DEFINING RESILIENCE IN MALTREATED CHILDREN FROM THE PRACTITIONERS’ PERSPECTIVES

KEY FINDINGS

- Practitioners described resilience as existing on a continuum.
- Resilience is displayed differently across developmental stages of childhood, but some aspects of resilience are consistent despite age. For example, regardless of age, resilience can be both innate to the child and/or can be learned.
- Resilience can be promoted or inhibited by external factors (e.g., home environment, community, social support) and characteristics internal to the child (e.g., developmental stage, temperament, cognitive functioning).
- Caregivers play an important role in the development of resilience following maltreatment and should be included in the treatment and services intended to promote resilience.
- Practitioners implement a variety of strategies and interventions as a means to promote resilience.

About this Study

One out of eight children will experience child maltreatment by the age of 18. Children who experience maltreatment are at heightened risk for many negative developmental outcomes, yet some children overcome the odds and continue to grow and succeed—a phenomenon often described as resilience. There remains a lack of consensus and consistency around the definition of resilience, the characteristics and features of resilience, and factors that may promote or inhibit resilience development. Clarity about the conceptualization of and factors that contribute to resilience is needed to inform the creation of developmentally appropriate, practice-based interventions for promoting resilience among maltreated children. This study aimed to describe the meaning of resilience in children from practitioners’ perspectives, explore factors that promote and inhibit resilience in maltreated children, and understand variations in resilience among younger and older children through 27 individual interviews with practitioners from an agency in central Ohio serving maltreated children.

Conclusion

Findings reveal that resilience should be conceptualized as a continuum—ranging from mere survival to the ability to thrive—and should be considered within the context of the child’s environment and developmental stage. Future research should examine whether the existing resilience measures are reflective of the resilience conceptualization described by practitioners. Additional research also should focus on understanding how practitioner conceptualizations of resilience influence the type of treatment or service that practitioners deliver to clients and the method through which they deliver it.

ABOUT THE RESEARCHERS

This project was led by Dr. Susan Yoon who is recognized as an expert in resilience research and the impact of child maltreatment on child development trajectories. Rebecca Dillard, Fei Pei, Karla Shockley McCarthy, and Brieanne Beaujolais (research assistants) are doctoral students in the social work program where they study various topics related to child development, trauma, and health and behavior outcomes.

About the study: Results of this study will be used to inform a larger study designed to develop a strengths-based intervention to promote resilience among maltreated children.

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