**Artifact #4**

Resiliency and Optimism

In Children and Adolescents

Summer 2009

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Response Paper

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The first five lessons in this class have taught me a lot about factors that might influence resiliency, how family issues might influence a child, how children deal with violence, and interventions we can use when we see a child being maltreated. All of these topics are very important to me as a teacher because I know that the information can make a difference in my students’ lives.

Resiliency can be based on two judgments of a person’s life. 1) the person is ok, 2) the person has had adversity to overcome now or in the past. People form something called psychosocial competence in their lives. This competence can come from three areas: academics, social, and conduct. Academic competence is related to a person’s performance in school. It makes sense that if a person succeeds in academics their self-esteem related to performance in school would be higher-and a factor of resiliency.

Social competence focuses on how a person relates to others. It has been shown that having good friends is a factor of resiliency. Friends can help people deal with stress or issues that come up in life. Social competence not only covers close friends, but covers how a person would deal with day to day situations. If a person feels like they can handle everyday social situations with ease, their resiliency would be higher.

The conduct piece of competence is related to if a person behaves well and stays out of trouble. If a person has trouble at school with conduct, this can affect other areas of their life. Maybe stressors in a person’s life cause them to act out in ways that are not acceptable and this leads to conduct issues. As many teachers would tell you, if you see a student with conduct issues, you start to think that this student has some major issues that they need to deal with in their life as well.

Resiliency has certain threats and protective factors. Some threats would be premature birth, poverty, mental illness of a parent, divorce, war, and maltreatment. Some protective factors of resiliency would be higher IQ, higher self-esteem, personality, optimism, positive parental or adult relationships, peer relationships, and support from school.

Divorce was listed above as being a threat to resiliency. I found out that there are many pieces of information that help piece together possible scenarios and how children might deal with them. For example, the age of a child when parents divorce can make a difference in resiliency. Studies show that the older a child is, the more capable they are of dealing with a divorce in their family. This seems to be the case because the older a child gets, the larger their support network. A child would be able to talk to friends, other prominent family members, or other important adults such as teachers.

On the other side, when a child is younger during a divorce, they haven’t had the time to build such a web of support. Their support mainly comes from their parents, who are going through major stress themselves. The parents might not be able to help their child with their stress.

Other factors that affect resiliency when parents divorce would be gender and how divorced parents co-parent. Boys tend to externalize their feelings about divorce either in talking to people, or acting out in their conduct. Girls tend to internalize their feelings, which could make them depressed about the situation. How parents deal with the way they co-parent after a divorce can affect their children as well. The ideal situation would be some joint agreement where both parents get to see their children. It is also beneficial for the parents to communicate and not have conflict when it comes to parenting their children. I have seen many divorces that get very messy and their children are the victims.

Protective factors in divorce situations would be positive peer relationships, supportive schools, and the chance to talk about feelings in therapy.

There are many other factors in a family other than divorce that can affect a child’s life. A depressed parent, or a parent who had substance abuse problems can be a factor in how their children react to stress in childhood or later in life. Studies show that children with a depressed parent have 8 times the normal threat to forming childhood depression and 5 times the normal threat to forming adult depression. Those numbers really hit me-that is a huge increase! Depression of a parent can cause deficits in cognitive performance in infants and children, insecure attachments, and depression.

I would hope that if people knew of these statistics they would try to get help when they became depressed for the sake of their children. The problem is that a lot of time people who are depressed might lack the logical thinking to know when they need help. I have noticed that depression is a major issue in adults and children during the 9 years of my teaching career.

As always, there are protective factors in dealing with a depressed parent and being resilient against having problems in a person’s future. These factors include a positive self-concept, social competence, good academics, and a father who is present in a child’s life.

One final subject that we have focused on in class so far is the topic of a child’s resiliency to violence or maltreatment. The first thing that I found interesting was that the response of a child to violence depends on the reaction of the caregiver with them at the time. I feel that this is very important for people to know in an emergency situation. I think that most adults step up in a situation of violence and stay calm for the benefit of a child. I know that it will happen that an adult cannot stay calm because of a personal attachment to the situation or just an inability to cope with the stress. This subject reminds me of a time when I was 16 and there was a tornado in the area. I was at a friend’s house at the time and some neighbors with a young child had come over because they didn’t have a basement. I was very frightened of tornadoes and usually got a little frantic. I saw the child, however, and I told myself to stay calm so the child wouldn’t be scared. From then on I was less panicky during severe weather. On the flip side, I remember seeing some episodes of the TV show Cops where children were in the scene of a violent act. The adults around them were either yelling or crying uncontrollably. The children in the situation seemed very agitated, crying and screaming. I am sure this was related to the adults’ reactions.

There are three main types of violence; violence in the media, violence in the community, and domestic violence. Some studies show that children who are exposed to these types of violence can have permanent changes or trauma in their brain chemistry. It could also lead to Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome.

Adults can help children be resilient to violence. Parents or caregivers can make sure that children who were exposed to violence can go to therapy to talk it out rather then hold their feelings in. Talking and drawing about situations can help children get their feelings out in a constructive manner.

Teachers at school can help by observing changes in a child’s behavior, being a good listener, and talking in a positive way. Children who live in a chaotic environment that might include violence will definitely benefit from a structured classroom. This will give them some predictability and control in their lives.

The community can also play a vital role in helping build resiliency in children who are exposed to violence. Community programs need to be responsive to the community they are in. The program has to work with the people of the community, honoring cultures and belief systems that are already in place. Faith communities are helpful because they have a large base of people to reach out and help. Strong leadership in a community program is also a must to serve people most efficiently and fairly.

Along with violence, maltreatment of children can be a problem that can cause lifetime detriments. Maltreatment in childhood has been identified as a significant risk factor for a range of emotional behavior and social adjustment problems. I know there are many cases of neglect and maltreatment of my students. It makes me sad that the things that are being done to them today will likely affect them for the rest of their lives. It makes me think hard about how I treat students who I might think are being maltreated. As a teacher I know that I can have affect students’ lives.

A few protective factors of childhood maltreatment are perceived control and close friendships. I think that utilizing any mentor programs that are available to match an adult or teenager with a student who needs a friend can be useful. If a child can make a bond with someone that can help them be resilient to any maltreatment that they go through, it would be well worth the time!

Like I stated at the beginning of this paper, I think that all of the topics that we have covered in class so far have been very beneficial to me as a teacher. I think that it is very important to realize that students come to school with all sorts of backgrounds and issues. Knowing what can help make them resilient to these risk factors is priceless. I am very interested in the subject of optimism as a protective factor and will be doing my research paper on this topic. Along with the class information I feel better equipped to help students who will come to my class in the future needing attention and understanding.

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