needed
- Ability to set and meet goals
- Ability to break big tasks into smaller chunks
- Ability to problem solve and adapt to changing situations, on the fly.

Executive functioning  
Refers to all three areas combined:



## Working Memory



Working memory refers to the capacity to hold onto and manage information long enough to carry out cognitive tasks such as learning, following direction, reasoning and comprehension.

Examples of microskills:

- To return to our place in a book after a friend interrupted us
- To recall where we were in the recipe before we had to help our child
- For reading comprehension throughout a paragraph, to a short story, to a chapter, to a novel.
- To perform a multi-step arithmetic problem
- To keep track of moves and make a logical next step in a board game
- To follow multi-step instructions without reminders
- Planning and acting out a skit or imaginary play
- Taking turns in group activities
- Easily rejoining a game after stepping away to get a drink of water or chasing a ball

(17 yr old Conversation example)

(Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University).



## Inhibitory Control (Examples of microskills)

Inhibitory Control allows us:

- to pause and think before we act
- filter our thoughts
- to still hear the teacher while noticing the snow fall outside
- to be able to hear your friends talk while walking in the mall
- to resist temptations
- prioritize and accomplish important tasks – even when we'd rather daydream
- 'bite our tongue' and say something nice
- to control our emotions, even when we are angry, rushed, or frustrated
- to wait until we are called on even when we know the answer
- to not hit someone who has inadvertently bumped into us
- Eat our dinner before having dessert
- save our money up for something more fun

(Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University).



## Cognitive or Mental Flexibility

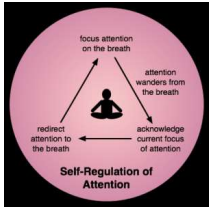
Cognitive or mental flexibility allows us to:

- Switch mindsets and adjust to changing situations
- Cope with transitions
- Changing attention and keeping track of different ideas or tasks
- Consider multiple perspectives or multiple ways to do something ("think outside the box")
- Apply different rules in different situations or context (ie "outside voices" and "inside voices", our home versus friend's home)
- To learn rules for grammar, the scientific method, common core
- Be adaptable rather than rigid (ie. even if familiar routine is disrupted)
- to catch mistakes and fix them
- to revise ways of doing things in light of new information
- To generalize knowledge from one experience to another
- To compromise or work through a conflict
- To tolerate when someone does something in a different or unexpected way
- To tolerate, explore and accept differences, which allows us to value what makes us unique and special.

(Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University).



What zone am I in?



## Strong Regulation Skills

- Goes hand in hand with inhibitory control, but also incorporates dimensions of self and others
- Includes ability to self-regulate, as well as co-regulate
- Includes ability to regulate attention, emotions and behavior
- Involves noticing, tolerating and responding to physiological sensations, feelings, thoughts and urges appropriately (i.e. sleep, hunger, emotions, boredom)
- All while taking in cues from others and the environment
- Underlies the ability to manage stress
- Allows for moment between impulse and action
- Requires ability to access knowledge for what helps

**Strong regulation skills are in play when we are...**

- In control of our body, behavior and energy levels
- In control of our attention
- In control of how we express our feelings
- When we reflect on our feelings
- Managing transition between tasks/situations/etc., even if anxious
- Resisting distractions
- Perspective-taking and getting along with others
- Being flexible
- Planning and setting goals for things that feel big
- Delaying gratification
- Underlies the development of grit and tolerance in expanding skills or problem solving
- Pursuing emotional states associated with well-being
- Matching the intensity of our reaction with the level of the event



## How are EFS and RS developed?

- They DO NOT automatically develop with maturity but have to be built via repetitive stimulation of brain regions overtime.
- Start in infancy with significant foundational skills online prior to starting school .
- Requires scaffolding of skills to develop added complexity. Adults support the emergence of the skills, facilitate practicing via play, reminders and direction, until they have mastered the skill.
- Crucial building blocks for lifelong cognitive and social competencies

## Strong Executive Functioning and Regulation Skills

### Why are they important?

Because they underlie  
our learning,  
our competencies,  
our morality and  
lead to the development of  
socially and emotionally competent children.



- Linked to better academic and social outcomes in school, as well as more meaningful relationships across their lifetime.

- Higher social competencies rated in kindergarten linked to graduating high school on time, obtaining a full-time job, earning a college degree by age 25.
- Kindergarten teachers rank self-control and sustained attention as more critical than content knowledge for school readiness.

Urban Child Institute Staff. 2015. Investing in Early Childhood. Retrieved from <http://www.urbanchildinstitute.org/articles/features/investing-in-early-childhood>  
Urban Child Institute staff. 2016. Positive Early Experiences Pay off for Lifetime. Retrieved from <http://www.urbanchildinstitute.org/articles/features/positive-early-experiences-pay-off-for-lifetime>

## What Helps Adults?

- Create a collaborative, supportive and empowering relationship whenever possible.
- Help calm adult's threat response systems through consistency, predictability and clear communication.
- Help adults find hope and sense of stability.
- Help families meet their basic needs. Might need to actively support families in accessing and utilizing resources
- As basic needs become met, help adults shift focus from survival to longer-term goals – including being a strong parent.
- Help adult imagine themselves achieving a goal and see potential for the future. Help them develop a step-by-step plan for realizing this goal.
- Help adults break big tasks into smaller chunks so they can learn to help their own kids do this.
- Notice successes and provide positive feedback. Build on small successes to help adults see their actions can have a positive impact.

## What Helps Adults?

- Help adults find delight in their children.
- Help adults become more attuned with their children and see from their child's perspective.
- Help adults find ways to better connect with and support their children at age-appropriate levels.
- Help adults be okay with change and transitions, and support their kids with change.
- Help adults develop perspective and stress management skills.
- Frame areas of concern as something possible to be resolved. If significant negative consequences are likely, be mindful of how you convey this information. Bridge them to their support systems.
- Help adults become more self-aware with what triggers their own intense reactions or emotions and how to cope in the heat of the moment
- Encourage adults to imagine, prepare and practice for relevant stressful situations (ie. cooking dinner when oppositional teen slams door)
- Help adults find ways to stay organized and problem solve barriers in completing case plans.

## What Helps Children?

- Helping children perceive and tolerate safety
- Being attuned to what drives their behavior
- Helping them learn what it feels like to be relaxed
- Help strengthen family bonds and sense of connection
- Predictability in routine/schedule and support with shifts in this schedule
- Labeling and talking about feelings.
- Helping kids develop an awareness of time
- Emphasize need for developing skills rather than punishment when youth capabilities are routinely overtaxed
- Encourage and educate adults involved in the child's life to help scaffold the development of necessary skills
- Encourage youth to problem solve real-life challenges (ie: trying to finish an assignment when friend texts with a personal problem)
- Process with youth what solutions they have tried, what worked and what didn't
- Help youth consider how this information can be generalized to other situations.

## What Helps Children?

- Encourage youth to ask other people they trust on how they cope with stress. When does it make sense to turn to a friend versus an adult?
- Help youth view challenges in a different light and as less threatening. "Haven't mastered it yet" attitude.
- Help youth navigate social relationships, boundaries, texting, dating and non-verbal cues.
- Help youth tolerate and adapt to changes.
- Encourage youth to consider situation from another person's point of view to build greater flexibility.
- Help youth become more self-aware with what triggers their own intense reactions or emotions and how to cope in the heat of the moment
- Encourage youth to try new activities and discover their passions. Support them through any anxiety of trying something different.
- Support youth in mapping out steps in setting and reaching goals, as well as managing any obstacles.
- Help youth develop a long-term perspective and plan for the future.
- Help youth see their successes and ability to have an impact.
- Help youth notice people and situations around them and how we all fit into the picture



Teaching youth and adults about common self care practices, including regular exercise, eating healthy, appropriate sleep routines and stress-reduction skills matters too.



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### Core Ingredient #4:

#### Developing Competency within the Self

Developed by Core Ingredient #1, #2 and #3.  
Leads to Core Ingredients #5

## Competency within the self

This includes our self-concept, identity, self-esteem, trust in our abilities, trust in our learning, and having a sense of self across situations and time.

It is strongly affected by our experience and the responsiveness of our relationships.



### Building a sense of competency begins with adults verbally reflecting back to children what we notice them do.

Stems from the micro "serve and return interactions" in infancy and grows into:

"Look at you swim! You're my little fish!"

"Look at you write! You're so good with your name!"

"Look at those Lego creations! You are so creative!"



### Children look to parents and other important adults for help in understanding what they can feel competent in.

#### This requires adults to:

- Notice and delight in a child's efforts, growth and accomplishments.
- Provide positive reflection back to the child
- Support and encourage them in building and expanding skills
- If trying new things or taking healthy risks, emotionally regulate them through the experience as needed. Providing some perspective, education or breaking task down into smaller pieces helps.
- Appreciate progress along the way towards mastery
- Show pride in their accomplishments and help them experience this pride
- Help them see their own growth

(confidentparentsconfidentkids, 2013)



## Curiosity paired with safety is an essential building block of competency

Infants will look longer at a novel event versus a familiar one. They become curious and want to understand something that is odd to them.

- Infants as young as 3.5 months actually achieve object permanence (an object continues to exist even if you can't see it). Rene Baillargeon's work.
- Infants as young as 5 months grasp simple mathematics. Karen Wynn's work.



## Having a sense of agency:

Knowing that you can impact your environment means that you are noticed and seen.



## A coherent sense of self across situations and time enables us to reflect on ourselves in the past, present and future.



And this underlies the sense of mastery and belief in one's own capacity to overcome hardships.



Ingredient #5!!!!

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## Big Picture of Resilience

### Other factors that lead to resilience:

- Feeling safer at home and school
- Basic needs being met
- Building structure, routines and predictability
- Exposure to people who care for them
- Ability to imagine a happier and safer future
- Fostering hope, encouragement and empowerment
- Feeling special, unique, and that you matter.
- Having a positive impact on the world. (Might be most present w/ peers)
- Helping others
- Repeated practice of skills with a healthy mindset
- Building adaptability and flexibility
- Giving youth (and families) credit for their courage and hard work to heal
- Finding shared similarities, values, beliefs and ideals within the family helps.
- Increasing family connectedness, and identity
- Encouraging parents to become more involved or aware of the school community.
- Encouraging families to heal together

### Other key information:

- Resilience can be situation-specific.
- Resilience requires the reliable presence of a supportive and responsive adult **PLUS** multiple opportunities for building critical skills in executive functioning and regulation.
- Resilience can be built in the adults we work with and requires the same supportive relationships and building of critical skills.
- Facilitating the development of resilient families is the ideal.

