

Supporting resilience and identity in young people

Erskine Bridge Hotel 2nd April 2009

Report prepared by A McGerr on behalf of SACP from hand outs and notes taken on the day.

Hosted by Kay Gibson Operations Manager, Kibble Education and Care Centre.

“I saw an angel in the stone and carved to set it free” Michelangelo

The quote sums up theme of the day where the child is the stone and we all can help shape the child's life.

The sessions were fairly interactive where everyone shared experiences and perspectives. Our two esteemed facilitators for the day were:

Professor Angus Skinner: visiting professor at Strathclyde University, from 1992-2005, he was Chief Social Work Inspector and Chief Social Work Advisor to Scottish ministers. Here he led the review of child protection and the establishment of the National Care Standards.

Sally Wassell: an independent social worker working with children and families. She has written on strategies on building resilience in children and young people. She is currently involved as an expert witness in Scotland, Northern Ireland and the north of England dealing with concerns about emotional abuse and neglect and the effects on healthy development.

Angus began by setting the scene. He related that the majority of social workers spend less than ½ day per week with clients. The rest of the time is taken up following guidance, meetings and I.T. It's time to focus on the child not bureaucracy.

I was asked directly as a panel member when was the last time there was any good news in a social background report, I had to admit there is limited focus on the positives what kids are good at, eg who are their friends and other issues that we will see are pivotal in building resilience in children and young people. The message is don't focus on the problems, start with the good news. You will get much more cooperation from the young person with that approach.

All professionals working with young people underestimate how powerful our messages are to him or her, however we must believe in the intrinsic worth of each individual.

Sally then went on to outline the six domains of resilience.

Secure base
Education + Learning
Friendships
Support talent + interests
Positive values
Social competences

These domains have to be looked at in terms of environmental issues, child's own outlook, family, significant others and wider community.

Our discussions included the following items among others.

Secure base

How do they react to stress?
Do they seek help, if so to whom?
Do they try to control people?

Do carers show commitment to child?
Safe secure environment?
Appropriate routines?

Supportive family members?
Child's friends?
Family friends
Professional's - health, social work, teachers?

Accepting community
Do carers participate in community life?
Does the child take part in community activities?

Education

There is evidence (Jackson, 2001) that educational attainment is a powerful resilience factor.

Happy at school?
Are they in mainstream?
Do they enjoy learning?
Do they have hopes and ambitions?

Do carers attend school functions
Do they actively help child's learning
Does environment support learning with books, computer etc

Do other family/friends enjoy support learning?
Are there teachers the child likes?

Does child have a mentor?

Any out of school learning activities?

Does child use library?

Friendships

Do they have lasting friendships?

Do they value friendships?

Are friends significantly older or younger than them?

Do carers like their friends?

Do friends visit the child at home?

Is the child encouraged to spend time with friends?

Do the carers have friends?

Does the child come from a friendly family?

Is child victimised, bullied or marginalised?

Do they fit in?

Is child a member of any organisations?

Are there friend-making opportunities, youth clubs, sports, faith groups?

Talents and interests

What are they good at?

What are they interested in?

Is there anything they dream of doing?

Do carers know of child's talent or interest?

Do they offer practical support to pursue this?

Do carers have own interests?

Are there family members to support child in this?

Does child have role model?

Is there anyone who actively discourages child from pursuing an interest?

Is there community opportunities in sports, music, drama art etc.?

Does the child feel included in what the community has to offer?

Is there funding available?

Positive values

Does the child demonstrate moral reasoning?

Understand others perspectives?

Care for others?

Share with others?

Are carers good role models?
Is caring encouraged?
Are there conversations about positive values?
Do child's friends have positive values?
Do family member encourage positive values?
Does anyone actively discourage positive values?

Does the child have a mentor or advisor?
Is the child a member of a faith group?
Are there community opportunities to help others?

Social competencies

Autonomy - can they take responsibility for themselves?
Self-control - can they regulate behaviour?
Self-efficacy - do they believe they can be effective in the world?
Attention - can they concentrate on tasks

Do carers help the child to develop self-control?
Do carers show self control themselves?
Is child helped to notice they have acted effectively?
Does environment promote attentiveness and concentration?

Do family members promote this?
Does the child have a role model?
Are there any teachers, play leaders etc who can help?

Does the child belong to a community group?
Is there a range of faith groups in the area that the child would be allowed to join?

Angus then went on to discuss more general aspects of resilience.

The first obvious statement is wealth does not buy happiness, in the western world wealth is on a steep upward curve but so is depression. Young people's self esteem is up but so are their anxieties.

We can learn helplessness. Lab experiments show when a dog is led into a room and it can smell food it goes for it but if there is a physical barrier in the way it cannot reach the food. Try this several times, the dog comes up against the barrier each time. Eventually you can take the barrier away and dog will not try reach the food. It has learned it cannot reach it. The same is true of children if they learn repeatedly they cannot trust adults, how much harder is it for them to trust anyone?

However if we can learn helplessness we can also learn optimism.

Until the last decade or so all psychology research was into negative feelings, no one thought to look at positives.

Research into nuns who all had to fill out very similar questionnaires for admittance to convents were studied. It was discovered that on average, nun's who wrote an optimistic application live an average 12-15 years longer than the applications that were deemed pessimistic. Similarly, graduation photographs were studied and graduates that were deemed to have a genuine rather than forced smile lived longer, made more money and had fewer divorces.

An economist came up with a formula $H=MR^{10}$ where H equals happiness M is Money and R is relationships to the power of 10, This suggests relationships have a disproportionate effect on happiness, remember this is from a professor of economics.

Adversity

Adversity is defined as a life event that has a negative impact on resilience.

- Loss, abuse etc.

To combat adversity we need to promote

Hope - Young people need a challenging, realisable goal

Efficacy - promote young people to be all they can be

Resilience - this requires persistence don't let them or you give up

Optimism - helps them to believe in the future.

As a final task, we were asked to take away one thing we would think about and act upon, In my case the thing I never thought enough about before is social isolation and its impact on resilience. If family members are not supportive and there is no wider community input the child has little chance.

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