

"Resilience is important because it is the human capacity to face, overcome and be strengthened by or even transformed by the adversities of life" (Grotberg, 1995 p.10)

What do we mean by resilience in the context of children and families? How can those who work with children and families promote and support resilience?

Promoting resilience in the context of children and families is important as it is widely accepted that those who demonstrate resilience i.e. have some or all the qualities identified by Kobasa, Grotberg and others are able to cope with adversity and deal with life effectively.

What is resilience? What are the qualities that are needed to develop resilience? What evidence is there to support the notion and its importance?

The term resilience refers to the abilities that children and families foster enabling them to cope and overcome difficult, distressing, and stressful life circumstances. Resilience is "normal development under difficult conditions" (Foneyg et al., 1994, quoted in Topic 3, p. 30).

Children and families that are resilient can demonstrate and manage to grow into happy, healthy and together people, dealing with life in an effective and competent way despite facing major difficulties and setbacks in their life.

Two major contributors to the debate of resilience are Grotberg and Kobasa, both have studied and researched this area extensively and have produced two different concepts of gaining resilience.

Most children and families at some point in their lives have to cope with difficult situations and some may have to cope with serious adversity. These adversities stretch from war, death, poverty, divorce, serious illness and abuse etc, to more ordinary

difficulties such as bullying, pressures of school and homework etc. However most adults and children do overcome and cope when faced with these adversities. The question being raised is "how do they do it?" (Topic 3, p. 25)

Grotberg, a major contributor to the debate of resilience explains that, how a child reacts to these situations all depends on his/her resilience, "Whether such experiences crush or strengthen an individual child depends, in part, on his or her resilience" (Grotberg, cited in Topic 3, p. 30) and that if children and families can and are encouraged to adopt the necessary qualities for resilience they can get over traumatic experiences. However she also suggests that without resilience children will without doubt be unable to cope.

Kobasa studied two groups of adults employed in executive positions, the members of which led very stressful lives. One group had suffered stress related illness and in the other group the executives had not. Kobasa compared these groups to find out how the second group coped. She found three main qualities that prevented them from experiencing stress related illness; she identified these as control, commitment and challenge.

There are similarities and differences between these two theorists, which I will continue to explain.

Grotberg after reviewing studies of resilience has suggested that resilient children have three main qualities in common and defines these as, " I have" " I am" and " I can".

Gotberg's quality "I have" refers to children having people around them who:

- Love and trust them.

- Are able to set boundaries which enables the child to realise the need to stop before trouble or danger occurs.
  - Show good examples of behaviour and how to do things properly.
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- Want to encourage independence and help the child when they are suffering from illness, danger or needing to learn.

The short case study of Raul, a young boy who had an accident which resulted in his legs being unable to hold his body weight, given as an example in block one, topic three, page thirty three provides a good example of the factors that can be drawn and promoted from the quality '*I have*'. In Raul's situation the promoting of trusting relationships, providing good role models, encouraging autonomy and independence enable him to gain resilience.

This is very similar to Kobasa's quality '*commitment*'. This is a quality, which has been defined as people having strong bonds and ties with family, friends and their community and is able to maintain and contribute to the role that they have established. To enable children to develop the quality of '*commitment*' we would need to guarantee that the child was encouraged and secured a close, loving connection to family, friends and their community, for example involving a child "buying grandpa's birthday present." (Block 1, Topic 3, p. 27) or helping out a school fundraising event would give the child a feeling that they have contributed and maintained a specific role.

Grotberg's second quality '*I am*' refers to children being individuals who:

- Are liked and loved.
- Like and enjoy doing nice things for others and showing concern for them.
- Have self-respect and respect others.
- Are able to take responsibility for their actions and who show confidence that everything will be all right in the end.

The example I am going to use is from Raul's situation, Grotberg suggests that the following resilience factors drawn from the quality 'I am' could be promoted by encouraging Raul to remember that he is "lovable, becoming autonomous and independent,

doing things he should be proud of and seeing his mum being loving, empathic and altruistic." (Block 1, Topic 3, p. 33)

Kobasa's identifies a second quality, as 'Control' "People who have a high degree of control are those who strongly believe they can influence the events in their lives They see themselves as able to make their own luck, to find solutions to problems and turn around difficult situations to their own advantage." (Block 1, Topic 3, Table 1, p. 25)

Teaching children how to take control and giving them some control helps them to gain this quality, which in turn helps them to become resilient to stressful events. A prime example of a child being encouraged to gain this quality could be letting them choose what they would like to eat or do or " involving them in planning the family holiday." (Block 1, Topic 3, p. 27)

These two qualities in whole are not that similar, however I have found an element from each quality, which can be linked. Grotberg believes to begin gaining resilience you need to start becoming autonomous and independent; to do this means being able to start taking control and being given control, which is exactly What Kobasa believes forms a part of her quality Control.

Grotberg's final quality "I can" refers to children able to:

- Talk about things they fear.
- Problem-solve.
- Demonstrate control even when they feel they want to do something dangerous.
- Talk and take action at appropriate times and find help when in need of it.

An example again is of Raul's situation, for him to gain some resilience he needs to be encouraged to recognise he is able to problem-solve, manage his feelings and impulses without losing control and to find trusting relationships.

Kobasa's final quality is defined as 'Challenge'. People who show a high level of challenge are able to look at the new opportunities and excitement change offers, instead of fearing it. They look for the positive side of tragedy instead of dwelling on any losses they may have. Helping children look for opportunities and the silver lining in change is important, they can begin to believe that some good can be produced after and maybe during a stressful event i.e. "expecting a child to repair something that they have broken"(Block 1, Topic 3, p. 27) or taking action themselves when they have fallen out with friends.

These last two qualities offer again an element of similarity e.g. Grotberg believes that if a child can begin to talk about the things that he/she may fear he/she can then begin to look for the good that may come out of facing the fear. Kobasa believes if people can challenge their fears and find some good opportunities and excitement in this change they are able to gain her quality 'challenge'.

Grotberg suggests that not all of her identified qualities are necessary for a child to become resilient, however she also suggests that only one is not enough and that if a child bears one quality only, that child will find it hard to survive

In comparison Grotberg and Kobasa show that their qualities "I have" and "Commitment" are indeed very similar in definition. However their other qualities, "I am", "I can", "Control" and "Challenge" only show similar elements of what is necessary to become resilient.

When working with children and families I would be inclined to use Grotberg's framework as in my understanding, this framework demonstrates concrete ways of promoting

resilience. You can teach the child or family ways of doing and thinking about things that will promote the qualities, Grotberg sees as important, and in turn this could lead to them then gaining the attitudes that Kobasa suggests we need in overcoming and dealing with life's problems.

" ..... childhood is an opportunity. Each young child has unique potential for development of human capacities....."(Woodhead cited in Topic 3, p 41)

Resilience forms a major element of children's and family's quality of life and it is for this reason it is well worth promoting.

**References**

K204 Course Team (2001) *Working with Children and Families*, Topic 3, pp. 25-41.