

*Protecting and Promoting
Children's Resilience to
Extreme Adversity When Facing
Violence and Disasters*

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CE Learning Objectives:

- Participants can describe in multiple ways in which exposure to extremely adverse experiences is most likely to affect children's development in the immediate term and across time.
- Participants can describe how families, schools, healthcare facilities, and other child-serving systems (e.g. first-responders) can more effectively protect children from unnecessary secondary and vicarious exposures to potentially traumatic stressors, including from news coverage and social media.
- Participants can apply principles of strengths-based models to promote active resilience behaviors among children, families, and child-serving systems that provides a multi-contextual ecology for thriving in the face of adversity.



Presenter's Frame of Reference

Humans:

- Are organisms (like plants and animals)
- Create artificial (built) environments to ensure safety, comfort, and survival
- Are highly social by nature (like ants, bees, and wolves)
- Establish social hierarchies (like ants, bees, and wolves)
- Benefit from/require a consistent, predictable social order
- Pay costs for social/cultural transgressions (such as nonconformity or conflict with status quo hierarchies)
- Are capable of self destructive thoughts, attitudes, behavior (such as self-sabotage, bitterness, addiction, suicide)
- Can suffer physical, emotional, spiritual tolls from hardships
- Are capable of experiencing awe, joy, love, gratitude, and growth through making life-affirming meaning out of even the worst hardships (wars, genocides, interpersonal violence)



Key Concepts:

Adversity/Violence/Disaster/Resilience

- What is adversity?
 - Conditions threatening someone's stability, viability, or development.
- What is violence as it applies to interpersonal and community violence?
 - Behavior that threatens or actually harms any person's physical, emotional, and/or psychological wellbeing and/or survival.
- What is disaster?
 - An event of such destructive magnitude that the physical, emotional, and/or psychological wellbeing and/or survival of many people are harmed.

Key Concepts:

Adversity/Violence/Disaster/Resilience

- What is resilience?
 - “The capacity of a dynamic system to withstand or recover from significant challenges that threaten its stability, viability, or development.”
 - Bouncing back from setbacks.
 - No adversity, no resilience.
 - Resilience tends to gradually and progressively strengthen and then weaken across the life-course (generally, with individual differences)
 - While “potential” resilience varies across individuals, **environmental** influences make the greater difference.

Key Concepts:

Adversity/Violence/Disaster/Resilience

- Resilience varies by degree depending on:
 - Types of adversities,
 - Their intensities,
 - Durations, and
 - Cumulative burden.
 - Some types of adversities may be more injurious to some than to others (like **Kryptonite** for Superman)
 - Extreme adversities would tend to be intense, prolonged, and/or pervasive (widespread).
 - Adversities are also cumulative (like straws on the proverbial camel's back)
 - Environmental systems supportive functions

Resilience in Global-Historical Perspective

- Humans do not require a charmed life to prosper and thrive.
 - We are among the Earth's most successful recent species.
 - We established thriving communities in every environment except **Antarctica** (bases don't count).
 - Human children are particularly well suited for survival and thriving in the face of adversity due to familial and community social support.
 - Humans have survived countless disasters, pestilence, disease, famine, malnutrition, wars, and other sorts of violence.

Resilience in Global-Historical Perspective

- Extreme Adversity has long been a problem, but we have always adapted even when the costs were profoundly terrible.
 - Prolonged or Chronic Extreme Adversity often has lasting deleterious effects on normative development.
 - Optimal Resilience to Extreme Adversity can be promoted through two interacting channels:
 - Environmental/Social Resources
 - Individual/Personal Resourcefulness

Environmental/Social Resources

- Nurturance for Survival and Development
 - Protection (Secure base)
 - Exploration (Motivated and facilitated learning and adaptation to encountered environments)
 - Social Support Networks
 - Cultural and Societal Institutions
- Human Social Nature (hugely important)
 - Protective Allies
 - Protective Systems
 - Adversaries (persons)

Challenges and Reactions

- Adversity (conditions/circumstances)
 - Obstacles and Impediments to Goals
 - Resource inadequacy
- Stress Escalation
 - Adaptive Response => Success/Growth
 - Adaptive Failure => Exhaustion/Shutdown
- Extreme Adversity (violence/disaster/survival threat)
 - Survival Reactions
 - Persistence and Adaptive Agility
 - Extreme Exhaustion/Depressive Shutdown



Personal Resourcefulness

- Physical growth and strengthening
- Developmental potentials and achievements
 - Social Engagement
 - Co-Regulation
 - Synchronized transactions
 - Emotional mirroring
 - Behavioral Mirroring
 - Self-Regulation

Personal Resourcefulness

- Adaptive Capacity (intelligence)
 - Resilience is like intelligence (successful adaptation)
 - Achievement Motivation/Enjoyment
 - Persistence
 - Frustration Tolerance
 - Information Processing (Learning)
 - Accuracy
 - Speed
 - Productive Inferences
 - Moderate Generalization
 - Integration across experiences



Effects of Extreme Adversity on Normative Development

- Decreased Health and Longevity
 - Threats to survival, such as heart disease, stroke, cancer, diabetes, and suicide.
 - Increased depression, anxiety, tobacco use, alcohol and other drug use.
- Decreased life satisfaction
- Increased risk of interpersonal and self-directed violence
- Increased sexual risk taking
- Increased risk of Trauma and Stress-Related Disorders



Promoting Resilient Responses to Violence and Disasters

- Think ENVIRONMENT
- Think SOCIAL
- Think CULTURE
- Think ACTIVE
- Think STRENGTHS

Promoting Resilient Responses to Violence and Disasters

- Think ENVIRONMENT
 - Improve the quality of the developmental environment
 - Provide:
 - Protection
 - Stability
 - Comfort
 - Healthy but Challenging Stimulation
 - Create sheltering buffers against the surrounding “chaos” as rescue, recovery, and rebuilding are underway
 - Collective child health and welfare concerns should be prominent priorities, not an after-thought nor someone else’s problem

Promoting Resilient Responses to Violence and Disasters

- Think SOCIAL
 - Emphasize “socially” focused over “individually” focused interventions
 - Strengthen all levels and sources of Social Support
 - Emphasize “belonging” and counteract “alienation”
 - Family Systems
 - Parenting and Respite
 - Extended family connections
 - Schools and other child-focused systems of care
 - Build healthy peer-support options
 - Prevent and interrupt bullying (but not punitively)
 - Foster community connections and collective efficacy
 - Bridge community divides, including any recently exacerbated

Promoting Resilient Responses to Violence and Disasters

- Think CULTURE
 - Cultures provide:
 - Codes of Conduct
 - Shared Values, Expectations, Beliefs, and Assumptions
 - Belonging to a Collective Identity (“Insider” status)
 - As do Religion, Nationality, Ethnicity, Race, Profession, etc.
 - Perspectives on “Outsiders”
 - Intercultural Transactions and Collaborations benefit from:
 - Facilitation by Cultural Brokers (bicultural allies)
 - Building “trust by association”
 - Take actions of unquestionable kindness and generosity
 - Like language, culture is more “tool” than “obstacle”

Promoting Resilient Responses to Violence and Disasters

- Think ACTIVE
 - Don't just stand there, but don't just do "something"
 - Too much talk, not enough effective action
 - Foster and inspire activities among the affected youth:
 - Prosocial
 - Cooperative
 - Constructive
 - Compassionate
 - Emotionally Gratifying
 - Physically Engaging
 - Demonstrative of Community Efficacy
 - Living things are vibrant, colorful, dynamic; Signal vitality!

Promoting Resilient Responses to Violence and Disasters

- Think STRENGTHS
 - Foster self-efficacy (create opportunities)
 - Promote “growth” rather than “fixed” mindsets
 - Promote problem-solving and persistence
 - Promote “self-compassion”
 - Promote empathy, altruism, and compassion toward others
 - Promote acceptance of (not surrender to) harsh realities
 - Promote realistic expectations toward how others “should” be responding (such as parents, schools, governments)
 - Promote a longer and more extensive perspective on current conditions (rather than short-term tunnel-vision)
 - Promote engagement in social and cultural activities

Learning Objectives Review #1.1:

Describe in multiple ways how exposure to extremely adverse experiences is most likely to affect children's development in the immediate term and across time.

- Higher adversity (ACES) predicts:
 - Poorer physical and mental health
 - Higher likelihood of chemical substance dependence/addiction
 - Higher likelihood of risky behaviors (e.g., sexually)
 - Lesser performance in educational and occupational contexts
 - Disrupted brain development, epigenetic effects, shortened telomeres
 - Lesser quality of life and decreased longevity

Learning Objectives Review #1.2:

Describe in multiple ways how exposure to extremely adverse experiences is most likely to affect children's development in the immediate term and across time.

- Intensely acute, chronic, and/or persistent escalations of the stress response may impair physical, cognitive, and emotional functioning
 - Nervous system recalibration and sensitization
- Threats to survival (self or others) may instill apprehensive anxiety, hypervigilance, fearfulness, distrust, anger, aggression, trauma
 - Automated and overgeneralized learning
- Activation of attachment alarm system => relational insecurity, clinginess, regression, social withdrawal or rejection
 - Loss of trust/confidence in the reliability of others
 - Need to persistently "test" relationships

Learning Objectives Review #2.1:

How can families, schools, healthcare facilities, and other child-serving systems more effectively protect children from unnecessary secondary and vicarious exposures to potentially traumatic stressors?

- Parents and other adults should:
 - Avoid exposing children to the most distressing thoughts and feelings (outbursts and other dramatic stuff)
 - Children may be (or not) out of sight, but able to hear and feel what you think you're shielding them from
 - Admit to themselves quietly and calmly when they are not coping well with children's distress and seek assistance

Learning Objectives Review #2.2:

- Parents and other adults should:
 - Closely monitor what children are exposed to during this sensitive/impressionable period
 - Especially TV or internet coverage or “social” media
 - Create play areas and other “oases”
 - Preserve (when possible) any familiar routines & other predictabilities
 - Be sensitive to emergent attachment security issues
 - Be sensitive to situational changes in behavior (e.g., immaturity (regression, irritability, fearfulness)
 - Be accepting and normalizing, not punitive and pathologizing
 - Provide unequivocally compassionate support
 - Listen to children with openness to their feelings and thoughts
 - Answer questions with more patience than frustration

Learning Objectives Review #2.3:

Remember:

- Children's coping is highly reflective of parent and family coping (think "dynamic systems"), so ensure that caregiving adults are receiving the best available support for their coping effectiveness.
 - Parents and other adults function as role models for coping
 - This also applies to public figures in the media
- Children's meaning-making about experiences is socially influenced especially by observation of reactions by parents and other influential adults, as well as respected peers.

Learning Objectives Review #3.1:

Apply principles of strengths-based models to promote active resilience behaviors among children, families, and child-serving systems that provide a multi-contextual ecology for thriving in adversity.

- Think Strengths: Look for these and reinforce them
 - Favor rewarding with praise and small privileges, not bribes
- Think Attachment Security: Connect, connect, connect!
 - But securely, not anxiously or overly protectively
- Think Culture
 - Encourage engagement in cultural activities (rituals, celebrations)

Learning Objectives Review #3.2:

- Think (and Model) Emotional and Behavioral Regulation:
 - Both Self-Regulation and Co-Regulation
- Think Vision:
 - Support seeing above and beyond the immediate situation
- Think Optimism:
 - Encourage hopefulness, awe, appreciation, and gratitude
- Think Self-Efficacy
 - Encourage the self confidence and discipline to get good at things
- Think Growth Mindset: Not determinism
 - Encourage persistence and cognitive flexibility
- Think Compassion
 - Encourage altruism, kindness, empathy, and self-compassion



Reflections

- Does this all make sense, or not?
- Can you/we really act on this?
- What would “we” need to do differently or additionally?
- Are there any surmountable or insurmountable barriers to improvement?
 - Policy?
 - Priorities?
 - Culture?
 - Reality?
- Are you willing, able, and encouraged?
 - Why?
 - Why not?

