

Tracking student resilience

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In recent times, research that has traditionally concerned itself with children 'at risk' has been supplemented by studies which have concentrated on the characteristics of those children who display resilient behaviours despite the presence of negative individual, family or environmental factors. A range of internal and external 'protective factors' that contribute to childhood resilience has been identified in the literature.

The research being presented here reports on one phase of a longitudinal study that is tracking children originally identified as displaying resilient or non-resilient behaviour. After one year, the persistence of resilient or non-resilient behaviours is noted among the 55 children in the study; the incidence of changed behaviour – either from resilience to non-resilience or vice versa – is low. Case studies of three children are used to illustrate the trends in the findings and to provide real examples of how the presence or absence of protective factors impact on the lives of real children.

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In recent times, research has been conducted into childhood *resilience*, a term which, according to Masten, Best and Garmezy (1990), is defined as the process of, capacity for, or outcome of successful adaptation despite challenging or threatening circumstances.

The historical bases for the concept of invulnerability or resilience were established in the early 1970s (Garmezy 1971; Garmezy & Neuchterlien 1972; Garmezy, Masten, Nordstrom & Terrorese 1979; Anthony 1974) and investigations of specific populations of resilient children and adolescents followed (Garmezy 1974; Anthony 1987; Werner & Smith 1988; Garmezy & Rutter 1983). In these later studies the subjects were children and adolescents who were classified as being at risk of psychiatric disorders, delinquency and other negative life outcomes because of a variety of individual, family and environmental factors (eg, neonatal stress, poverty, abuse, physical handicaps, alcoholism and criminal activities). Rather than focusing on those children and adolescents who were casualties of these negative factors, however, the studies focused instead on those who had not succumbed. The questions this work asked were: What is it about these children and adolescents that enables them to survive? What makes them apparently immune to the factors that negatively affect others? Instead of focusing on individual deficit, the new approach focused on individual strengths and, thus, the concept of resilience emerged in the psychological literature.

A strong feature of the published research on resilience has been the identification of both internal assets of the individual and external strengths occurring within systems in which the individual grows and develops; both

are frequently referred to in the literature as *protective factors* (eg, Garmezy 1985, 1994; Rutter 1987; Gore & Eckenrode 1994) or *protective mechanisms* (Rutter 1987). Just as risks have been identified as cumulative, protective factors seem to have the same cumulative effect in individuals' lives. The more protective factors that are present in children's lives, the more likely they are to display resilience.

Internal assets or protective factors that consistently appear in the literature in describing common characteristics of resilient children are such things as social competence, problem solving skills, mastery, autonomy and a sense of purpose and a future (see Waters & Sroufe 1983; Garmezy 1985; Rutter 1980, 1984, 1985; Werner & Smith 1988; Masten, Best & Garmezy 1990; Gore & Eckenrode 1994; Consortium on the School-Based Promotion of Social Competence 1994).

External assets or protective factors have been described in relation to three primary social systems in the child's world – family, school and community. These systems, of course, fall into what Bronfenbrenner (1979), in his ecological theory of human development, calls the *microsystem* – the first of a series of nested social structures that have a powerful impact on children's development. In relation to the family, many of the protective factors identified by research clearly relate to the consistency and quality of care and support the individual experiences during infancy, childhood and adolescence. The work of Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore and Ouston (1979) shows that another source of external protective factors can be the school. Children in discordant and disadvantaged homes are more likely to demonstrate resilient characteristics if they attend schools that have good

academic records and attentive, caring teachers. Other studies have also shown the important role that individual teachers can play in resilient children's lives (Geary 1988; Werner & Smith 1988; Coburn & Nelson 1989). In relation to the community, children in disadvantaged areas are generally considered more at risk than those in more affluent areas. However, certain community characteristics seem to operate as protective factors. The strength of social support networks provided by kin and social service agencies, for example, is one such factor (Pence 1988).

Many researchers argue that caring and support across all three external systems outlined above are the most critical variables throughout childhood and adolescence (West & Farrington 1973; Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore & Ouston 1979; Rutter 1984; Garnezy 1985; Anthony 1987; Masten, Best & Garnezy 1990; Rhodes & Brown 1991; Gore & Eckenrode 1994). Caring and support establish the basis for trusting relationships throughout life, a factor identified earlier by Erikson (1963) as the foundation for healthy future development.

THE RESILIENCE PROJECT

The study to be reported here is the latest phase of a three year research project exploring the concept of resilience in relation to Australian children's lives. In our earlier work in South Australian schools, we talked to ordinary, randomly selected, 9-12 year old children and their teachers about (a) what they think a 'tough life' is, (b) why 'some kids have a tough life but do OK', and (c) why 'some kids have a tough life but don't do OK'. We discovered that children's and teachers' understandings about those factors that put a child 'at risk' were quite similar and many of their perceptions about what enabled some children to 'do OK even though they had a tough life' were consistent with the protective factors identified in the literature on resilience.

Based on information gathered from the children, their teachers and from the literature, we constructed a screening device to help teachers identify children displaying resilient and non-resilient

behaviours. Using this device, teachers identified fifty-five 9-12 year old children who were experiencing 'tough lives', 30 of whom were displaying non-resilient behaviour and 25 of whom were displaying resilient behaviour.

Just as risks have been identified as cumulative, protective factors seem to have the same cumulative effect in individuals' lives. The more protective factors that are present in children's lives, the more likely they are to display resilience.

We then designed a longitudinal study that would track the fifty-five children over several years in order to discover (i) whether protective factors actually feature in the lives of real resilient children; (ii) if their absence is obvious in the lives of non-resilient children; and (iii) how protective factors work in practice. We wanted to discover the life stressors present in 'at risk' children's lives and learn what strategies, resources, internal and external coping behaviours are used. In addition, we wished to examine the stability of resilient and non-resilient behaviour over time. As Rutter has warned, '...resilience cannot be seen as a fixed attribute of the individual. If circumstances change, the risk alters' (Rutter 1990: 184). A longitudinal design, we believed, would provide evidence to support this point.

We talked to the children individually twice, one year apart, using a *This Is Your Life* format for the interview. The semi-structured interview schedule that we used contained such questions as:

What important things have happened to you in your life?

Who are the important people in your life and why?

How do you like to spend your time?

What do you like about your life at the moment?

Are you proud of what you have done in your life?

Have you any regrets about what has happened to you?

What are your plans for the future?

What do you think may help you achieve your plans?

What may stop you from achieving your plans?

What advice would you give other kids about life?

The present paper reports on the second round of interviews that were carried out with the same children one year later.

THE PRESENT STUDY

The second round of interviews used the same semi-structured interview schedule that had been used the year before. Our interest this time around was to find out what had happened in the children's lives, to learn whether they were still using the strategies they had identified in their earlier interviews and to assess whether there had been any change in their status as children consistently displaying resilient or non-resilient behaviours.

Although the process of discovering where our original children are currently located has involved a considerable amount of detective work, we have been able to track them all down and the data set is now complete. The trends are very clear: the likelihood that children who displayed non-resilient behaviours last year are displaying resilient behaviours this year is low; the likelihood that children who displayed non-resilient behaviours last year are continuing to display non-resilient behaviour this year is high; and the likelihood that children who displayed resilient behaviours last year are displaying the same behaviour this year, despite continued stressful circumstances, is also high. So far only one child, formerly displaying resilient behaviour, has been identified as now displaying non-resilient behaviour and this case is too individual and complex to be of value as an exemplar here. In what follows, we have picked out some case studies of children who exemplify

the main trends and we indicate how we believe combinations of internal and external protective factors can account for the children's current non-resilient or resilient behaviour.

NON-RESILIENCE TO RESILIENCE

Only two of the children who displayed non-resilient behaviour last year are considered to be displaying resilience this year, so the incidence is low and neither of them represents a complete transition to resilience, in our opinion. There are, however, some hopeful signs of change in both internal and external protective factors in their lives.

Case study 1: STEVEN

Steven was 8 years old when he was first interviewed and is 9 now. His mother works in a nursing home and his step-father is unemployed. He has a brother and a baby sister and he is in regular contact with his biological father who manages a local store and lives in a caravan park. The family was classified as disadvantaged on a range of indicators.

During the first interview in 1997, Steven came across as a palpably unhappy boy. When talking about his life at home, he talked a lot about being bullied; he described serious conflict with his brother and it was clear he saw himself as a powerless victim here. He also experienced a good deal of teasing from his step-father, Chris:

- I: And what is Chris, is he a teaser too?
- Steven: Yeah, he only does it on several occasions like, 4-eyes, he said that once.
- I: To you?
- Steven: Yeah. He squirts me with the cat's water pistol too.
- I: Is he just having fun or do you see it's not fun?
- Steven: Oh it's not fun for me, but it is for him. Because he's like aiming for me when I'm behind the TV, and sometimes he says, 'Get your you-know-what down here.'
- I: What's he mean by that?
- Steven: 'Get your b-u-t down here.'
- I: Right. You understand what he means though don't you?

- Steven: Yeah. Because he's trying to stir me up.
- I: Chris?
- Steven: Yeah, he stirs me up all the time. Sometimes he squirts me with the hose when he's washing the car. I have to hide behind the car.
- I: And do you mind that?
- Steven: Yeah, it's okay.
- I: Okay? Just a bit of fun?
- Steven: Yeah.
- I: What about when he calls you '4-eyes'?
- Steven: Well I just say back to him, 'The glasses aren't eyes.'

At school, the bullying continued – principally, it seems, because Steven wears glasses. He was not experiencing academic success and he did not describe himself as a particularly happy boy:

- I: Would you describe yourself as a happy boy?
- Steven: Kind of in the middle.
- I: How come?
- Steven: Because I mostly don't even smile. I only smile for photographs.
- I: Really?
- Steven: Yeah
- I: Why?
- Steven: Because I don't feel like doing it. Sometimes I just really don't know why to smile because there's nothing to smile about.

During the 1998 interview, it is clear that little has changed in the major elements of Steven's life circumstances (ie, the family is still together, his step-father is still unemployed). However, Steven demonstrates in this interview a much more positive orientation to life – a much happier demeanour.

There are several significant differences between Steven's life last year and this year and they emerged as he talked. First, he has developed considerable expertise with the computer over the last year; he is a skilled computer games player, Net surfer and trouble-shooter. This appears to have given him a certain status with his brother, who now has to seek Steven's help when there is a computer problem. Although their fighting does not appear to have diminished in frequency or fervour,

Steven seems to see himself as less of a victim in these skirmishes.

Another difference, that is a direct result of Steven's expertise with the computer, is his discovery of an anti-bullying Internet site. He talks enthusiastically of the advice he's gained from this and how he's put it into action at school:

- I: So what has turned you around, what has changed your attitude to your schooling?
- Steven: The Internet has a ... bullying thing. That changed me to a happy person and now ...
- I: So did you go on the Internet and look at a site to do with bullying?
- Steven: Yes.
- I: Tell me about that? How did you find out about it?
- Steven: It was on BTN.
- I: Oh Behind the News and you took down the address.
- Steven: Yes.
- I: And did your teacher help you do that?
- Steven: No I had a piece of paper and a pen, not a pen a pencil.
- I: So you did that all by yourself?
- Steven: Yes.
- I: What did you learn from the Internet site?
- Steven: It said if you are a bully then you get gain, they gain things by teasing people, but that talk really sweetly and it makes them go really down.
- I: So it gave you some things to do when you were being bullied.
- Steven: Yes.
- I: Do they work?
- Steven: Yes.
- I: So what is your main tactic when you get bullied, what do you do?
- Steven: When I am getting bullied, I just say 'please stop it', if he doesn't do it, ignore him for a second, and if he still keeps doing it then tell a teacher.
- I: That helps, it works.
- Steven: Yes.
- I: Excellent. Do you think learning how to do those things has made your life at school happier?
- Steven: Yes.

Steven's mother and step-father have also been instrumental in making a difference in Steven's life by initiating some interventions. These interventions may not all be ideal, but their intention appears to be the minimisation of conflict between Steven and his brother. First, Steven's mother has imposed a roster for computer use that gives each boy equal time on the computer and she has also negotiated and is enforcing a schedule of TV watching that enables both boys to watch their preferred programmes.

Secondly, Chris, the step-father, has organised for Steven (and not his brother) to take boxing lessons. The intention here seems to be to toughen Steven up; to prevent him appearing a 'wuss'; to overcome Steven's 'shyness' and to enable him to 'take care of himself' in fights with his brother:

Steven: Ian he gets in fights all the time I have told you that.

I: Do you reckon you and he fight as much now compared with when you spoke to me last year?

Steven: Yes.

I: More or less?

Steven: More.

I: What kind of fights do you have, are they violent, do you hit each other?

Steven: Yes, plenty of times.

I: He is a bit bigger than you though isn't he.

Steven: Yeah, lots stronger.

I: Yet you still have fights with him.

Steven: Yep.

I: Do you get hurt very often?

Steven: Not quite as much because I have taken up boxing lessons.

I: You have really. Has Ian?

Steven: No.

I: Whose idea was that?

Steven: Chris's.

I: What so you can fight Ian back?

Steven: Yes.

I: And how do you feel about taking boxing lessons?

Steven: It is easy at the start and then it gets complicated.

I: Does Chris encourage you to hit back at Ian?

Steven: No. Yes all the time.

I: What does he say?

Steven: He says, 'Don't be a wuss' and everything. Like very - how do you say it - shy. And I cry almost half the time and he is saying to not be a wuss and then I and Chris get into arguments and Mum comes out and settles him out.

Steven's school achievement has improved enormously and he is happier at school - as he says: 'Now I very like school now':

I: What else about school is going well for you?

Steven: Going well in everything really.

I: Your reading is okay?

Steven: Yeah because the parent/teacher interview I heard Mrs. Brian say.

I: That you are doing well.

Steven: Yeah in my Maths test and I had no areas to do in revision so then we were doing this page I finished it faster than anybody else and I got to start doing the year 5 sheet.

I: Oh really that is excellent. I think you told me last year that you were having a bit of trouble with your school work.

Steven: Yeah I was getting distressed with it. But now I really like it.

I: What has changed in the time since I talked to you last time?

Steven: I have changed my reading skills, I have changed my spelling a bit, I have changed Maths by humungous areas, changed English as well, we had it good when it comes to Grammar.

[...]

I: Okay. Are you proud of anything that you have done since I talked to you last year?

Steven: Yes I am proud of my hand writing. Proud of my Maths and Science.

Steven's concluding statement this year is in stark contrast with last year's:

I: So you are reasonably happy with life?

Steven: Yes.

I: That is wonderful, I am pleased to hear that Steven. Because last year you weren't all that... you told me

things that suggested that you weren't particularly happy at school, but you are now, what do you think the future holds?

Steven: I will be a very happy man.

So, in broad terms, little has changed in Steven's life's physical circumstances but some protective factors, which were not in evidence last year, are now in operation. First, there are internal protective factors related to **mastery** and **problem solving** that lead to feelings of **pride**, **self-worth** and **self-efficacy**. Steven has obviously improved his school performance and is now succeeding in key academic areas; he's proud of his work in Maths and Science; he's proud of his handwriting; he knows he's made 'humungous' changes in his Maths and his English and he knows he is the agent that has made these changes. In addition, his computer skills add to his sense of mastery and have led him to sources of information that are helping to solve the problem of being bullied - he now has strategies for dealing with those who continue to try and make him a victim.

In relation to external protective factors, the family interventions appear to have had some practical effect. The TV and computer rosters/schedules have certainly reduced opportunities for conflict and although Steven does not sound as though he's enjoying the boxing lessons much, they appear to have given him a certain amount of confidence when conflict with his brother is unavoidable. Equally important though, is the fact that these parental interventions communicate to Steven that he is **cared for**.

The combination of internal and external protective factors that have become active in Steven's life over the last year have changed his attitudes, his behaviour, his school performance and his self-perceptions. Cumulatively, these fit the criteria of resilient behaviour. The challenge for Steven, and for those who care about him at home and at school, is to ensure that these positive changes are sustained and strengthened.

NON-RESILIENCE TO NON-RESILIENCE

Of the 30 children who were identified as displaying non-resilient behaviours a

year ago, 28 are still displaying the same behaviours a year later. It would seem that the mutually reinforcing cycle of risky environmental circumstances and few protective factors is a hard one from which to escape. Ally's story is individually unique but at the same time typical, in broad terms, of many others in this grouping.

Case study 2: ALLY

Ally was 11 years old when interviewed in 1997. She lived with her mother and father; her adult brother lived independently. The family rated low on a range of SES indicators and while, strictly speaking, it could not be classed as itinerant, it had relocated frequently.

In 1998, when we were finally able to track Ally down again, it is clear her circumstances have deteriorated badly. Her parents have divorced; her mother has taken out a restraining order against her father and she and Ally have moved to get away from him; this has meant another change of school for Ally. Her teachers classified her as non-resilient largely on the basis of her poor attendance at school and her poor academic achievement. Ally's present circumstances are tenuous; she and her mother are staying with a friend of her mother's but this is not working out well because the household is crowded and conflicts are frequent.

When reading the transcripts of Ally's interviews, two things come across to the reader very strongly – the first is what appears to be quite unself-conscious accounts of loss. She has few friends, largely because of her constant moving from school to school. She had made two friends at her school last year but one of them moved away without Ally being able to say goodbye. In the transcript that follows she talks almost wistfully about the need to belong and to be looked after by friends:

I: Right so why are Crissie and Chloe important to you Ally?

Ally: Because they're my only best friends and they're the first ones I've ever had. They're really nice to me except for Crissie because she bosses me around most of the time and Chloe is a little bit annoying sometimes but still they're really great friends. I mean they give everything, they

look after me when I'm hurt and sick and all that sort of stuff.

I: So they're loyal types of people are they?

Ally: Yes. Sort of like King and Queen, you know what I mean?

I: King and Queen, I'm not quite sure what you mean?

Ally: Like if I'm the princess and they like order me around and stuff like that. They look after me.

I: All right so they're the King and Queen in the sense that they order you around but they also look after you. You have to do what they say more or less, something like that is it?

Ally: Yes but sometimes they let me boss them around.

Four of the people Ally cites as being important to her are Arnold Schwarzenegger, her older brother and her parents, but all of them have let her down in some way. Arnie, for example, has married someone else:

I: Who are the important people in your life?

Ally: Well, Arnold Schwarzenegger for one. My brother which I haven't seen for about 7 years. I only talk to him on the phone once in a while, about every fortnight. Of course my parents and my cousins and all of my friends.

I: So you mentioned Arnold Schwarzenegger, he's pretty important in your life. Why is he important?

Ally: Because he's the number one action star and also because he's rich. I don't care about his money much but he's sort of a little bit cute.

I: Yes, you like the look him, he's well off and he's an action star and you admire that do you?

Ally: Yes.

I: Who else did you mention? You mentioned your parents, why are they important Ally?

Ally: Well because they've looked after me from the day I was born and they've cared for me and all that sort of stuff.

I: Right so they're pretty important because they've looked after you and cared for you, mum and dad.

Ally: I wish there was a way I could repay them. The only thing I could think of is when I find Arnold Schwarzenegger, if I do marry him that I'd come back and live.

I: Right so you marry ...

Ally: Sort of like a fantasy.

I: Yes, it's a fantasy. Then you could sort of repay your parents for everything they've done for you by getting married to him and having lots of money but it's a fantasy.

Ally: I don't think it will happen because he's already married.

I: Right, oh well.

Ally: Maria Schneider, it was her birthday on Friday night. Because she's married to Arnold Schwarzenegger I got really mad about it because it was her birthday and she probably got a lot of money from her husband and all this sort of stuff. So I just say, 'Stuff you, you bitch.'

Ally's brother, whom she has not seen in person for 8 years, has revealed that he is gay and she fears that this will mean that she will not become an auntie. Her parents have experienced an acrimonious divorce and her mother has custody of her, however, Ally misses her father and worries about him:

Ally: Well I haven't seen him in a while and I've been having nightmares and terrible stuff is happening to him. I've got a bad feeling that something is going to happen.

I: Well, you're pretty worried about Dad.

Ally: Definitely.

She misses her old school at Rivertown:

Ally: And then we moved again, when I was in grade 5. The last one or two months when I was in year 5, I was going to be in Mr Lester's class which I really wanted to be in because they go to Woodhouse each year, for camp. They've been there 3 years in a row because it's so good. I miss my old school, I really want

to go back but Mum and Dad won't let me.

She loves animals but her dog ran away and she has lost many of her possessions in the most recent move down south:

- I: So you like to watch television. You used to like to ride your bike but you haven't got one any more?
- Ally: My dad's got it, he won't let me get it. Well he will let me get it but it's covered in spiders. Big black ones about this big.
- I: So it sounds like when they broke up you might have lost a bit of stuff, did you?
- Ally: Oh heaps, I lost my bunk bed. I lost nearly everything except for the ones that I really wanted like my Hanson CD and my posters. The only thing I didn't get was my Hanson book I ordered from Lucky Book Club but they're keeping it for me.
- I: So it sounds like you lost a lot of things as well as you know having your parents split up.
- Ally: Oh definitely.
- I: It's hard isn't it? Yeah.
- Ally: As well as losing my parents I lost nearly all my life.
- I: So you really felt a terrible loss. All the things you were used to and the people you were used to and living together and everything all just disappeared.
- Ally: Can we get onto the next question now?
- I: Sure, course we can.
- Ally: It's getting uncomfortable talking about this situation.

In her twelve years, Ally does seem to have experienced a good deal of loss and has few of the anchors that give others' lives stability – friends, a stable school life, a community in which to grow up and make contacts. Moreover, her family has now split up and she no longer has a permanent residence. If it is reasonable to assume that some minimum level of family/school/community stability is necessary for the development of resilient behaviours, then it is clear that Ally's circumstances fall far short of this threshold.

The trends are very clear: the likelihood that children who displayed non-resilient behaviours last year are displaying resilient behaviours this year is low; the likelihood that children who displayed non-resilient behaviours last year are continuing to display non-resilient behaviour this year is high; and the likelihood that children who displayed resilient behaviours last year are displaying the same behaviour this year, despite continued stressful circumstances, is also high.

The second feature of Ally's interviews that impresses the reader (or listener) is the extraordinary brisk, matter-of-fact, assertive tone she adopts when talking about a life that appears to have rarely been very predictable and has clearly become increasingly chaotic during the last year. This is the kind of tone that one might associate with a child displaying resilient rather than non-resilient behaviour. Does this pervasive tone suggest that Ally is somehow rising above the chaos of her family life to deal/cope with her problems in positive, constructive ways? When you examine her transcripts closely it is clear that this is not the case – Ally's plans and strategies are quite unrealistic if not counter-productive. Some involve fantasy – which may well be a coping behaviour but is temporary and unproductive in the long run.

One counter-productive and unrealistic plan involves truanting from school. It's clear that Ally doesn't like school much but truanting is more than just a means of escaping an unenjoyable experience –

it's part of a plan that she has devised to get expelled from her present school. Her aim is to be sent back to her old school at Rivertown which clearly has pleasant memories for her.

- Ally: [...] I miss my old school, I really want to go back but mum and dad won't let me.
- I: Back to Rivertown.
- Ally: I'm trying to get expelled but it's not a really good thing.
- I: From here?
- Ally: Yes.
- I: So you're doing everything you can to get away from the school?
- Ally: Yes.

Since puberty, Ally has seen that a way out of her situation is to marry someone rich and cute – in one blow she gets a special and permanent relationship and funds – things that seem to have escaped her thus far. The only rich and cute men she is aware of are movie stars – Arnold Schwarzenegger, Leonardo di Caprio, Jim Carrey – and so she constructs plans for ensnaring such men:

- Ally: Unfortunately, my opinion is that my life sucks. And one more thing that is bad about life though, am I allowed to be negative in this situation?
- I: Sure. Well actually we've got a question coming up about that. We can just go straight to that and that's about have you got any regrets about what's happened to you during the last year.
- Ally: Yeah, all the cute boys are always married.
- I: Oh right.
- Ally: Except for Jim Carrey.
- I: Oh right. So the ones you like...
- Ally: And Leo.
- I: Oh and Leo.
- [...]
- I: So what do you think may help you to achieve your plans. You mentioned you want to get married.
- Ally: Move to America.
- I: Oh right. Now why would it be good in America?

- Ally: Cause of all the cute guys and most of them aren't married.
- I: Oh right, so it's a much better place to get married?
- Ally: And they're rich.
- I: Oh yeah, right. So money is important.
- Ally: Yeah, very important. I'm in love with money. If I could get away with it, I would marry money.
- I: Oh right.
- Ally: I'd have a big huge bag about this big sitting right next to me in bed.
- I: Oh, no person, a big bag of money.
- Ally: Yep, and I'd never spend it, well if I could stop myself anyway.
- [...]
- I: So moving to America would really make a big difference because then you could get married to someone who had a lot of money.
- Ally: Yeah and then I could come back to Australia and I could buy all the things I looked at in the supermarket and 'Hey did I want that? Yeah, I think I did. Did I want that? Yeah I think I did'.

When asked about her future plans in 1997, Ally said she wanted to be a detective/policeman, a teacher and a shop-keeper. Her poor academic record is a problem in relation to all three 'goals' but her response was to reject the requirements rather than to see school work as a useful means to an end. In 1998, her former goals are not mentioned. Now she's talking about developing a babysitting business – but this follows a discussion of how she does not want to have children of her own because she dislikes children intensely. Her plans for the future appear unrealistic and ephemeral.

So, in contrast with Steven, Ally's life circumstances have changed in the year between the interviews, but not for the better. What stability there was in a peripatetic life has been eroded by the bitter divorce of her parents. She has no family figures close by to whom she can turn for guidance, consolation and strength. Her frequent changes of school and her persistent truanting have prevented both the development of a close, supportive relationship with

teachers and ensures that she falls farther and farther behind with academic survival skills. Her friendships do not survive her frequent relocations. Her inner survival skills and problem solving techniques appear to be based in fantasy and/or are counter-productive and unrealistic. It is hard to find even one protective factor, of either an internal or an external kind, in operation in Ally's life but there are many of the classic indicators of risk. If we are able to trace Ally in a year's time and if her life circumstances have not changed for the better, it is likely that her non-resilient behaviours will be even more deeply entrenched.

RESILIENCE TO RESILIENCE

All except one of the children who had been identified by their teachers as displaying resilient behaviours in 1997 appeared to be using the same resilient strategies to deal with new or persistent life problems in 1998.

Case study 3: TONI

In her 1997 interview, 12 year old Toni revealed that she had an alcoholic, unstable, stressed-out mother and a mentally ill father – they split up when Toni was a one year old. When she was 7 she lost her baby sister in tragic circumstances. In March of 1997, Toni was thrown out of home after a history of physical and emotional abuse from her mother. She was rescued by her paternal grandmother and grandfather who had also taken over the care of their mentally ill son. Here Toni tells the story of being kicked out of home in one continuous, unstoppable narrative:

Toni: Well, some of the most important things that have happened to me last year is, I had a fight with my Mum and she kicked me out of home, and we had to go to court, so my Nanna and Pop could get custody of me and live with them. And I'll tell you what happened. What happened was, my friend come over after school one day and she left at 4.30 and Mum and her boyfriend went out at 4.30, and they didn't get back until 7 that night and my brother was hungry, and my Mum was whingeing because I didn't feed him, but I didn't know what to give him and that, and then she

started punching me around the house and that. And she was hitting me and slapping me in front of the kids and she told me to pack my bags and get out. So I didn't want to, and she started hitting me again, so I went in my room and packed all my bags up, and then she threw me outside. I started walking down the street and she ran down the street and she dragged me back to the house, and started bashing me up some more. Threw me in my bedroom and said, 'You can go to your Nanna and Pop's in the morning. You can go to sleep now.' 5 minutes later she walks in the room with a glass and threw it at me, and missed my eye by about 1cm. Then she said that she was going to go and leave me to deal with her boyfriend's junk when he gets home because he wasn't in a very happy mood. So I said, 'I'm not going to stay here and listen to it.' So she threw me outside and threw the rollerblades at me, and I started walking down the road. I had all of my things, like I had about 5 bags to carry and I walked down, rang my Nanna and Pop. I was crying and I didn't know what to do and my Nanna was just saying that Poppy was coming to get me now. And I was talking to her on the phone, and Mum and the kids were walking down the road. And Mum took the phone off me and she started abusing my Nanna on the phone and saying that she was a 'dog' and all this other stuff. Then she tried to throw the phone thing at me and that's when my Poppy turned up. And then Mum pushed me over on to the cement and punched me one last time and then she was calling Poppy a 'scum' and all this other stuff. And I was crying. And then I went back to Nanna and Pop's house with Poppy and then half an hour later after that, she rang up, and she was saying to Nanna, 'Just tell her I'm sorry and I want her to come back and live with me and I didn't mean what I said.' And all this other stuff. And then she wanted to speak to me, but I didn't want to speak to her so Nanna said that I was asleep.

When interviewed for the second time, Toni explains that she is still living with her grandparents. Her Dad's now in jail (albeit briefly) and Toni is attempting to rebuild a relationship with her mother but is being cautious and very realistic about the prospects of being able to do this successfully. She is worried about the safety of her little brother and sister, and she has experienced her first betrayal by a close friend. Life has not been a bed of roses this year for Toni either.

Unlike Ally, the internal strategies that Toni uses to deal with her life's problems are all highly functional and she has some external sources of support that are also strongly associated with resilience. Her 'nanna and poppy', for example, are **caring people** in Toni's life; they have clearly been enormously important to her not just in providing her with shelter but also in convincing Toni that she is a loved person:

I: And you were saying before your family, that is a very important thing in your life, tell me about your family?

Toni: Well my Nanna and my Poppy they are very nice and they care about me.

[...]

Toni: Put it this way, my family is a family that actually helps each other, like I help my Nanna out and I help my Poppy and they help me out and I help my Dad and he helps me out and we all help each other.

I: All of those sorts of things. So you know that you are loved and looked after?

Toni: Yes I do.

An aunt and uncle also provide Toni with continual practical and loving support and she also cites a wide circle of **friends** as 'important people in her life':

Toni: Most of the time when it is hot I will go in my Nan and Pop's pool and my friends come over or most of the time I will go to their house we just like go for walks and go on picnics, go on bike rides.

I: Because you are quite close to some nice places around here aren't you for bike rides and things?

Toni: Yes but I live in Redwood Vale and so we just like spend lots of time with each other and like that is what friends are for, hang around with each other.

[...]

Toni: No-one else is exactly like me and I am myself, I am my own person. And what I like about my life is that I have got lots of friends to help me through tough times and that, so that is me.

Toni uses the practical resources available to her to actively engage in **problem-solving**. She took advantage of counselling, for example, to deal with her feelings about her baby sister's death:

I: Right, that is a terrible tragedy, and how did your grandparents help you to cope with it, what did they do?

Toni: They just said remember all the fun times you had with her and just don't think about what she is dead, because she is always going to be alive in you.

I: Did that help?

Toni: Yes that did, it helped a lot.

I: Did you see any counsellors or anything like that?

Toni: Yes I seen counsellors for I don't know how long, it was like ages and I have been to counselling every now and again because every year on Kelly's birthday now I send my Mum a card even though she is dead and she puts it with her urn and Mum said to me that I should put the past behind me and just forget about it, but I can't forget about my little sister.

When her own beatings became hard to bear, Toni also approached Family and Community Services (on the advice of a **trusted teacher**) and they provided her with needed assistance.

Toni demonstrates **autonomy** in so far as she assumes responsibility for others – for example, she ensures that her mentally ill father takes his medication regularly and she tries to protect the

brother and sister still living with her mother from harm. In the future she wants to be rich enough to have a mansion where everyone she loves can live – her friends Melinda and Kay; her little brother and sister; Nanna and Poppy and her father.

Self esteem, as the result of accomplishments, is a major factor in Toni's sense of who she is. The Youth Living Skills programme was an important thing in her life because, as she says, it taught her self confidence:

Toni: The most important things in my life would have to be my family and also this year I was in this like youth living skills program with Melinda.

I: That sounds fun, what did that involve.

Toni: That involved – like we learnt self confidence and we just learn confidence in ourselves and we just have lots of fun.

I: What sorts of things do you do? What sorts of things build up your confidence do you think?

Toni: They built up my confidence when I learnt new things that I couldn't do before?

I: What were they teaching you to do, this is not one of those ones where you have to jump down cliffs and things is it?

Toni: No they taught me how to ice skate and ski at the ice arena and we had all these celebrations and Melinda and I did all these dances and another important thing about my life is that this man from the ... asked me and Melinda if we would like to go to Shedley Theatre and perform on the stage in front of over 7,000 people.

Other skills also make Toni feel proud and boost her self esteem:

Toni: I am also proud of myself for the things I can do, like I am crafty like Nanna and like she can do paper crafts – she is teaching me, and we can both sew on the machine and make clothes and everything like that, I am very proud of myself.

In terms of **life plans**, Toni has devised several rational options for her post-

school life – working with animals (maybe a Park Ranger, maybe a vet) or joining the army. Her strategy for reaching those goals is to work hard:

Toni: If I work hard in school and I study and I go through all my years at high school, go to college and university and then I will probably get what I really want to do.

I: Are you going to do that, are you going to work hard, are you good at school?

Toni: Yes.

And she has **self-insight**, she knows which of her past behaviours would prevent her from achieving those goals:

I: What do you think could stop you from achieving those plans, what could go wrong?

Toni: Let's say if like I turn out like that I have got a horrible behaviour or something which I have in the past years but I have changed now.

I: What has changed your horrible behaviour, how did you change?

Toni: Well like the pushing my friends gave me and they stood by me even if I was like obnoxious sometimes, they stood by me and they taught me how to calm down and just like ignore people when they call me names and that.

I: So how was your behaviour obnoxious, what were you doing, were you just very aggressive?

Toni: Yes I was very aggressive and very loud.

I: Really. What produced that do you think?

Toni: My Mum used to like hit me all the time and it used to make me pretty angry so I used to fight back, and so that is how I grew up, I grew up in a very violent household with my Mum.

I: So and people have taught you to be not violent, to deal with your feelings. And your friends did that and the counsellor perhaps too?

Toni: Hmm, and some people just said 'Don't! Just give up on her, she is not going to change', and they

didn't believe them, and they stood by me and I did change.

Toni's life has been marked by violence and tragedy but a range of caring people and some fortuitous opportunities have combined to convince her that being 'obnoxious' and lashing out are not constructive life strategies. In Toni's case it seems that the external protective factors – caring grandparents and other relatives, supportive friends and teachers, and opportunities for success (eg, the Youth Living Skills programme) – have preceded the internal protective factors – self esteem, achievable life goals and autonomy. Even though life may continue to be hazardous for Toni, she gives the impression that it will take a lot to undermine her resilience – a characteristic of all the children in the study who are continuing to exhibit resilient behaviour one year on.

... it is hard to generalise about the most effective ways to mobilise and implement protective factors; they will be individual and particular to the circumstances in which the children find themselves.

CONCLUSION

Previous research and the theoretical literature on the subject of resilience have clearly identified the protective factors that, by their presence or absence, have profound effects on the lives of children at risk. But generalized prescriptions can leave questions unanswered. What sorts of things, for example, do families have to do to be caring and supportive; how do teachers demonstrate caring and attentiveness; what role do friends really play in an individual's life; what does it take to experience mastery, self-esteem and autonomy; what counts as problem-solving; what opportunities for success

work best and what kind of life plans are consistent with resilience?

The benefit of longitudinal research, like the current project, is that it does help to flesh out the theoretical prescriptions and provide some illustrations to answer the questions raised above. It can, in short, demonstrate how protective factors operate in the real lives of real children over time.

As can be seen from the case studies presented here, it is hard to generalise about the most effective ways to mobilise and implement protective factors; they will be individual and particular to the circumstances in which the children find themselves. However, there are three observations we would like to make in this regard:

- **FIRSTLY**, our work shows that, as far as teachers and parents are concerned, neither major special efforts nor special skills are required to demonstrate care and attentiveness – simple acts will do. Toni's teacher, for example, communicated care and attentiveness by listening sympathetically to her, gaining her trust and providing good advice. Steven's mother showed caring support by implementing some simple rules to eliminate obvious sources of conflict between Steven and his brother. Ally's parents, on the other hand, consumed by their own problems, are unable to negotiate something as simple and as potentially meaningful to Ally as the return of her bike.
- **SECONDLY**, schools can play a major part in fostering resilience by focusing on some fundamental areas. These include teaching for mastery in crucial subjects like Language and Mathematics; encouraging authentic real-life problem-solving; providing opportunities to achieve and experience authentic success. Steven's pride in his academic achievements is palpable in his 1998 interview and, in an excerpt not quoted here, Toni talks proudly about her successful transition to high school. Ally, on the other hand, has experienced such disruptions to her learning in the

basic subjects and is such a persistent truant, that her present school has real problems in meeting her needs.

THIRDLY, the wider community can provide surprising opportunities that foster resilience. The Internet provided the website on anti-bullying strategies that made such a difference to Steven's life; the Youth Living Skills Programme challenged Toni to develop skills and sufficient confidence to show them off in a public performance. The sense of pride and self esteem that these experiences have engendered in these two children come across very clearly in their transcripts. Ally's one stated opportunity for such an experience (the trip to the Woodhouse Camp) was forfeited when the family precipitately moved away from Rivertown.

As Bronfenbrenner (1979) points out, we live in and are affected by nested social systems that interact and influence each other. Clearly the family, the school and the community are three elements of Bronfenbrenner's systems that can have a major impact on the development of resilience. It is comforting to know, however, that the acts that can make a difference are often simple and within the capacity of most members and groups that constitute society. □

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