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GUIDANCE

A resilience and coping framework for supporting transitions back to school

Transition: resilience

WHAT WE MEAN BY 'RESILIENCE'

Resilience can be a difficult concept to define. Broadly when we talk about resilience, we're talking about someone 'bouncing back' after experiencing adversity or challenging circumstances. There are a number of definitions and we use the following definition:

Resilience is the capacity of a dynamic system to adapt successfully to disturbances that threaten the viability, the function, or the development of that system.

(Masten, 2014)

This means that our capacity for resilience comes from the interaction of many different parts of our lives that are connected. If we think about children and young people, it's easy to identify different parts, or systems, in their lives that interact and that will have a bearing on their resilience. Some examples of these 'interacting systems' in children's lives include:

- Peers
- Family
- Parents
- School (as an organisation but also those within the school like the child's teacher and the whole staff body)
- The local community

Resilience is dynamic. It can change across time, context and situation and individual resilience depends on the resilience in other parts of the system (Masten, 2015).

There is no doubt that the coronavirus pandemic has presented and will continue to present challenges for individuals, families, schools and local communities. Children and young people have been unable to attend school, see their friends or teachers and some

will have experienced sudden and upsetting events such as family member being seriously ill. With this in mind and understanding the difficult experiences that people will have had, our view is that *'...the experience of trauma does not only yield pathology'* (Southwick et al., 2014, p.7). Ttofa (2018) offers further clarity to explain what this means:

Resilience is not sweeping the negative away; it is expanding our view of the negative to make sense of it, whilst also assimilating and allowing greater focus on what matters, what is needed to support a continued course towards a desired and meaningful outcome.

PROMOTING RESILIENCE

The factors that support the process of resilience for children have been discussed widely (Eames, Shippen & Sharp, 2016; Roffey, 2016) and the most important factors include:

- A sense of belonging
- Strong relationships
- Agency
- High expectations
- The opportunity to participate as valued members of the community

It is worth highlighting the importance of a sense of belonging to promote resilience at times of transition as described in the earlier BPS paper [Back to school: Using psychological perspectives to support reengagement and recovery](#) (Hill et al., 2020). Children have identified a number of factors that promote a strong sense of belonging including strong relationships with peers and staff, connection between school and home, feeling safe at school and working as part of a team (Gowing, 2019; Midgen et al., 2019).

ADOPTING AN APPROACH THAT NURTURES RESILIENCE

There is a risk that the narrative around school transition and the experiences of children becomes dominated by the language of risk, trauma, damage, or illness. To adopt an approach that promotes resilience is not to ignore the potential for trauma or harm, rather *'Resilience models emphasize positive influences without discounting risks and vulnerabilities'* (Masten, 2011, p.495). This means that there is space for a narrative that explores assets, strengths, hope and coping.

The current situation has been a collective experience, and this in turn may promote a sense of belonging for children and young people. Many children have been able to connect with family members, friends, or the local community in a number of ways since lockdown began. The use of online video software, shared experiences like YouTube PE or seeing rainbows and bears in their local community are but a few examples that have likely promoted a sense of belonging. Going forward into the transition back to school a key question will be:

What are the existing factors that have supported children's resilience, and how do we maintain these?

This question is particularly important for children who may experience a sense of dread or anxiety at returning to school. Anecdotally there are reports of some children feeling happier and more relaxed than they have done for quite some time, since the beginning of the lockdown period. For these children, their resilience may be supported by acknowledging this, involving them in the process of transition back to school, and considering the various resiliency factors that can be harnessed, adapted or strengthened.

COPING

'Coping' is often discussed in combination with competence and resilience: coping is how we adapt to stressful situations and experiences in order to protect ourselves from stress. Resilience is the outcome of successful coping.



In this current pandemic, we don't know what is going to happen or what the future will look like, and we are being asked to find new ways to cope.

Our resilience, nationally, has in many instances been remarkable. Many families, young people and communities are reporting positive experiences of personal resource and community support as well as facing significant challenges and distressing losses. Whilst we in no way wish to minimise the challenges currently being faced, and recognise that for some groups this time is much more challenging than for others, we think it is important to connect with the ways in which we are coping with this challenge. Positive coping is associated with better mental health outcomes. Engaging with our coping, competence and resilience now is as important as preparing for the mental health challenges that may emerge.

A FRAMEWORK FOR PROMOTING RESILIENCE (MASTEN, 2011)

As we move towards school transition, having a framework which helps our thinking in terms of **how** to promote resilience may be useful. We need to consider how it might be applied at various levels, that is:

How might the framework be used to promote resilience for:

- Individuals
- Classes
- Whole school communities

The following framework is adapted from Masten (2011).

Mission	<p><i>Frame positive goals</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – What strengths are already present? – How can we promote these strengths? – What positive outcomes are we working towards?
Models for change	<p><i>Include positive influences and actions</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – How can we broaden our view of change to highlight positive development? – How can we track growth and achievements? – What positive resources can we increase?
Measures of change	<p><i>Track the positives too</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Can we measure progress as well as deficits? – What areas of growth and progress should we look for? – How will we know when positive change is happening?
Methods of change	<p><i>Prevent, promote and protect</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – How can we reduce potential harm? (e.g. how can we reduce the negative impacts of not seeing friends) – How can we increase existing strengths or assets (e.g. how can we increase opportunities for play) – How can we improve powerful adaptive systems (e.g. how can we ensure children feel safe when in school?)
Multiple supporters of change	<p><i>Engage a collaborative team</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – How can we collaborate with families to nurture resilience? – Who within school can help us towards positive change? – Who else might be need? (e.g. other schools, advisory teachers, educational psychologists)

Many schools will have close connections with their communities and be able to use the above framework to support individual children by considering their unique risk and protective factors, particularly those children that may be especially vulnerable.

At this time it may also be important to consider how to continue to support teacher resilience, by promoting a sense of belonging, encouraging and modelling help-seeking, and supporting teachers' reflectiveness and learning (Duffield & O'Hare, 2020).

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RESOURCES

During the Covid-19 pandemic the British Psychological Society convened a Cross Divisional Coordination Group to facilitate the rapid production of psychological advice and guidance to inform and support the UK response.

All productions from this group can be found [here](#)

The papers below will be of particular relevance to those working in education and supporting vulnerable children and families:

[Back to school: using psychological perspectives to support re-engagement and recovery](#)

[Supporting care-experienced children and young people](#)

[The psychology of play](#)

[Advice for key worker parents - helping your child adapt](#)

[When your parent is a key worker - advice for children and young people](#)

[Teacher resilience during coronavirus school closures](#)

[Talking to children about illness](#)

[Talking to children about coronavirus](#)

[UK school closures - support and advice](#)




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