Resilience Processes in Development
Fostering Positive Adaptation in the Context of Adversity

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How do children and adolescents “make it” when their development is threatened by poverty, neglect, maltreatment, war, violence, or exposure to oppression, racism, and discrimination? What protects them when their parents are disabled by substance abuse, mental illness, or serious physical illness? How do we explain the phenomenon of resilience—children succeeding in spite of serious challenges to their development—and put this knowledge to work for the benefit of all children and society? The scientific study of resilience emerged about 30 years ago when a group of pioneering researchers began to notice the phenomenon of positive adaptation among subgroups of children who were considered “at risk” for developing later psychopathology (Masten, 2001).

The resilience research pioneers led a revolution in thinking about the origins and treatment of psychopathology. The primary focus of earlier clinical research on children at high risk for psychopathology had been either to observe the consequences of adversity or the unfolding of risk processes accounting for the etiology of disorders. Research efforts were directed toward understanding pathology and deficits, rather than on how problems were averted, resolved, or transcended. The field of mental health at the time was dominated by psychoanalytic theory and a disease-oriented biomedical model that located the source of illness within the individual. However, the first investigators to explore the phenomenon of resilience realized that models based primarily on predicting psychopathology were limited in scope and usefulness, providing little understanding of how good outcomes were achieved by many of the children identified as at risk. Such information was vital to

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the goal of intervening to improve the odds of good developmental outcomes among children at risk. One of the great contributions of the early investigators was their recognition and championing of the idea that understanding positive developmental pathways in the context of adversity is fundamentally important for preventing and treating problems, particularly among children at risk for psychopathology.

The study of resilience has advanced in three major waves of research over the past three decades. In this chapter we highlight the concepts and findings resulting from these waves to date, as they have shaped an emerging resilience framework for research and practice. The first wave of work yielded good descriptions of resilience phenomena, along with basic concepts and methodologies, and focused on the individual. The second wave yielded a more dynamic accounting of resilience, adopting a developmental-systems approach to theory and research on positive adaptation in the context of adversity or risk, and focused on the transactions among individuals and the many systems in which their development is embedded. The third wave, now taking shape, is focused on creating resilience by preventive interventions, directed at changing developmental pathways.

THE FIRST WAVE: IDENTIFYING INDIVIDUAL RESILIENCE AND FACTORS THAT MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Initial research in this area was dominated by a strong cultural ethos in the United States that glorified rugged individualism—that Horatio Alger ability to "pick oneself up by one's own bootstraps" and succeed solely through one's own efforts. Early on, investigators as well as journalists referred to children who functioned well despite the odds as "invulnerable" (Anthony, 1974; Pines, 1975) and tended to focus on their personal traits and characteristics. Such children were thought to be impervious to stress because of their inner fortitude or character armor. As research extended across time and across types of trauma, the term of invulnerability was replaced by more qualified and dynamic terms such as stress-resistance and resilient. These concepts were thought to more appropriately capture the interplay of risk and protective processes occurring over time and involving individual, family, and larger sociocultural influences (Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990; Rutter, 1987; Werner & Smith 1982, 1992).

Key Concepts

During the first generation of research on resilience in development, these phenomena were studied in a variety of different contexts throughout the world (Glantz & Johnson, 1999; Masten et al., 1990). A consensus emerged on key concepts, though controversies continue to this day. Resilience typically refers to a pattern of positive adaptation in the context of past or present adversity. Two distinct judgments are required before a resilient pattern of adaptation can be identified. First, one judges by some criteria that there has been a significant threat to the development or adaptation of the individual. Second, one judges that, despite this threat or risk exposure, the current or eventual adaptation or adjustment of the individual is satisfactory, again by some selected set of criteria.

There has been considerable confusion throughout the past three decades on the precise meaning of many terms used by resilience researchers (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000; Masten, 2001; Rutter, 2000). Nonetheless, there is a growing consensus on a working vocabulary for this domain of inquiry, as presented in Table 2.1. Much of that vocabulary