
Resiliency: What We Have Learned by Benard, Bonnie

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Resiliency: What We Have Learned

Benard, Bonnie (2004).
San Francisco, CA: WestEd; 148 pages. \$19.95. ISBN 0914409182.

Ten years ago, resiliency was relatively new to the fields of prevention and education. Today, it is at the heart of hundreds of school and community programs that recognize in all young people the capacity to lead healthy, successful lives.

This book is written for parents, social workers, students, practitioners, researchers, educators, administrators, policy makers, program developers, and anyone else motivated to enhance the intrinsic resilience of children and seeking holistic strategies that meet the requirements of the "No Child Left Behind" Act using quantifiable and proven methods. It provides an inspirational account of practices that work and the theories that support them.

The roots of resiliency theory began in 1955 with Emmy E. Werner's paper, "Risk, Resilience, and Recovery: Perspectives from the Kauai Longitudinal Study," that focused on children who had learned to lead successful lives despite environmental hardships and extreme stresses during their upbringing (Werner 1992). During the 1970s, youth development researchers started similar "life-spanning" studies of inner-city children. According to Bonnie Benard, research editor for *Resiliency in Action* (1996), their research focused on "children born into seriously high-risk conditions such as families where parents were mentally ill, alcoholic or abusive." Out of these studies the term resiliency emerged to describe people who have overcome hardships and risk factors through self-efficacy.

What began as a quest to understand the extraordinary has revealed the power of the ordinary. Resilience does not come from rare and special qualities, but from the everyday magic of ordinary, normative human resources in the minds, brains, and bodies of

children, in their families and relationships, and in their communities.

- Ann Masten (Benard 2004, p. iv)

Benard (2004) states that early in her research,

I began to see that perhaps the most useful role I could play would be to bring to practitioners the research that supported what they knew intuitively in their hearts and from their experience and wisdom worked to prevent health-risk behaviors and promote life success. That is what this and all my writing has been about.

From this perspective, Benard discusses results and implications of studies that consistently validate resilience theory and practice. She highlights monumental studies including the most recent outcomes of the Werner and Smith 30+ year longitudinal study of over 640 "at risk" children measuring their capacity to cope with internal and external stresses. Another important study discussed is The National Longitudinal School-Based Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) created to assess health-related behaviors of adolescents in grades 7-12 and designed to explore the causes of these behaviors, with an emphasis on the influence of social context.

Karen Seashore Louis, professor of educational policy and administration at the University of Minnesota and Director of the Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement (CAREI) states in the opening editorial for the spring 1997 CAREI newsletter,

The concept of resilience has, in the last decade, begun to change the way that we look at the lives of children. When policy discussions emphasize 'children at-risk,' the task of removing all of the factors that can create significant stresses for children seems overwhelming. Rather than promoting action, it tends to promote labeling and inaction.

In an effort to redirect past approaches which often focused on problem assessment and thus led to inaction, Resiliency: What We

Have Learned takes on an assets-based approach, focused on creating optimal environments and conditions to support youth and to reduce daily stresses. This more positive outlook enables people who care for children to do what they can, rather than attempting to solve things over which they have no control.

According to Benard (2004, p. 3-4),

the goal is to synthesize and integrate some of the key research findings and their application in programs and movements that support positive youth development and resilience. The emphases here on providing a framework, research support, and a rationale for resilience-based prevention and education are in line with the profound messages of long-term developmental studies of youth in high-risk environments:

1. Resilience is a capacity all youth have for healthy development and successful learning.
2. Certain personal strengths are associated with healthy development and successful learning.
3. Certain characteristics of families, schools, and communities are associated with the development of personal strengths and, in turn, healthy development and successful learning.
4. Changing the life trajectories of children and youth from risk to resilience starts with changing the beliefs of the adults in their families, schools, and communities.

In Chapter 1, Benard builds a basis for these statements by emphasizing the simple, often misunderstood message that “the development of resiliency is none other than the process of healthy human development” (Benard 2004, p. 9). Resiliency has often been viewed as a “personality trait that one either has or does not have, rather than as an innate capacity bolstered by environmental protective factors” (Benard 2004, p. 9). Her ability to clarify misconceptions about the term “resilience” and its application to practice is exceptional. She acknowledges the difficulties involved in

studying resilience, especially when measuring dynamic community systems. She stresses the importance of developing a uniform vocabulary so that resilience research and practice can gain support and broad acceptance.

In Chapter 2, Benard presents research-based outcomes of resilience. She calls these outcomes “personal strengths” and draws on her previous themes of social competence, problem solving skills, autonomy, sense of purpose, and bright future. These competencies and strengths have been identified in resilient youth regardless of ethnicity, culture, gender, geography, and time (Werner and Smith 1992; 2001).

Chapter 3 provides a four-point perspective on resilience strengths, building upon her classic 1991 publication, *Fostering Resilience in Kids: Protective Factors in the Family, School, and Communities*. Benard calls for a universal language of strengths, an understanding of the dynamic qualities of these strengths, an acceptance that all of us possess resilience strengths, and an appreciation for context and culture in relation to these strengths. Positive youth development depends upon the quality of the environment and is the focus of the next four chapters.

Chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7 examine a substantial body of research concerning environmental protective factors organized into family, school, and community perspectives. Each chapter describes protective factors in relation to caring relationships, high expectations, and opportunities for participation and contribution. The framework for basic protective factors emerging from decades of multidisciplinary research becomes even more evident as Benard synthesizes renowned studies. Charts and easily scanned quotes help orient the reader through these densely packed chapters.

Chapter 8 focuses on the future and asks, “what underlying themes—from research and from what young people have told us—should shape our work in the decade ahead?” (Benard 2004, p. 107). She stresses humans have an “inborn developmental wisdom” and therefore adults need to focus on “how” to tap this wisdom, not “what” to do to develop or create it in the young people they work

with (Marshall and Moll 2004). "Resilience research makes clear that protective factors in one setting have the power to compensate for risks that may be present in other settings" (Benard 2004, p. 109). As a result, Benard argues that a single positive relationship can be enough to enhance resiliency.

Chapter 9 concludes with a call for action and the importance of belief and vision in every person's life. Adults' belief in the natural resilience of youth is essential if we are to enhance protective factors.

Benard concludes with a comprehensive appendix outlining family, school and community protective factors. One of the greatest strengths of this book is Benard's ability to show relationships between multiple studies. Appendix A depicts this nicely showing an easily understood cross-referenced matrix of Personal Strengths of Resiliency from 16 different studies.

The only thing I see as a detriment for this book is its lack of a subject index, and that is hardly something to keep anyone from reading it.

Ultimately, this book is one of advocacy, providing valuable guidance using proven methods to enhance resiliency. Benard (2004, p. 9-10) states,

resilience has to start with the adults who work with kids, not with the kids themselves. If teachers have self-awareness and empathy, and if they model good relationship skills, that's a basic step in teaching those skills to children. You have to have adults modeling and living the skills for children to learn them.

She

calls for transformation of all our youth- and human-services systems. The challenge is not only to restructure policies and programs but to fundamentally alter relationships, beliefs, and power opportunities to focus on human capacities and gifts rather than on challenges and problems.

Resiliency: What We Have Learned is a valuable resource for anyone working with children, families, schools, and communities. Benard provides supporting evidence that validates resiliency-based approaches for both practitioners and researchers.

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Bambi Yost is a Ph.D. student in the Design and Planning program at the University of Colorado at Denver with a background in Landscape Architecture and Urban and Regional Planning. She is the AmeriCorps' UCAN Colorado Campus Compact Coordinator overseeing architecture and planning students in service-learning projects. For the past four years, she has planned, organized, and led community-based design-build Learning Landscape playground projects with Denver Public Elementary Schools (See <http://thunder1.cudenver.edu/cye/lla/home.html>). Prior to graduate school, she was an educator and program manager for the Chesapeake Bay Foundation where she designed and led multi-disciplinary hands-on service-learning environmental programs. She is currently conducting studies to evaluate the Learning Landscapes Program with an emphasis in public health and outdoor education.