Promoting resilience in inner city youth: implications for counselors

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Promoting resilience in inner city youth: implications for counselors

Abstract
The strain and difficulties that plague the inner city continue to mount. As a result, youth who grow up in this environment are exposed to violence, substance abuse, inadequate education, and poverty. Although some youth become a part of the cycle that produces these unfortunate events, some are able to make it out and become assets to society. This occurrence has been termed resilience. The study of resilience continues to grow as researchers attempt to provide information for school officials, communities, and mental health practitioners about how to promote resilience in inner city youth.
PROMOTING RESILIENCE IN INNER CITY YOUTH:
IMPLICATIONS FOR COUNSELORS

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Abstract

The strain and difficulties that plague the inner city continue to mount. As a result, youth who grow up in this environment are exposed to violence, substance abuse, inadequate education, and poverty. Although some youth become a part of the cycle that produces these unfortunate events, some are able to make it out and become assets to society. This occurrence has been termed resilience. The study of resilience continues to grow as researchers attempt to provide information for school officials, communities, and mental health practitioners about how to promote resilience in inner city youth.
Inner city African American youth are faced with insurmountable obstacles on a daily basis. Many of them are exposed to chronic stress as a result of maltreatment, substandard housing, violence, inadequate education, and other environmental or socioeconomic disadvantages in their communities. Many of these children, due to the odds against them, are forced to live a life of crime, drug abuse, lack of appropriate education, and are unable to obtain gainful employment. Despite the obstacles that these children face, many of them are able to make it out of these situations and have gone on to become assets to society. Why is it that some inner city youth are able to make it out of these difficult situations and some are not? Many mental health professionals and researchers believe that resilience in children is the primary reason why some are able to overcome obstacles and some are not. Understanding how to best promote resilience in inner city youth is of increasing interest to researchers and social service providers (Stutman, Baruch, Grothberg & Rathore, 2002). As the future for youth growing up in the inner city grows increasingly difficult, it is important that counselors learn effective ways to promote resilience as we may become pivotal factors in helping them towards the correct path.

The purpose of this paper is to provide a definition and historical background on the study of resilience, the four major protective processes that foster resilience, and examples of strategies that help to build these protective processes for children. This paper will also describe the necessity for promotion of resilience in the inner city and give counselors an idea of their roles in identifying at-risk children, protective factors that may be present in a particular child, and helping to plan therapeutic interactions that may increase the likelihood of resiliency.
A Brief History of Resilience Research

The concept of resilience arose from attempts to understand the effects of poverty, parental mental illness, and other environmental stressors on child development. During the 1970’s, researchers studying children growing up in such circumstances began to notice that many did just fine despite the adversities they contended with day in and day out (Garmenzy & Masten, 1994). These researchers began to wonder what enabled these children to thrive in situations that derailed most others and what interventions could be developed to place at-risk children on the right path (Stutman et al, 2002).

One of the founding researchers, Norman Garmenzy (1974) wrote, “were we to study the forces that move such children to survival and to adaptations, the long range benefits to our society might be far more significant than our many efforts to construct models for primary prevention designed to curtail the incidence of vulnerability” (p. 114). Since these early studies, numerous researchers worldwide have studied children and adolescents growing up in situations such as war, natural disasters, family conflict, violence, poverty, abuse, homelessness, parental mental illness, and more (Stutman et al, 2002). Werner and Smith (1992), noted that the processes that enable these youth to achieve health and healing have a more profound effect on the course of their lives than the stressful events. These processes have become known as resilience.

A Definition of Resilience

The concept of resilience continues to evolve and a concrete definition of the concept has yet to be established. With that being said, the majority of the research reveals similar definitions, although some differ slightly. Goldstein & Brooks (2005) stated that “resiliency can be defined as a child’s achievement of positive developmental outcomes
under adverse conditions” (p. 6). Some of the terms often considered to be synonymous with resilience are positive coping, persistence, adaptation, and long term success despite adverse circumstances (Winfield, 1994).

Winfield (1994) explained that by labeling children resilient or non-resilient, it is easy to overlook the significance of this concept. She expressed that what makes a child resilient is the relative strength of individual characteristics and external protective processes such as support provided by schools, counselors, communities and families. Garmenzy (1983) identified individual characteristics of resilient children in high poverty areas who succeeded despite their disadvantaged circumstances. These characteristics include a broad range of social responsiveness, positive peer interactions, a high degree of social responsiveness, sensitivity, motivation, intelligence, empathy, and a sense of humor. Joseph (2002) believes that there are other individual characteristics of resilient children that include:

- Social skills and social support
- A sense of purpose and commitment to personal and social goals
- Self understanding and acceptance
- Good decision making strategies
- Stress coping strategies
- Good nutrition and exercise (p. 272)

Many researchers debate over the idea of resilience being viewed as something we do or something we foster. Winfield (1994) believed that resilience should be viewed as something we should foster throughout children’s development by strengthening protective processes for them at critical moments in their lives. She
viewed resilience as a developmental process that can be fostered, and that strategies for change can be directed towards practices, policies, and attitudes among professionals. She noted that within every young person there is a delicate balance between the protective processes and risk factors that originate both internally and externally within them.

Four Protective Factors that Foster Resilience

As mentioned earlier, external protective processes are essential to the idea of promoting resilience. Rutter (1987) outlined four protective processes that foster resilience:

- Reducing negative outcomes by altering the risk or child’s exposure to risk
- Reducing negative chain reaction following self esteem
- Establishing and marinating self esteem and self efficiency
- Opening up opportunities

Reducing Negative Outcomes by Altering the Risk or Child’s Exposure to Risk

An extreme example of altering a child’s exposure to risk would be a situation where he or she is removed completely from the environment in which he or she resides. Going away to a boarding school or living with family members in a low risk area are dramatic alternatives to reducing or altering a child’s exposure to risk. Unfortunately, for many inner city youth affected by alcohol, drugs, and violence among parents or family, leaving the environment is not an option (Winfield, 1994). Many inner city youth become so hardened by the events that they witness within their environments that they become accustomed to living life at risk. This in turn promotes violent behavior and an attitude that forces them to show that they will not back down. Schools in the inner city
should be more responsible for altering children's exposure to risk. Various strategies can be implemented that help to have the basic needs of the children met.

After school programs must be promoted in order to give children options of extracurricular activities, which keep them away from the dangers of the city. Also, the government must approve and develop programs and jobs targeted at inner city youth that will help them develop discipline and focus. These examples, however large or small, may have an effect in alleviating a child's exposure to risk.

Reducing a Negative Chain Reaction Following Risk Exposure

Usually, youth who participate in violent acts, crime, or become pregnant at an early age allow themselves to be pulled in a downward spiral of negative behavior from which they rarely recover. Particular interventions and programs must be put in place for individuals who have made mistakes or bad choices in the past. This may help in avoiding the chain reaction and help promote resilience. Job training and education become key factors in this task. Winfield (1994) expressed that increased literacy skills and credentials for urban youth are critical in order to achieve success in the labor market. She stated that students who fail to attend high school or do not receive job skills usually join the ranks of the unemployed. MacIntosh & Miller (1999) said it best when they noted that one of the most secure avenues for success regardless of socioeconomic status is the classroom. A strong education can arm inner city adolescents against the adverse consequences of social inconsistency, social injustice and poverty.

In addition, Rutler (1987) suggested additional strategies for reducing the negative chain reaction for adolescent matters. These strategies include instating quality parental care programs designed to encourage adolescent parents to continue schooling to reduce
the likelihood of welfare dependency. These programs may include parenting classes, on
site or community day care, and ongoing health care classes for mothers and their
children. Other solutions for reducing negative chain reactions following risk exposure
may be obtaining resources from church or community-based organizations. Social
workers and mental health professionals may also be enlisted to help break the chain of
negative behavior in individuals in order to prevent additional negative behaviors from
taking place.

Establishing and Maintaining Self Esteem and Self Efficiency

Self esteem and self efficiency are developmental processes that are learned primarily
in two ways: in positive interactions with peers or adults and in successful
accomplishments of a task, whether it is academic, musical, artistic, or athletic (Winfield,
1994). Similarly, self-efficiency develops when students learn that they have control
over certain things in their environment and that they are not helpless. Checkoway &
Zimmerman (1992) concurred and pointed to problem-solving efficiency and self-esteem
as predictors of positive expectations”. Similarly, Dubow, Arnet, Smith, & Ippolito
(2001), reported that studies with inner city children found a significant correlation
between self-esteem and optimism. Helping inner city underprivileged children develop
self-esteem and self-efficiency may be a daunting challenge as the images they see and
experiences they have had may play against this task. It is essential that children involve
themselves with tasks and activities that allow them to have positive interactions with
adults and peers.

Also, providing youth with mentors or other positive role models will help to build
self-efficiency and self-esteem. Many underprivileged children in the inner city feel that
they have no control over their lives. It is important that schools, agencies, and communities provide them with tasks, part-time jobs, community experiences, and other outlets in order to help build self-esteem and self-efficiency.

*Opening up Opportunities*

Opening up opportunities ties into all of the protective factors that promote resilience. Without opportunity, inner city children cannot thrive. Nettles (1991) found that students who participated in activities sponsored by community-based programs displayed the following characteristics:

- More certainty in graduating from high school
- Increased sense of personal control
- Heightened academic self concept
- Increased effort to achieve future goals

Social policies such as desegregation and funding of Head Start programs, also have affected youngsters' opportunities and access in schools and classrooms (Swanson & Spencer, 1991). Programs such as the Junior Marines and the Mayor's Summer Employment in Washington D.C. have opened up avenues for inner city youth that may have been closed in the past. Although these programs have been successful in reaching a small ratio of these children, additional programs must be designed and implemented in order to make a more widespread impact on inner city underprivileged youth.

*Growing Up in the inner City*

Although the inner city of New York or Washington D.C. may differ from that of Los Angeles or Atlanta, they all share one common factor, which is the presence of poverty. The U.S. Census Bureau reported that the official poverty rate in 2002 was 12.1 percent,
up from 11.7 percent in 2001. An alarming 8.2 percent of the people who are officially below the poverty line are in major cities or metropolitan areas.

A study conducted by the Committee on National Urban Policy, the Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences on Education, and the National Research Council (1990) that explored the extent and location of “ghetto poverty”, as well as, the question of whether poor people in the ghetto are worse off than people living elsewhere. They defined ghettos as inner city neighborhoods with overall poverty rates of 40 percent or more. They attempted to answer such questions such as: Does poverty feed on itself? Does living in the ghetto exacerbate the problems associated with being poor? They found that the social conditions in these areas including crime, dilapidated housing, drug use and related violence, problems related to out of wedlock births, and unemployment reflect a cycle that continues to reproduce and get worse.

Their study also reported that neighborhood effects are stronger for children, which lead to delays in cognitive development and unwanted sexual and family formation practices. Renchler (1993) reported similar concerns by writing that the statistics on children who live in poverty portray a picture of a nation struggling to keep up with the problem and perhaps not fully committed to solving it. He reported that poor inner city youth are seven times more likely to be victims of child abuse and neglect than are high socioeconomic status children. These statistics continue to grow in the new millennium, causing many children to become displaced and unmotivated to succeed.

Violence in the Inner City

Living in constant fear of gunfire, fights, stabbings, and gang warfare is a reality for many children living in inner city neighborhoods. Violent crimes and victimization rates
for youth are reaching alarming levels in the United States. Additionally, teenagers are the most frequent instigators of violence against other teenagers. African American inner city teenagers, specifically males, have higher crime rates than do teenagers in any other group (Fitzpatrick & Boldizor, 1993). Youth who participate in these crimes usually see no hope for the future. They are products of their environment and they are aggravated by their current living situation, which in turn harbors an “I don’t care” attitude.

Violence begets violence and in the inner city, violence has become the norm. African American inner city youths are under siege. They have the highest rate of detention, suspension, expulsions, and special education placements. In juvenile justice, they have the highest rates of arrests and detention (Harvey and Hill, 2004).

Youngstrom, Weist, and Albus (2003) studied the relationship between violent exposure and stress among inner city youth. They found that the association between violence and stress might be influential on the outcomes of children and their relationships. Warner and Weist (1996) posited that as a result of higher stress levels, many inner city African Americans suffer from survival fatigue. This condition of passivity, hopelessness, and current and future helplessness is the result of exposure to the chronic traumas and stress epidemic to urban environments. This chronic stress and violence is undoubtedly caused in part, by poverty.

In addition to poverty and violence being deterrents for children growing up in the inner city, likewise the prevalence of substance abuse, use, and sales is becoming more prevalent. An abundant amount of adolescents have turned to selling drugs as a way to earn money and avoid a life of complete poverty. This has become a severe problem and
has not been given the attention that is needed. Around one in six urban adolescents have had some involvement in drug dealing (Centers & Weist, 1998).

For inner city teenagers, there are a range of problems associated with drug dealing including juvenile arrest, involvement in violence (as victims and perpetrators), substance abuse, behavioral and emotional difficulties, academic failure and dropout. The prevalence of drugs in inner city communities add to the cycle of destruction that plague many families within it. As a result the children within these families are exposed to lifestyles that they must adapt to and put up a suite of armor against.

Helping Counselors Promote Resilience in Inner City Youth

Working with inner city youth may be challenging for mental health counselors. The stance of the counselor must include a firm commitment to the principles of looking for strengths rather than weaknesses and to a sensitive understanding that life may be difficult for children who do not have the advantages of material possessions and a stable home (Rak & Patterson, 1996). The counselor must also be aware that it may be difficult for such children to identify strengths when the majority of what they see may be negative.

The Institute for Mental Health Initiatives (2001) established several guidelines for counselors working to promote resilience in inner city youth. The first step is building a therapeutic relationship. Building a trusting relationship is essential to resilience as you are then able to establish clear boundaries, expectations, and consequences for violation of the rules. It is important for counselors to know that even a teenager who has never had a therapeutic relationship before can learn to trust.
The second step is to focus on the individual, not the problem. Counselors should focus on strengthening the individual rather than changing one narrow behavior, such as violent acts, promiscuity, or drug use. This can not only build resilience but also reduce the problem behavior as well. The counselor should create an environment in which adolescents feel valued and are better able to trust. This leads to more disclosure and engagement in the sessions. Helping the client strengthen communication, self-talk, and goal setting allows them to build self-esteem and self-efficiency and increases the likelihood that they will apply these skills to any situation.

The next step is keeping the accent on the positive. Counselor should always offer praise rather than blame, and employ positive approaches to setting limits and criticism. They should also continuously model hope and optimism as a positive therapeutic encounter that may increase resiliency.

Next, set high expectations and provide the support youth need to meet them. Expectations influence the impact of therapy. They are essential to keeping a gauge of progress in therapy. Although setting high expectation may backfire, if they are consistently enforced, they become a way for clients to assess their progress and determine when they are ready for an increased challenge.

Finally, make the parents a part of the therapeutic process. Poor parenting skills are one of the greatest threats to a child's resistance. It is important to work with the parents to remind them that children, particularly those growing up in the inner city, prosper in an environment where they are loved and where there are clear expectations for responsible behavior (Smith, 1991). Counselors must also emphasize that communication with their
children is monumental. Many parents need help in learning how to listen to their children and validate their children’s concerns and needs.

Counselors can also help parents understand that children’s capacity for resilient behavior is diminished when they experience a high degree of uncertainty and turmoil in the family (Rak & Patterson, 1996). Parents who have many responsibilities and are managing parenting along with long hours of employment should be encouraged to place priority on their responsibilities as parents and to assess who else in the family or neighborhood might be able to supplement the care and support their children require.

One family circumstance that creates especially high risk is early parenthood, often without marriage, followed by economic hardship and repeated pregnancies. The parents, often single mothers, become overwhelmed with responsibilities, have trouble providing physical necessities, and experience stresses that make it difficult for them to provide an emotional supportive environment.

Schools and social service agencies have developed programs for teenage parents that serve multiple purposes: teaching child care techniques, discussing the consequences of multiple pregnancies, and addressing parenting skills. Although counselors may not have primary responsibility for creating such programs, they can provide support for the establishment of program, provide consultation to the staff regarding the principles of risk and protective factors, and offer direct consultation and counseling to individual parents and groups of parents needing help with nurturing their children.

Conclusion

Inner city youth are faced with seemingly insurmountable barriers during their adolescence. These barriers come in many forms. Exposure to violence, crime, drugs,
poverty and inadequate education are just a few of the hurdles that need to be crossed in order to be successful in life. Despite these challenges, many children are able to endure the exposures of a negative environment. These children are known to be resilient.

Resilience must be fostered within inner city youth and it is the duty of schools, agencies, communities, and families to do so. It is also the duty of these entities to understand the four protective processes that foster resilience and strategies for implementing them.

Researchers continue to study resilience, what it is, and how to promote it. We must continue to find solutions to the difficulties that children growing up in the inner city face in order to thwart the cycle of poverty, violence, and drug abuse. Mental health counselors are in an ideal position to help with this process. The more that is learned about promoting resilience in inner city youth, the further we can go in treating them appropriately and tailoring therapeutic interventions that work.
References


