

Critical Connections for Life and Learning: Literacy and Resilience

Yale and Scholastic Research Project on Family and Childhood Resilience Executive Summary

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In all aspects of life, children need to develop sets of skills that will help them manage and deal with change and uncertainty and grow and learn from challenges. These skills are essential to healthy living and development, buffer stress, and are the foundation for building a resilient individual. Resilience fostering skills include the abilities to reach out to others in times of need, to reframe experiences in ways that promote flexible thinking and problem-solving, to be curious about others, and to feel realistically confident in one's ability to meet and master life's challenges. These are skills that all children benefit from and more so for that growing number of children who because of their life circumstances are less able to navigate life's diverse range of inevitable challenges and changes including those that offer positive opportunities as well as those that bring loss and adversity. This issue becomes even more pressing in the current financial climate when an increasing number of families are dealing with serious economic, social and health issues. The ability to establish

a sense of self and manage, moderate, and adapt to unpredictable situations and circumstances is critical to positively and resiliently adapting to the demands of a dynamic, fast-paced, 21st century. To ensure that all children have the opportunity to thrive academically and socially, the need to foster these life management skills becomes ever more critical.

Social connectedness is perhaps the most important of the number of skills promoting resilience and indeed may be the skill that also fosters flexible thinking, curiosity, empathy, and a strong, confident sense of self. Understanding how to build on and nurture social support directly affects a number of other adaptation fostering skills including effective management of difficult emotions, self-confidence and social competence, flexible problem solving, and positive learning from role models and peers. Building capacity among children to establish and sustain strong, positive social relationships (i.e., "social networks") with their peers and adults (e.g., parents/fam-

ily members, caregivers, educators) and within their homes, schools and communities fosters positive adaptation not only in children but also in their families and their communities. In short, strong social relationships among individuals have a ripple effect in fostering and nurturing social support and cooperation in the same systems in which those individuals live, learn and work – families, schools, and communities.

Among a number of means of enhancing capacities for social connectedness, literacy and narrative skills, which are socially constructed and contextual in nature are important and under appreciated mechanisms

“There is a need to develop competent, connected and active lifelong learners who can respond effectively to unpredicted needs to succeed in a world of rapid technological, social and organizational change.”

—Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD),
Education Ministers Meeting, November 2010

through which positive social networks are established and maintained. Literacy capabilities, and literacy rich environmental resources can help fortify the protective element of a child’s social networks by serving as tools that enable the relational contributors (e.g. , peers, parents/families, caregivers, educators) found within social networks and hence, can be used to strengthen and promote resilience capacities. For example, children learn many ways of adapting to and growing from challenges when parents, family members, neighbors, and teachers engage in meaningful conversations with them and share stories of their

lives. The intentional, regular practice of storytelling also facilitates learning from role models; whether the role models are adults in children’s lives or historical people or characters found in literature. Learning from the stories of parents, family members, friends, neighbors and teachers not only promotes learning from role models but also shows children many ways of adapting to and growing from challenges. Learning to elicit stories from others facilitates the curiosity and social-emotional and cognitive skills necessary to tell and frame one’s own story. And in the telling and writing of stories about significant challenges, children gain the skill of reflecting on their own actions and circumstances and in so doing, seeing the many ways of telling about any one event.

Literacy-based interventions specifically targeted toward building resilience promoting skills that occur when children are young can translate into improved abilities to cope with the challenges and difficulties children may face during their lives, giving children the skills needed to live up to their full potential. As an early intervention, these specially targeted literacy-based activities and initiatives can serve as a primary mechanism through which positive social networks are established and maintained.

In this joint research project scholars from the Yale Child Study Center in the Yale University School of Medicine will work closely with Scholastic to develop and evaluate new interventions that seek to demonstrate how building capacity among children to establish positive social networks using literacy-based strategies fosters resilience. These interventions will be designed to support children’s resilience and aid families and educators in their efforts to foster resiliency in both formal and informal learning environments, those which uniquely contribute to the development of confident, connected, and resilient youth.