

## Children Who Fail at School But Succeed at Life

### Contextual Influences That Can Change the Odds

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## Resilience Through the Life Span

- Why is it that some people exposed to multiple childhood risks and adversities "beat the odds" and manage to go on to lead meaningful and productive lives?
- Why is it that others succumb then rebound decades later?
- Is it because those who "beat the odds" are more resilient?
- Are we sure?
- Might some who succumb to adversity be every bit as resilient as those who endure, or even more so? (Might some adults?)
- Have we been focusing on the wrong question?

## Resilience Through the Life Span

- What could cause otherwise resilient people to succumb to risk and adversity?
- And why do a number then rebound decades later?
- Resilience Through the Life Span Project
- Current focus: People who fail at school but succeed in life

## Resilience Through the Lifespan

- Resilience: strength under adversity
- Emmy Werner – following children exposed to 4 or more risks, now in their 40s. Significant # who succumbed through age 18 rebounded by their early 30s. Still doing well in their 40s.

## Are There Limits to Emotional Endurance? Long Term Multiple Risk Exposure

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- Risks can co-occur
- "A man with one watch always knows what time it is, a man with two is never really sure."
- Risks can co-occur and can also persist (ACES can co-occur and can also persist)
- Protective processes that can offset multiple prolonged risk exposure (Werner and Smith, 2001)

## Protective Influences

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Events, Experiences, Conditions  
That Can Outweigh or Neutralize  
the Effects of Exposure  
to Known Risk Factors

## ACE Study

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- Introducing protective processes, including programs and practices, that can outweigh the effects of multiple childhood risk exposure may do more than reduce the risk of serious learning, behavioral, emotional and life adjustment problems down the road.
- We may prevent/reduce incidence of major health consequences decades later.

## Protective Processes That Researchers Feel Can Offset the Effects of Multiple Childhood Risks

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(Werner et al, 2001)

1. Experiences That Reduce the Impact of Prevailing Risks:
  - A. Learning to see adversities in a new light
  - B. Reducing the amount of exposure to the risks of adverse conditions (role of context); buffers
2. Preventing a Chain Reaction of Negative Life Events; Creating Safety Nets
3. Experiences That Promote a Sense of Mastery (Mastery to meaning connection)
4. Opening the Door to Turning Point Experiences or Second Chance Opportunities

## "To Form Erroneous Conclusions and to Reason Correctly From Them"

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- Paradoxically uneven learning, behavioral and emotional profiles (sometimes observed in children exposed to multiple risks and adversities)
- Can they lead caring people with the best of intentions to several entirely understandable yet erroneous perceptions?
- Can these erroneous perceptions over-ride protective processes that for some could outweigh exposure to multiple risks and adversities?
- 5 erroneous perceptions

## Erroneous Perception #1

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- Anyone capable of performing exceptionally well on intellectual, creative or artistic tasks that most others find very difficult, is necessarily capable performing equally well or better on academic or behavioral tasks that most others find very easy.
- It's all simply a matter of trying harder.

## For Whom the Bell Curve Tolls

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- Individual strengths and talents –
  - Possible to be strong (sometimes extremely so) in complex intellectual areas, and/or areas that involve creativity and inventiveness,
  - And weak (sometimes extremely so), in areas that most others in one's age range can master with little effort.
  - Trying harder in these weak areas may not allow one to do much better.

## For Whom the Bell Curve Tolls (cont)

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- This profile is common among children/youth/adults who experience various learning disabilities/differences
- Examples...

### Erroneous Perception #2

- Anyone who knows what they're supposed to do in a given situation can be expected to predictably, consistently and independently do what they know, one hundred percent of the time.
- It's all about willpower.

### The Role of Executive Function

- It's possible for someone to know what to do, yet have problems consistently, predictably and independently doing what they know.
- Learning/behavioral profile is consistent with individuals (children, youth, adults) with executive function challenges  
(Barkley, 2010; 2002)

### The Role of Executive Function

- To complete tasks, reach goals, solve problems and get along well with others we rely on executive function -- a family of mental processes
- These mental processes work in harmony.
- It's our ability to coordinate these processes that allow us to plan, organize, manage and emotionally regulate our lives.
- Experts in the field use different metaphors to this coordinating role -- Our brain's orchestra conductor, air traffic controller, or chief executive officer

### Examples of Mental Processes Under the EF Umbrella

- Self-Control -- Behavioral Inhibition
- Emotional Self-Regulation
- Organization, Time Management, Planning (OTMP)  
(Howard Abikoff et al., 2014)
- Mental Flexibility
- Self-Monitoring
- Working Memory

### The Role of Executive Function (Cont)

- Executive function: Allows us to take what we know and govern ourselves with this knowledge.
- Executive function delays/weaknesses impact our ability to do what we know.

### The Role of Executive Function (Cont)

- What can cause EF challenges?

Learning/behavioral profile  
(neurodevelopmental profile)

Prolonged traumatic stress exposure  
(Perry, 2002)

Both, in combination

Other conditions?

### Interpersonal Trauma and Executive Functioning

- Among those suffering the effects of traumatic stress, neuroimaging studies reveal decrease in activation in brain regions associated with executive functioning (van der Kolk, 2006).

### Executive Function Challenges: Possible Sources of Confusion

1. Children (and adults) with EF challenges can know what to do yet have difficulty consistently, predictably and independently doing what they know (Barkley, 2010; Goldstein, 2001). Will respond better to reminders, cues, prompts, strategies at the point of performance.
2. May exhibit exceptional strengths in intellectual, creative and/or other areas, yet struggle at tasks most would consider simple, if not automatic.
3. May do far better (and sometimes very well) in situations they find stimulating and interesting.

### Executive Function Challenges : Possible Sources of Confusion

4. When they finally do successfully complete a particularly lengthy assignment, they may be so mentally exhausted that they're less able to complete their current assignment (unless they re-fuel their emotional self-regulation fuel tank) Self-regulation, it turns out, is a depletable resource.
5. When assessed, many will meet dx criteria for ADHD – Dx will confuse some since they will pay attention very well when they're interested in what they're doing.

### Erroneous Perception #3

- The single measure of human intelligence is school performance. Those who do very well in school, therefore, are very smart, and those who don't do very well in school, therefore, are not.

### Learning to See Abilities in a New Light (cont)

- It's not how smart are we, but rather, how are we smart?
- Howard Gardner, Ph.D. - Diverse intellectual strengths
  - linguistic
  - logical-mathematical
  - musical
  - kinesthetic
  - spatial
  - naturalist
  - interpersonal
  - intrapersonal

### Learning to View Abilities in a New Light: "Successful Intelligence" – Robert Sternberg, Ph.D.

- Successful intelligence: To be able to draw upon the abilities we need to succeed in life based upon our personal notion of success (Sternberg).
- Acting upon our environment in a way that maximizes our opportunities for success.
  - May require that we try to change conditions so they match more closely with our strengths.
  - May mean seeking out entirely different environments that provide new and better opportunities for success.
  - Or it may require that we adapt to current conditions as best we can.

#### Erroneous Perception #4

- Individuals, school age children included, can be expected to think and act the same way in situations they perceive as safe, friendly and within their ability to control as they do in situations they perceive as dangerous, threatening and beyond their ability to control.

#### Portraits of Resilience- In Context



- Resilience and context are inseparable
- In an environment that you perceive as dangerous and threatening, it makes no sense, from a survival point of view, to appear conspicuously vulnerable

#### The Impact of Social Climate On Emotional Well Being and Quality of life

- Numbers of children/teens who won't accept help – because they feel stigmatized
- Repelled by special placements
- Won't speak to counselors
- Would rather suffer in silence than be target of ridicule

#### The Impact of Social Climate (cont)

- Numbers of adults in the workplace or elsewhere who won't accept help – because they feel stigmatized
- Won't speak to doctors or counselors
- Would rather suffer in silence than be target of ridicule

#### Erroneous Perception #5

Believing as we do in erroneous perception #4, it follows that resilience and success are one and the same. Those who succeed at school are resilient. Those who fail are not, logically speaking.

Programs that draw from those who "beat the odds" in an effort to help those who succumb.

#### Are There Limits to Emotional Endurance?

- The impact of prolonged inescapable stress
- Can we inadvertently create these conditions?
- Common misperceptions – and their potential implications
- Eventually coming to believe that challenges (adverse experiences) are permanent, permanent and personal?

### **Perceiving Adversities To Be Permanent, Pervasive & Personal**

(Seligman, 1992)

- Permanent – the perception that things will never change
- Pervasive – problems are evident not just in one life area, they're pervasive
- Personal – It's all your fault.
- Learning to see adversities in these 3 ways increases the likelihood of psychological problems; may also weaken our immune system
- Start young, may be especially impairing
- Can common misperceptions increase the likelihood of learning to see challenges in these 3 ways?

### **Perceptions That Foster Resilience**

(Seligman, 1998; 1992)

- Adversities are temporary – the perception that things will get better
- Adversities are limited – Things may not be going well in one area but they are going well in others areas
- Not personal – Doing the best we can under the circumstances

### **Changing the Odds**

- Perceptions > processes > practices
- New perceptions = greater access to protective processes and programs/practices that can foster them
- Contextual influences (protective processes contextually expressed)

### **Perception #1**

- It's indeed possible that some people can be capable of doing difficult things easy yet find easy things difficult for reasons that can have nothing to do with laziness or a person's moral character.

### **Perception #2**

It's entirely possible for someone to know what to do yet have difficulty consistently, predictably and independently doing what they know, in part, because they call into play different skills (Barkley, 2010; Goldstein 2001).

### **Perception #3**

There are many different ways of being smart, some of which can't be measured by how well one does in school.

#### Perception #4

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Resilient people, school age children included, sometimes think and act differently in places they find threatening and dangerous as opposed to places they find warm and friendly, particularly when those threatening and dangerous places are also perceived as stigmatizing, inescapable and beyond their ability to control or influence.

#### Perception #5

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It's these contextual influences that can determine whether we endure in the face of adversity or are stretched to our limits of emotional endurance, which helps to explain why some of the most resilient people we will ever have the pleasure of meeting may struggle significantly just to get through a typical day, school-age children included.

#### Contextual Influences That Can "Change the Odds"

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- **Social Context** = The ability to successfully seek out, change and/or accommodate to social contexts where we enjoy socially valued roles and responsibilities, and the opportunity to contribute significantly.
- **Life experiences – In Context** = Learning to see strengths, challenges, and adverse experiences in a hopeful new light.
- **Relationships – In Context** = While resilience is typically viewed through the lens of individual journeys, research suggests that our greatest source of strength may actually be each other.

#### Contextual Influences

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- Contextual influences linked directly to protective processes that can potentially offset multiple childhood risk exposure (Werner et al 2001)
- (contextually expressed protective processes)
- See attached figure

#### Social Context

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1. The opportunity to do what we love to do and also do well: The transforming power of meaningful work
2. Raising the bar and leveling the playing field
3. A change of scenery: The value of a fresh start

#### Life Experiences – In Context

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4. Personal pathways to a sense of mastery
5. Learning to see human intelligence in a new light
6. When difference no longer signals danger
  - a. More labels, not less
  - b. Learning to see abilities as malleable, not fixed
  - c. Learning to see challenges in historical context
7. Translating the pain of our past into meaningful action on behalf of others

### **Relationships – In Context**

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8. "Beating the odds" thanks to those who "changed the odds"
  - a. Safety nets
  - b. Connecting to those who legitimize rather than stigmatize
9. Growing closer and stronger as a result of difficult or traumatic life events
  - a. Relationships as malleable, not fixed
10. Our greatest source of strength – Each other:  
A closer look at turning points

### **Individuals Exposed to Multiple Risks Who Succumbed, Then Rebound Decades Later**

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- We are more resilient than we realize
- There are limits to emotional endurance even for the most resilient among us, school-age children included
- You and I have more influence than we realize in determining who endures and who succumbs

### **Those Who Succumb, Then Rebound Decades Later**

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- The meaning we attach to the adversities of others can influence the meaning they attach to these same adversities
- The role of human understanding in overcoming a difficult past, understanding that is, of our context sensitive ways
- Mastery can lead to new meaning, new meaning can lead to mastery

### **Those Who Succumb, Then Rebound Decades Later**

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- Being different can render you at a serious disadvantage at one stage in your life, and at a significant advantage at another stage.
- The role of strengths and talents and how they foster a sense of mastery
- Life outcome can be very different than tx outcome