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

Gilbert Reyes, PhD
Affiliate Member
National Child Traumatic Stress Network
Chair of Disaster Relief Committee
APA Division of Trauma Psychology (Div52)
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.
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?
  o Conditions threatening someone’s stability, viability, or development.

• What is violence as it applies to interpersonal and community violence?
  o Behavior that threatens or actually harms any person’s physical, emotional, and/or psychological wellbeing and/or survival.

• What is disaster?
  o 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?
  o “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.
  o Resilience tends to gradually and progressively strengthen and then weaken across the life-course (generally, with individual differences)
  o While “potential” resilience varies across individuals, environmental influences make the greater difference.
Key Concepts:
Adversity/Violence/Disaster/Resilience

• Resilience varies by degree depending on:
  o Types of adversities,
    • Their intensities,
    • Durations, and
  o 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)
  o 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.
  o Prolonged or Chronic Extreme Adversity often has lasting deleterious effects on normative development.
  o 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 $\Rightarrow$ Success/Growth
  - Adaptive Failure $\Rightarrow$ 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)
  o Resilience is like intelligence (successful adaptation)
  o Achievement Motivation/Enjoyment
    • Persistence
    • Frustration Tolerance
  o 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
  o Improve the quality of the developmental environment
  o Provide:
    • Protection
    • Stability
    • Comfort
    • Healthy but Challenging Stimulation
  o Create sheltering buffers against the surrounding “chaos” as rescue, recovery, and rebuilding are underway
  o 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
  o Don’t just stand there, but don’t just do “something”
    • Too much talk, not enough effective action
  o Foster and inspire activities among the affected youth:
    • Prosocial
      o Cooperative
      o Constructive
      o Compassionate
    • Emotionally Gratifying
    • Physically Engaging
    • Demonstrative of Community Efficacy
  o 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:
  o Both Self-Regulation and Co-Regulation

• Think Vision:
  o Support seeing above and beyond the immediate situation

• Think Optimism:
  o Encourage hopefulness, awe, appreciation, and gratitude

• Think Self-Efficacy
  o Encourage the self confidence and discipline to get good at things

• Think Growth Mindset: Not determinism
  o Encourage persistence and cognitive flexibility

• Think Compassion
  o 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?