



University of Pittsburgh
Office of Child Development

Resilient Children

Poor and dangerous neighborhoods offer children abundant opportunities to grow up aggressive and violent. Why is it most do not?

Many dark forces lie in wait for children, threatening to influence their behavior in ways that can leave them undereducated, poor, and bumping up against the criminal justice system for the rest of their lives. Poverty, with all of its cohorts, is probably the most insidious force steering children toward problem behavior.

Yet many, if not most children, manage to avoid developing the kinds of aggressive, defiant, and impulsive behaviors that invite serious social consequences, even those who grow up in the poorest, most dangerous neighborhoods.

Why are some children remarkably resilient to the worst circumstances life can offer? Research suggests characteristics of the family and of the parents and children themselves tend to protect them.

Certain problem behaviors invite trouble. Children who develop serious aggressive, noncompliant, defiant, or im-

pulsive tendencies are more likely candidates to fail in school or drop out altogether, get involved in crime, or have difficulty finding decent jobs as adults.

Many Risks

Those problem behaviors are consistently found to be more prevalent among children who live in low-income families,¹ especially among boys. The reason: children who grow up poor are exposed to long list of dire circumstances. For example, family resources are scarce and providing for even the most basic needs is difficult. Stress among poor parents tends to run high. Single-parent families are not uncommon. And poor neighborhoods shoulder a higher share of parents who are still, essentially, children themselves.

But children don't have to be poor to be at risk of developing behavior problems. Rich or poor, any risk factor or combination of risks can contribute to aggression and other conduct problems. Among those found to be influential are:

- **Family criminality.** A biological propensity toward action and aggressiveness that may lead to crime runs through the families of criminals. And deviant behavior is more readily learned in such families. For both reasons, a family history of criminal behavior is statistically linked to child behavior problems.²
- **Family conflict.** Frequent fighting within a family is another factor associated with behavior problems in children. Children exposed to family conflict, for example, may become conditioned to respond aggressively to similar situations away from home.
- **Maternal depression.** Depression influences a mother's behavior,

sometimes in ways harmful to children. A mother who is depressed, for example, is more likely to be inconsistent in disciplining her children, a tendency that is associated with children developing behavior problems.

Despite these and other risks, many children are able to avoid poor outcomes even under extremely difficult circumstances. Research identifies several forces that work to offset circumstances that can lead to problem behaviors.

A Mother's Protection

Mothers play an extremely impor-

Whether lax and permissive, or overly demanding and cold, an extreme parenting style risks raising a child who is less competent and less well adjusted.

tant role in child development. Certain maternal behaviors, assessed during infancy and early childhood, appear to help protect young children from developing insecure attachments, behavior problems, and poor cognitive outcomes.

In general, mothers tend to protect their children from a range of poor behavioral outcomes by being sensitive and supportive. The more involved they are with their child, the better protected the child is. A child's resiliency is also associated with mothers who have embraced a positive style of teaching.

Yet, a mother's IQ, level of education, and the nature of her personality

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have generally not been found to offer children much protection from factors that encourage problem behavior.

There are several characteristics of the family that tend to protect children. Family stability is important to development. A positive emotional climate in the home also helps.

Parenting Practices

Researchers have taken a keen interest in the relationship between parenting styles and child outcomes. Findings suggest certain parenting behaviors can predict behavioral outcomes of children as well as how resilient they are, especially among those most at-risk.

Discipline that is severely punitive or authoritarian and inconsistent enforcement of rules are styles associated with childhood conduct problems. Whether they're lax and permissive or overly demanding and cold, parents whose behavior veers to the extremes risk having children who are less competent and less well adjusted.

On the other hand, parents who are firm and demanding but who are also responsive and supportive, are more likely to have well-adjusted children. This combination of styles tends to provide some structure to the otherwise stressful and chaotic environment in which high-risk children live.

A Child's Temperament

Temperament traits appear linked to how resilient children are. Children gain a measure of protection when they are alert, highly activity, and curious as infants and toddlers. These more robust infants stand a better chance of eliciting stimulation from otherwise depressed or unresponsive mothers and other adults.

Later in life, the more sociable and likable children are, the less likely they'll have poor developmental outcomes. Re-

silient children have been described as agreeable, cheerful, friendly, relaxed, responsive, self-confident, and sociable.

A pleasant temperament also tends to protect a child. "Easy" children are less likely to incur the wrath of parents or receive harsh punishment, but they are more likely to receive attention and form positive and supportive relationships with their parents.

A child with an easy temperament, good looks or winning smile is more likely to be spared harsh punishment.

Intelligence, especially verbal intelligence, has also been found to be a protective factor in some studies. One explanation is that children with average or above average verbal IQs are better able to negotiate resolutions to conflicts rather than resort to aggression and violence. Conversely, children who display conduct disorders or juvenile delin-

quency are often burdened with poor verbal skills.

'Halo Effect'

Physically attractive children also appear to have an edge. When the National Institutes of Mental Health studied child-rearing, for example, resilient children were described as having winning smiles and pleasing physical appearances.

Studies suggest physically attractive children benefit from a so-called "halo effect," a tendency of others to view them in a positive light. In one study, transgressions committed by attractive children were viewed less harshly by adults than the same acts of wrongdoing committed by unattractive children.³

There are no guarantees that children wrapped in these protective factors will emerge from difficult homes and neighborhoods unscathed. But the fact that many do sounds a note of hope: children, no matter how precarious their situation, are not inevitably doomed to problem futures.

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