



Why Some Kids Overcome Obstacles – Part 2

Factors That Help At-Risk Kids

by Jeffrey Katz, Ph.D.

In Part 1 of *Why Some Kids Overcome Obstacles*, I wrote about a university study in which all of the children born on the island of Kauai in 1955 were followed from birth until their thirties. What we saw was that some of the children who were at-risk, whether by exposure to stress during pregnancy or birth, to poverty, or to family problems, continued to have problems throughout childhood and adolescence. On the other hand, a good number of at-risk children seemed to be able to overcome the odds, and were so labeled "resilient." In this column we will look to see what happened to these different children in their 30's and, finally, what conclusions the researchers drew from all they had found out.

As a whole, the children who were resilient at a younger age continued to do better in adulthood than the other at-risk children who were not resilient when younger. The resilient adults were also doing just as well as the adults who had not been at-risk who had grown up in more affluent, secure, and stable homes. The resilient adults seemed to have a sense of personal competence

and determination, good support from their spouses, and a reliance on faith and prayer.

The researchers also found that most of the high-risk youths who were having serious problems in adolescence had recovered by their thirties. Most of the adults who had learning disabilities as youngsters were not having serious problems later. Most seemed to be getting along well in life. The only difference was that they seemed to worry more about their work and to have more stress-related health problems.

Also, of the adults who were involved in delinquent behavior as adolescents, most did not continue to have the same kind of problems in adulthood. Having an intact family in childhood and adolescence seemed to be the factor that differentiated between those adolescents who continued to be in trouble with the law as adults and those who did not.

Once the researchers found out what happened to all the kids after reaching adulthood, they went back to try and figure



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out what factors across time contributed most to their doing well in later life. Several groups of protective factors seemed to be important. The first group of factors and the most important involved the temperament of the individuals. Those whose temperament was such that other people would respond positively to them seemed to do better. They had active and outgoing dispositions, a high degree of self-esteem, and a sense that they were in charge of their future. They also found people and created environments that were compatible with their needs.

The second group of factors included having skills and values that led to the efficient use of whatever abilities they had. These included realistic educational and vocational plans and regular household chores and responsibilities. The third grouping included having parents whose parenting style promoted feelings of competence and self-esteem in the child. Group four involved having supportive adults who fostered trust and helped the child along. These were not generally parents, but other adults who the children came into contact with in the community, such as relatives, youth leaders, and members of church groups.

The final group of protective factors had to do with the availability of opportunities during transition periods in life. Transition periods were such things as going from high school to the work place, from civilian to military life, or from being single to being married. Often, if an individual was coping poorly during a certain period, the transition would get him back on track later.

After all was said and done, the researchers felt that their findings provided hope and optimism about the future for children who are at risk. As long as the balance between stressful life events and protective factors is favorable, a successful life is possible. However, if the balance is tipped towards stressful events, then even the most resilient child can develop problems. The challenge in today's society is to shift the balance from vulnerability to resilience—either by reducing exposure to stressful life events or by increasing the number of protective factors (such as the availability of supportive adults) in the lives of vulnerable children.

Also important is the promotion of competence and self-esteem in young people. This is done by helping children be successful in school by, for example, providing them with extra help if they are falling behind. It also means supporting



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their interests and hobbies and encouraging cooperative activities.

The study also found that self-esteem grew when youngsters were given the opportunity to take on responsibilities that fit their level of development. This would include chores, part-time work when older or even caring for their younger siblings. This causes children to feel that they are being helpful in an important way.

Finally, the resilient children in the study each had at least one person who accepted them unconditionally—if not a parent, then

another family member, or someone in the community. Having a close relationship to an unrelated adult to whom the child feels he is special was found to be of tremendous importance to individuals who were initially troubled as youngsters. To me, this is the most important finding of the whole study. Our personal relationship to each of our children, to other children we know, and even the relationships that we have amongst ourselves are what makes each of us feel special and competent. Even under the worst of circumstances, we can overcome and move forward, "with a little help from our friends."



About the Author

Jeffrey Katz, Ph.D., is a child, adolescent, and adult psychologist and leading expert in the field of ADHD, learning disabilities and behavioral problems. He is also a foremost consultant and sought after speaker for numerous medical, academic, business and legal professionals and organizations. Throughout his career, Dr. Katz has been interviewed by many print, radio and TV outlets and served as a regular columnist for *Tidewater Parent* magazine. He is also co-author of the recently released book *365 +1 Ways to Succeed with ADHD*. A graduate of the California School of Professional Psychology, Dr. Katz has been in private practice in the Hampton Roads, Virginia area for more than 25 years.

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