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YOUTH OPPORTUNITIES
INITIATIVE

Promoting Development of Resilience among Young People in Foster Care

"We are all able to overcome our trials and tribulations; it makes us stronger. I like that about myself."

—Josh Wolfe, 18

Many young people in foster care have experienced considerable challenges that place them at risk of negative adult outcomes: poverty, separation, abuse, neglect, loss, and disruption. Yet with the right support systems, they can develop resilience in the face of adversity. When young people develop resilience, they are able to cope with, adapt to, and recover from even the most substantial challenges. Young people who develop resilience are more flexible and able to seek help and solve problems when stressed. They maintain a clearer sense of who they are and who they want to be when they face challenges.

Developing resilience is markedly essential for young people leaving foster care to grow and succeed as adults. Specific conditions in the lives of young people, called protective factors, have been found to help mitigate challenges and help young people recover and thrive despite significant adversity. The research clearly indicates that increasing these protective factors in the lives of young people in foster care will help them to develop resilience.

Critical questions

For young people in foster care, how should we think about resilience and its relationship to risk and protective factors? What do we need to understand about the development of resilience in order to support these young people? What are the critical elements of a framework that helps young people in foster care develop resilience? How do we help them build their capacity for resilience? This issue brief examines these questions and offers a framework that supports the development of resilience.

Re-defining resilience

It's important to move away from defining resilience as a static individual trait. It is not the case that young people are either resilient or lacking in resilience. Traditionally, resilience has been defined as

> "It's more than just a person or one thing that happens, it's a continuum."
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> —Josh Grubb, 19

"good outcomes in spite of threats to adaptation or development."[1] Resilience generally has been viewed as the protective factors, processes, and mechanisms that contribute to good outcomes despite experiences with stressors (or risks) that can lead to poor outcomes.[2]

More than three decades of research have led to a more nuanced understanding of resilience. Resilience is a dynamic developmental process that is best measured by the presence/absence and strength of risk (factors that contribute to poor outcomes) and protection (factors that buffer against risk). These factors exist at the individual, peer, family, school, neighborhood, community, and societal/cultural levels.[3] For that reason, researchers suggest that instead of referring to young people as "resilient," we use the phrases "development of resilience" or "development of resilient processes" to describe patterns and not individual traits. Resilience is not merely a reflection of an individual's ability to survive and thrive despite adversity; it is a complex, developmentally interactive process.[4] The ability of young people to recover from exposure to risk can be supported by combining efforts to reduce risk with strategies that increase the quantity and strength of protective factors.

Understanding risk and protective factors

The development of resilience involves risk factors as well as protective factors.[5] Risk factors increase the likelihood of a future negative outcome; protective factors decrease the likelihood of a future negative outcome and moderate the effects of risks.[6] Table 1 provides examples of risk and protective factors that might be found among young people in foster care.

At its essence, the development of resilience is demonstrated by a young person's positive adaptation despite significant risk or adversity. Resilience studies have defined "positive adaptation" in a variety of ways that incorporate positive behaviors (such as academic achievement), the absence of undesirable behaviors (such as remaining clear of criminal activity), and good internal and external adaptation (such as the ability to cope with stress and to develop healthy relationships with peers).

Core principles of resilience

For young people in foster care, these core principles support the process of developing resilience:

- *Optimism.* There is no point at which a young person is rendered incapable of building resilience; although the cumulative effects of risk are important for outcomes, there is no "point of no return" for a young person beyond which intervention will be ineffective. Research on risk factors makes clear that services and developmentally appropriate interventions have the potential to be effective for all children and adolescents, including young people in foster care who have experienced cumulative risk.[7]

- *Strengths-based.* The development of resilience means focusing on strengths rather than deficits and promoting healthy development in spite of risk exposure.[8] Although most young people in

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1   Masten, 2001.
2   ACT for Youth Center of Excellence, 2001.
3   Anthony, 2011.
4   Anthony, 2011.
5   Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005.

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6   Durlak, 1998.
7   Appleyard, et al., 2005.
8   Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005.

foster care have been exposed to multiple risks, they often possess multiple assets and have access to multiple resources that can support positive adaptation.

- *Broad context.* Resilience involves individual factors, but, importantly, it also encompasses environmental factors, such as family, which can shape and moderate risk factors.[9] For young people in foster care, environmental factors—siblings, extended family, caregivers, mentors, teachers, and social workers—can play significant roles in helping them develop resilience.

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9   Dawson, Ashman, & Carver, 2000.

- *Exposure level.* The realities of young people's exposure to risk affect the processes of developing resilience. The "playing field" is not level for all young people, and especially not for many young people in foster care who have not only experienced poverty, discrimination, and stigma, but also separation, abuse, neglect, loss, and other environmental and social stresses related to the foster care experience.[10]
- *Individualized experiences.* The process of developing resilience differs for individuals and for different groups of adolescents. At the individual level, what is a risk or a protective

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10   Anthony, 2011.

Table 1. Examples of Risk and Protective Factors	
RISK FACTORS	**PROTECTIVE FACTORS**
CHILDHOOD FACTORS	
• Low birth weight • Insecure attachment • Poor social skills	• Attachment to family • Social skills • School achievement
FAMILY FACTORS	
• Poor parental supervision and discipline • Parental substance abuse • Family conflict and domestic violence • Social isolation/lack of support networks • Trauma	• Supportive, caring parents and extended family members • Parental employment • Access to support networks
SCHOOL FACTORS	
• School failure • Negative peer influences • Poor attachment to school	• Positive school climate • Sense of belonging • Opportunities for success at school and recognition of achievement
COMMUNITY FACTORS	
• Neighborhood violence and crime • Lack of support services • Social or cultural discrimination	• Community networking • Access to support services • Participation in community groups

> "There were a lot of different things I had to overcome from my childhood. However, I had an excellent support system in place; my foster parents were there. They were there for my games, and I think that every young person needs an opportunity to look up in the stands and see somebody cheering for them."
>
> —Crystal Williams, 25

factor for one young person will not necessarily be a risk or protective factor for another.

- *Group experiences.* At the group level, the process may differ depending on urban or rural settings, socioeconomic levels, gender, age,[11] and for young people from different racial and ethnic backgrounds.[12] Current thinking on resilience highlights an ecological approach to building resilience, including interventions that focus on particular racial or ethnic groups, which stress risks, assets, and resources unique to each group.

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11   Fergusson & Horwood, 2003; Sameroff, Gutman, & Peck, 2003.
12   Gutman, Sameroff, & Eccles, 2002.

FIGURE 1. ADAPTIVE PROCESSES AND ASSETS CONTRIBUTE TO RESILIENCE

Adapted from Flynn, n.d.

- *Ongoing support.* A young person may be resilient in one situation and fragmented and brittle in another.[13] Just as we cannot view a young person who has a multitude of risk factors present as being a "lost cause," we also should not assume a young person with a multitude of protective factors needs little support. The frequently changing circumstances of many young people in foster care require ongoing attention to pathways that support resilience.

What Promotes Resilience?

The development of resilience is the result of human adaptive processes and assets interacting with one another. As Figure 1 shows, people develop resilience because of the interaction of the following factors: healthy brain development, including the capacity for cognition; healthy attachment relationships, including parenting relationships; the motivation and ability to learn and engage with the environment; the ability to regulate emotions and behavior; and supportive environmental systems that include education, cultural beliefs, and faith-based communities.

The development of resilience and positive youth development

The development of resilience is closely tied with the field of youth development, which focuses on building young people's strengths and protecting them from social, emotional, and physical harm. Youth development shifts the focus from fixing negative behaviors to building young people's

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13   Gilgun, n.d.

> "Being around people who can build you up is important so that you can build yourself up."
>
> —Josh Grubb, 19

strengths and capacity through assets that promote resilience. The Search Institute has identified 40 developmental assets that serve as building blocks for healthy youth development (see Appendix): *Internal assets*—such as a commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies, and a positive identity—reside within the individual; *external assets* are social and environmental influences on adolescent health and development, including parental support, adult mentoring, and community organizations that promote positive youth development. External assets bring an ecological context to the continuous development of resilience and move thinking away from defining resilience as a static individual trait.[14]

Studies consistently show that the more developmental assets young people have, the more likely they are to thrive and the less likely they are to engage in a wide range of high-risk behaviors. These developmental internal and external assets are better indicators of whether adolescents will grow up to become successful, well-adjusted adults than the presence or absence of risk factors such as poverty or drug use.

Resilience research identifies three core components that build resilience and help young people succeed: caring relationships, high expectations, and opportunities for participation and contribution.[15] Adolescents' healthy development and ongoing wellness is tied to meaningful and continuous relationships with caring, positive adults. Caring relationships are the supportive connections to others who model and support healthy development and well-being.[16] Numerous studies show that caring relationships are the most critical factor promoting healthy and successful development for young people,

even in the face of multiple risks.[17] Continuously spending time with caring family members, including parent-like figures, provides opportunities for young people to develop skills and healthy relationships. When adults take an active interest in young people, show them respect, have compassion for their circumstances, and actively listen to and talk with them,[18] these relationships help young people build communication and conflict management skills, concern for others, and a sense of belonging.[19] For more information on the importance of social capital, see another issue brief, *Social Capital: Building Quality Networks for Young People in Foster Care.*[20]

Young people also need a balance of challenges and responsibility. As adults communicate their high expectations, they help young people see themselves as active agents in their own lives. As a result, young people are able to use adult support and encouragement to experiment and strengthen their agency.[21] When young people in foster care have opportunities to participate in and contribute to their multiple communities—peer groups, neighborhoods, the broader community, and the foster care system itself—they have a strong foundation for developing problem-solving and social skills that enhance their autonomy. They build a sense of responsibility to others and society that encourages character development and empathy.[22]

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14   Sandler, et al., 2003.
15   West/Ed & Safe and Healthy Kids, 2002.
16   Benard, B. 2012.

17   Bernard, B. 2012.
18   Bernard, B. 2012.
19   Anthony, 2011.
20   Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, 2011, available at www.JimCaseyYouth.org
21   Anthony, 2011.
22   Anthony, 2011.

> It is as if the frontal lobes [of the brain] are being sculpted based on the young person's daily experiences.

Resilience and adolescent brain development

Research on brain development indicates that the adolescent brain is particularly receptive to prevention-oriented interventions, supports, and youth development strategies geared toward developing resilience and social competence.[23] From about 12 years of age through early adulthood, the brain goes through a very distinct phase of development in which it is reshaped. Prior to adolescence, neurons and synapses proliferate in the cerebral cortex. In adolescence, the brain starts to prune away unused brain cells, while allocating white matter (the myelin covering over nerve fibers, called axons, which allow brain cells to communicate with each other) to those cells that are being actively used. Through this "use-it-or-lose-it" process, more than 40 percent of all synapses are eliminated, largely in the frontal lobes.[24] It is as if the frontal lobes are being sculpted based on the young person's daily experiences.[25] (For more detailed information related to research on the adolescent brain, see the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative publication *The Adolescent Brain: New Research and Its Implications for Young People Transitioning from Foster Care.*[26])

This sculpting process, referred to as pruning and myelination, has already taken place from ages 6 through 13 in other parts of the brain—including the temporal and parietal lobes—where sensory processing, language, and visual-spatial skills reside. In adolescence, the brain begins to establish the top-down management skills necessary to apply knowledge—a process that takes place over a decade. This process depends "on a delicate dance between brain development and environmental stimulation,"[27] which underscores the importance of building resilience during this time period.

In adolescence, the brain begins to cultivate the capacity to control and use what has developed through childhood. At the beginning of this process, young people have underdeveloped abilities to think long-term and put events in context, maintain focus, suppress emotional outbursts, and inhibit seeking immediate gratification. With time and appropriate life experiences, young people develop these new skills— if they are in a stimulating and safe environment where they can develop and explore.[28] In this type of environment, young people also build external assets through caring relationships, high expectations, and opportunities to participate and contribute.

Research demonstrates that optimal family, school, and community environments support healthy adolescent brain development. Brain science shows that young people need adults to reinforce their positive behaviors and to communicate warmth and caring. Adults play critical roles in helping young people make up for what they still lack during adolescence by providing structure, time-management advice, guidance in making difficult decisions (even when young people resist), and showing them patience and love.[29]

Studies on adolescent brain development also show that high expectations are essential. For young people

23   National Center on Children and Poverty, 2008.
24   Harvard Medical School, 2005.
25   Chaban, 2008.
26   Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, 2011, available at www.JimCaseyYouth.org

27   Chaban, 2008.
28   Chaban, 2008.
29   US Office of Adolescent Pregnancy Program, Adolescent Life Demonstration and Research Program, 2009.

to learn to think critically, solve complex problems, and be successful in a wide variety of tasks, they must be challenged to practice complex tasks and strengthen their brains' capacity to engage in those thinking activities. Through engaging in complex activities, young people's brains will strengthen the connectivity between the cells needed to solve complex problems later in life.[30] Along with high expectations, young people need opportunities to participate and contribute in meaningful ways. Through these opportunities, they develop the ability to more thoughtfully regulate their daily lives as the prefrontal lobe develops to become the brain's executive director.[31]

The emerging framework

In order to improve outcomes for young people in foster care, the systems that serve them need to adopt a new framework that promotes the development of resilience. A strong framework that promotes the development of resilience among young people in foster care has several attributes:

The philosophy. Current thinking about resilience emphasizes:

- *Competence and strengths,* rather than maladjustment and deficits
- *Developing assets* for young people exposed to risk, instead of the traditional approach of focusing on risk reduction
- *Fostering pathways to resilience,* not just resilient behaviors and people
- *Interventions that focus on families, schools, and communities* as a way to increase developmental assets, expanding the more limited traditional approaches to asset building

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30   California Department of Education, 2012.
31   Lauren, 2009.

The goal. The goal is to shift young people's developmental courses and life trajectories in more positive directions.

Strategies for promoting resilience. Two major types of strategies aid the development of resilience among young people in foster care:

- *Strengths-based strategies* for improving the number and quality of internal and external assets. Tutoring, mentoring, community-based youth activities, parenting education for young parents, and recreational activities are key. Adults in the young people's lives serve as role models for appropriate behavior and help them develop problem-solving and communication skills that are critical for future educational and employment success.[32]
- *Process-focused strategies* to mobilize young people's abilities to adapt to various situations. These strategies build self-efficacy through graduated success models of teaching, developing effective coping strategies, fostering secure attachments, nurturing mentoring relationships, involving young people in healthy out-of-school activities, and supporting cultural traditions that encourage young people to bond with pro-social adults.

Turning points. The concept of "turning points" is important when creating a framework for the development of resilience among young people in foster care.[33] For many adolescents, turning points arise from the opening of opportunities that support positive shifts in their life trajectories.[34] Turning points can include continuing education at a

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32   Daining & DePanfilis, 2007.
33   Werner & Smith, 2001.
34   Flynn, n.d.

> "Let them spend time with someone who will be a positive influence and open their mind, help them make sense of their experiences and capabilities."
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> —Beamer Aston, 24

community college, educational and vocational skills gained from a job or in the armed forces, marriage to a stable partner, active participation in a community of faith, or recovery from a serious illness or accident. Most often, turning points involve informal help from spouses, friends, extended family members, or teachers.[35] Some young people in foster care have described their relationships with supportive adults as turning points in their lives. Systems that serve young people facilitate opportunities that lead to turning points.

Holistic design. Service providers and institutions that are involved in young people's lives address

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35   Flynn, n.d.

their multiple needs by networking with other institutions.[36] Components of holistic programming include emotional and physical wellness, drug and alcohol abuse prevention, emergency assistance, financial capability, employment readiness and training, housing stability, recreational activities, and adult and community partnerships.[37]

Conclusion

It is critical for systems that serve young people in foster care to support them in developing resilience in the face of risk and adversity. This involves a shift from a focus on deficits to a focus on strengths, from risk amelioration to enhancing protective factors, and from considering resilience to be a static trait to understanding resilience as a continuous, interactive process.

Adults who interact frequently with young people in foster care must recognize that although the playing field may not be level for all young people, there is no "point of no return" beyond which well-designed supports will be ineffective in improving a young person's functioning and, consequently, his or her future. Finally, although developing resilience is important for young people of all ages, adolescence provides a unique neurological opportunity for supporting the development of resilience and the accomplishment of critical developmental tasks.

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36   Burt, 2002.
37   Burt, 2002; Ocasio, Staats, & Van Alst, 2009.

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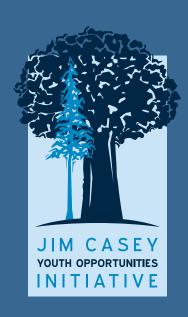
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THE SEARCH INSTITUTE: 40 DEVELOPMENTAL ASSETS FOR ADOLESCENTS AGES 12-18[38]

External Assets		Internal Assets	
Support	Family support Positive family communication Other adult relationships Caring neighborhood Caring school climate Parent involvement in schooling	Commitment to learning	Achievement motivation School engagement Homework Bonding to school Reading for pleasure
Empowerment	Community values youth Youth as resources Service to others Safety	Positive values	Caring Equality and social justice Integrity Honesty Responsibility Restraint
Boundaries and expectations	Family boundaries School boundaries Neighborhood boundaries Adult role models Positive peer influence High expectations	Social competencies	Planning and decision making Interpersonal competence Cultural competence Resistance skills Peaceful conflict resolution
Constructive use of time	Creative activities Youth programs Religious community Time at home	Positive identity	Personal power Self-esteem Sense of purpose Positive view of personal future

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38   The Search Institute, 2006.

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