Letter of Intent:
What Counselling Psychologists Need to Know About Resiliency in Children and Adolescents

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Resiliency is defined as “the process of coping with adversity, change, or opportunity in a manner that results in the identification, fortification, and enrichment of resilient qualities or protective factors” (Richardson, 2002, p. 308). Resiliency focuses on protective factors that contribute to positive outcomes despite the presence of risk (Benard, 1995). Acting more as a concept than an applied theoretical model, psychologists have studied resiliency since the 1970s, producing an abundance of literature that focuses on childhood and family history, as well as environment and social capital as predictors of success in adult life (Kitano & Lewis, 2005; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Runyan et al., 1998). The study of resiliency is important because little theoretical work has been done in order to solidify the concept or to provide a conceptual framework for resiliency, yet research findings indicate that without significantly changing the social environments in which children and adolescents live, attempts to enhance resilience will be met with limited success (Armstrong, Birnie-Lefcovitch, & Unger, 2005; Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Appendix A provides a detailed description of the operational definitions discussed within the context of this paper.

Problem Statement

The purpose of this project will be to explore the main model of resiliency, developmental assets. Differentiating the concept of resiliency from that of wellness and other terms used in the literature, this project will address the concept of risk, as well as protective factors, exploring both the internal, as well as the external factors that contribute to resiliency, and identifying what this construct offers to counselling psychologists. There will also be a discussion of how resiliency relates to normal development and what counsellors can do to foster
resiliency in their clients. This will be accomplished through a comprehensive review of the literature.

Project Rationale

Historically, efforts to enhance the health and well-being of children and adolescents have centered on a problem-focused paradigm, rather than on specific assets (Leffert et al., 1998). Although the problem-focused approach concentrates on identifying and reducing health-compromising risks and behaviors, the literature suggests that there is an emerging paradigm that conceptualizes, names, and promotes core elements of human development known to enhance health and promote well-being (Leffert et al.). Several intellectual streams have fed into this approach, including resiliency, protective factors, positive psychology, youth development, and strength-based approaches (Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990; Pittman & Cahill, 1991; Rutter, 1985; Werner & Smith, 1992).

From a historical view, the first wave of resilience-led inquiry focused on the shift from looking at the risk factors that led to psychosocial problems to the identification of strengths of an individual (Benson, 1997). According to Leffert et al. (1998),

As studies of the processes related to resilience and our understanding of the relation between community contexts and adolescent development have accumulated, intervention and prevention efforts have developed around these concepts in an attempt to alter the developmental pathways of young people. (p. 211)

Attempts to alter the developmental pathways of children and adolescents facilitated the paradigm shift from a reductionistic, problem-oriented approach to nurturing strengths, which has become a prevalent theme across academic disciplines and the helping professions (Richardson, 2002). In response to this shift, resiliency and resilience are emerging as intriguing
areas of inquiry that explore personal and interpersonal qualities and strengths that can be accessed to grow despite adversity (Richardson).

Adversity and risk affects children at multiple levels with regard to their environment; therefore efforts to enhance resilience must also take place at multiple levels (Brooks, 2006). A main theme found throughout the literature supports the notion that young people who have grown up in extremely disadvantaged conditions can escape without serious damage (Leffert et al., 1998). This project will explore of how this can be accomplished through generating positive environmental contexts within the parents, families, schools, and communities (Benard, 1991; Benson, 2002). In addition, the role and contribution of nonfamily adults will also be examined.

Resilience is not the mere absence of risk, but the presence of protective factors (Hjemdal, Friborg, Stiles, Rosenvinge, & Martinussen, 2006). The emphasis on thriving not only points to the absence of problem behaviour, but also highlights the signs of healthy development (Scales, Benson, Leffert, & Blyth, 2000). Risk factors do not discriminate between different races, ethnic groups or socioeconomic status; they can be found within the child, the family, the community, and other societal structures (Armstrong et al., 2005). Protective factors can have an impact on the damaging effects of risk factors at an individual or general level, a child level, or a family level (Rhule, McMahon, Spieker, & Munson, 2006).

**Literature Review**

The literature review for this project will identify factors that impact the health and well-being of children and adolescents. With a focus on protective factors that contribute to positive outcomes despite the presence of risk (Benard, 1995), the premise of resiliency is that people possess selective strengths or assets, which are often referred to as protective factors or developmental assets that help them survive adversity (Richardson, 2002). Resiliency is a
process that develops through interactions of children with their families, peers, schools, communities, and non-family adults (Brooks, 2006).

While the literature on resilience gives promise to finding specific ways in which parents, families, schools, communities, and nonfamily adults can enhance success among children and adolescents placed at risk (Kitano & Lewis), little theoretical work has been done that provides a conceptual framework.

Grounded in empirical studies of child and adolescent development, the developmental assets framework provides a common language for communities and social system and provides a tool for responding to the emerging understanding of the ecology of human development with a focus on prevention, resiliency, and protective factors (Leffert et al., 1998; Mannes, Roehlkepartain, & Benson, 2005). The developmental assets framework is promising, and it appears to be the most developed model that addresses the concept of resiliency at this time.

Research conducted by the Search Institute on the application of the assets provides compelling evidence for the foundational effect of positive human development on young people’s health (Mannes et al., 2005). Literature supports the idea that developmental assets play an important role in the healthy development of young people across varied life circumstances and in the face of multiple challenges (Mannes et al.). When present, developmental assets enhance important developmental outcomes, conceived as both the reduction of health-compromising behaviours and the increase of school success and other indicators of positive outcomes (Leffert et al., 1998).

Parents, families, schools, communities, and nonfamily adults are not only influential, but essential elements for building resilience in children and adolescents (Brooks, 2006; Durlak, 1995). A main theme found throughout the literature researched (Benard, 1991; Benson, 2002;
Brooks) supports the notion that generating positive environmental contexts within families, schools and communities increases resiliency and protective factors while minimizing risk factors.

Research identifies the presence of protective factors as having a key role in the prevention of a range of high-risk behaviours for children and adolescents (Mannes et al., 2005), supporting the notion that the more assets young people have, the more likely they are to report thriving behaviours such as valuing diversity, maintaining good health, and resisting danger (Scales et al., 2000). The emphasis on thriving not only highlights the absence of problem behaviour, but also points toward signs of healthy development or the presence of protective factors or processes that buffer the effects of adversity (Hjemdal et al., 2006; Scales et al.).

Methods and Procedures

This project will be structured using the following steps. A search of the literature will be undertaken using the electronic databases PsychINFO (1966 – 2005), Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection (2000 – 2006), and Internet resources such as Google Scholar. In addition to the terms outlined in Appendix A, the following search terms will be used: resilience, resiliency, risk, protective factors, wellness, and developmental assets. Such terms will include but not be limited to the terms outlined in Appendix A. A search of the University of Calgary library, University of Athabasca, and Calgary Public Library will be conducted using the same key terms. The goal of this project is to identify common themes and relationships that currently exist within the literature in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the unique concept of resiliency.

The following areas of exploration will form the foundation of this project. What does the literature say regarding (a) the developmental assets model of resiliency, (b) the debate about
whether resiliency is something that occurs within an individual, as opposed to something that occurs outside the individual, (c) how resiliency is related to normal development, (d) what counsellors can do to foster resiliency in their clients, (e) engaging adults to develop strength-building relationships with children and adolescents, (f) mobilizing young people to use their power as asset-builders and change agents to facilitate healthy community development, (g) the importance of expanding and enhancing programs to become more asset rich (h) activating all sectors of the community to create an asset-building culture and (i) influencing decision-makers to access financial, media and policy resources in support of positive community transformation (Mannes et al., 2005).

Potential Implications

The findings from this study could have important implications for counselling psychologists, as well as other professionals who have a desire to foster resiliency within children and adolescents. While some children appear to possess natural characteristics that lend themselves towards resiliency, others appear to lack these characteristics. However, research supports the notion that young people who have grown up in extremely disadvantaged conditions can escape without serious impairment (Leffert et al., 1998). This can be accomplished by generating positive environmental contexts for children and adolescents, thereby increasing the presence of protective factors. Increased levels of protective factors can buffer the damaging effects of risk factors on multiple levels (Armstrong et al., 2005).

Exploration of resiliency, risk and protective factors will increase awareness and understanding of the processes that promote resilience in children and adolescence on multiple levels. Increased understanding of these processes can provide parents, families, schools, communities, and counselling psychologists with information that will assist them in the
development and implementation of successful strategies and interventions based on the concept of resiliency to help promote health and well-being in children and adolescents (Benard, 1991; Benson, 2002).

Drawing from published works, this project will not involve any research participants, therefore there is a low level of risk involved with this project. In addition, the scope of this project is realistic with regard to the resources required to conduct the project, as well as in terms of the one-year time frame provided.
References


Appendix A

Operational Definitions

Positive Psychology – the scientific study of the strengths and virtues that enable individuals and communities to thrive

Prevention – a proactive process that empowers individuals and systems to meet the challenges of life events and transitions by creating and reinforcing conditions that promote healthy behaviours and lifestyles

Protective Factors – influences that modify, ameliorate, or alter adolescent’s responses to stressors and risk factors typically associated with maladaptive responses

Risk Factors – circumstances that increase the probability that a child will experience negative outcomes and problem behaviours

Strength-based Approaches – approaches that seek to increase the positive influences in an individual’s life

Youth – an individual between the ages of 12 to 18 years of age

Youth Development – the personal, social, and emotional process that all young people go through on the way to adulthood