

Fostering Resilience in Families Coping With Depression:

Practical Ways Head Start Staff Can Help Families Build on Their Power to Cope



Research on children at Head Start age or older whose families face adversities, including depression, has shown that many children do surprisingly well. The word **resilience** has been used to describe the qualities of these children. Dr. Ann Masten, one of the leading researchers on resilience, described it as “ordinary magic,” a quality that shows itself in children’s curiosity, in their ability to relate to others, and above all, in their ability to survive and be successful even though their lives include many challenges. Identifying strengths and building on resources are ways of fostering resilience and two of the principle goals of Head Start.

Understanding Resilience

Resilience can be understood at four levels: the individual, the family, the school and caregiving system, and the larger community. Important qualities of resilience were identified in studies of older children who grew up with the stressor of a depressed parent and yet managed to do well.

At the *individual level*, these children were able to:

- **engage in age-appropriate activities**, such as going to school or participating in community or religious activities
- **relate to others**
- **understand their family life**, in particular, the fact that their parents were depressed and that they were not to blame. Repeatedly, these young people said that understanding that their parents had an illness, that it had a name, and that they were free to go on with their lives, helped them a great deal.

At the *parenting level*, despite depression, many parents remain deeply committed to parenting, commonly saying things such as, “I will do what I need to do to take care of my child when I am depressed, even if I cannot do anything else.”

At the *caregiving level*, schools and health centers were vital in building strengths by providing care for those suffering from adversity.

At the larger *community level*, risk factors like community

violence, unemployment, or lack of access to resources can make depression more likely. On the other hand, safe neighborhoods, strong social ties, and shared purpose can build resilience. In this sense, a strong and well-functioning Head Start center serves as an important community resource against adversity and is in a key position to strengthen families.

What Promotes Resilience?

It is important to recognize resilience in children, in parents, in oneself as a professional, and to understand which systems in the community promote resilience. In the work of Head Start, resilience can be recognized and fostered at these four levels.

For the individual child:

- Supporting a child’s capacity to learn, to relate to others, to use imagination, and to see himself or herself as part of a community.
- Encouraging children’s relationships with their peers, their teachers, and their parents.

For families:

- Understanding the many cultural variations and different ways families can show strength and resilience is one of the great challenges and great opportunities.





Encouraging parents in their efforts to be more effective by having regular routines for their children to follow, and reading together.

At the caregiving level:

- Encouraging consistent positive attachments with children and by making parents feel welcomed and comfortable.
- Understanding depression and resilience in the families they work with can help teachers be a resource to families and more effective in their work.

At the community level:

- Understanding what exists and what is missing in community resources is an essential step to better parent outreach.
- Sharing knowledge and experience with families to find the right service or information from a variety of settings, including health clinics, schools, places of worship, and community centers.

The study of strengths and resilience in children has shown the importance of positive caregiving relationships and the capacity children have to change and adapt in the face of adversity. There is no one set result for children, even in the most difficult life situations. This knowledge provides hope for parents, but it is important to emphasize that schools, health clinics, and community centers can provide help and support. In a child's early years, a program such as Head Start can play a vital role for families.

Strategies for Head Start Staff to Promote Resilience

Recognizing and identifying strengths and resilience is a crucial part of Head Start's daily work. In reaching out to families, supporting the growth of children, and encouraging parents to be the best they can be, Head Start staff does the important work of fostering resilience.

A plan to build a Head Start program's capacity in this area requires shared goals, training, and support, including the following:

- **Gain knowledge:** Get to know the family well enough so that you can pinpoint strengths in both children and parents. Learn about the signs of depression and distress to aid in recognizing challenges and, where appropriate, getting help for parents with depression.

- **Focus on supporting relationships:** Having strong, supportive, caring relationships with others are important parts of resilience. In fact, having good relationships is the single best preventive strategy for depression. Nurturing positive and productive child-to-child, teacher-to-parent, and parent-to-teacher interactions, build resilience.
- **Celebrate strengths:** Work with parents and their children to help them recognize and name their own strengths. Helping families to see the positives in their children's lives, despite their own struggles and depression, is a powerful preventive activity.

In reaching out to parents, it is important for Head Start staff to communicate a message of hope that encourages growth.

Three key messages for parents are:

1. **"You and your child have strengths."** Parents welcome information about resilience. Asking parents what they like best about their child or what makes them happiest about their child is a good starting point.
2. **"Reflect on what you need."** Asking a parent "What do you need?" may seem simple, but many parents require support in understanding their needs before they can ask for resources. Encourage parents to think about how their current experience compares to how they would like things to be before asking them what resources they need. This means reflecting on "the now" and imagining "the future"—something that families facing adversity may find difficult to do. Depressed parents may need *extra support* when trying to imagine their options because depression can make it challenging for a person to think beyond their day-to-day coping. Building trust in their relationships with families is an important strategy for Head Start staff to encourage reflection.
3. **"Take care of yourself."** Many times, parents will move toward changing their lives in the name of being a better parent. Let parents know that energy invested in self-care can have positive results for their children as well. Encourage parents to consider *how* they are taking care of themselves. Offer examples of "first steps" for better self-care. For instance, a goal to change one's diet can be started by eating more fresh vegetables or cutting back on candy. A goal to exercise more can start with taking the stairs rather than the elevator.





For more support on this topic please see the following Family Connections materials:

Short Papers:

The Ability to Cope: Building Resilience in Yourself and Your Child

The Challenges and Benefits of Making Parent Connections

Better Parent Communication: What Do I Say When a Parent Tells Me Something Difficult?

Understanding Depression Across Cultures

Trainings:

Module One: (all workshops)

Module Four: *A Better Home Visit*

Additional Resources:

American Psychological Association. "Resilience Guide for Parents and Teachers." American Psychological Association. <http://www.apahelpcenter.org/featuredtopics/feature.php?#6> (accessed September 29, 2007).

Beardslee, William. *When a Parent is Depressed: How to Protect Your Children from the Effects of Depression in the Family*. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 2003. Originally published in hardcover under the title *When a Parent is Depressed: Protecting the Children and Strengthening the Family*. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 2002.

Bell, Carl C. "Cultivating Resiliency in Youth." *Journal of Adolescent Health* 29 (2001): 375-381.

Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University. "Advancing the Scientific Foundations of Health, Learning, and Community Well-Being." <http://www.developingchild.harvard.edu/content/council.html>.

Masten, Ann. "Ordinary Magic: Resilience Processes in Development." *American Psychologist* 56 (2001): 227-238.

National Scientific Council on the Developing Child. "Young Children Develop in an Environment of Relationships." Working Paper #1, NSCDC. http://www.developingchild.net/pubs/wp/Young_Children_Environment_Relationships.pdf (accessed May 5, 2008).

National Scientific Council on the Developing Child. "Children's Emotional Development is Built into the Architecture of Their Brain." Working Paper #2, NSCDC. http://www.developingchild.net/pubs/wp/Childrens_Emotional_Development_Architecture_Brains.pdf (accessed May 5, 2008).



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