

Health and Well-being in Early Childhood



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Janet Rose • Louise Gilbert • Val Richards



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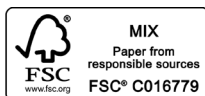
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CHAPTER 9

RESILIENCE AND BUILDING LEARNING POWER

Chapter Overview

This chapter considers young children's resilience and learning. It highlights how early years practitioners can encourage children to believe in their own abilities so that they are able to succeed in tasks, attain goals and experience a sense of achievement and how this can help to raise their self-esteem and improve their health and well-being. It begins by exploring the ideas surrounding the development of resilience and *self-efficacy* in children. It focuses, in particular, on how these issues affect learning and Building Learning Power. It will show how Learning Power is an enabling factor in the development of young children and their health and well-being. Key learning skills, considered to be integral to effective learning, will be examined and how the combination of *feeling*, *thinking* and *doing* forms the basis for health and well-being.

Resilience

Resilience relates to our capacity to pick ourselves up, learn from our mistakes and perhaps tackle tasks with increased vigour and determination to succeed, or develop alternative strategies to move forward.

Resilience is intricately linked to our capacity to process, manage and overcome stress and trauma. It is a universal capacity that can enable a person to prevent, minimise or overcome the damaging effect of

adversity (Grotberg, 1995). It is important to recognise that resilience is not a trait or a characteristic. Is a complex *process* involving both internal cognitive and personality factors *and* the functioning of external *protective* factors, such as caring adults, so we would not label children as *resilient* or *not resilient* but rather think in terms of children who are *manifesting resilient behaviours* and those who are not. From a neurological perspective, resilience is evident within our brains. For example, people identified as having resilience have greater activity in the frontal lobes. Resilient brains have up to 30 times more activity in the frontal lobes than non-resilient brains and more neural connections between the lower and upper regions of the brain (Music, 2011). These neural connections play an important role in facilitating recovery from adversity. These connections are forged by our early relationships and experiences.

Grotberg's (1995) international research has identified three key sources which help to create a resilient child. These are social and interpersonal supports, personal, inner strengths and interpersonal and problem-solving skills. These features are listed in Table 9.1.

Table 9.1 Features of a resilient child

I HAVE (social and interpersonal supports)

- People around me I trust and who love me, no matter what
- People who set limits for me so I know when to stop before there is danger or trouble
- People who show me how to do things right by the way they do things
- People who want me to learn to do things on my own
- People who help me when I am sick, in danger or need to learn

I AM (personal, inner strengths)

- A person people can like and love
- Glad to do nice things for others and show my concern
- Respectful of myself and others
- Willing to be responsible for what I do
- Sure things will be all right

I CAN (interpersonal problem-solving skills)

- Talk to others about things that frighten me or bother me
- Find ways to solve problems that I face
- Control myself when I feel like doing something not right or dangerous
- Figure out when it is a good time to talk to someone or to take action
- Find someone to help me when I need it

(Grotberg, 1995)

Mindful Moment

Think about your own resources of resilience – compile your own **I have, I am** and **I can** chart.

Now think about what you can do as an early years practitioner that can promote the support, strengths and skills needed to promote resilience.

Another model that considered the attributes needed for resilience and relates these to children's learning is encapsulated in Claxton's (2002) notion of Building Learning Power.

Building Learning Power

For Claxton (1999, 2002), resilience is one of four factors that enhance children's Learning Power. He considers how children's Learning Power can be enhanced by focusing on areas that he has identified as being fundamental to the development of their learning capacity: resilience, resourcefulness, reciprocity and reflection. These four areas are known as the four R's and will be considered in detail.

Resilience

Resilience has already been discussed and defined to some extent. It is the ability to harness a determination to find a way of coping with, or managing, a situation. However, it does not mean you will never experience feeling overwhelmed by the task ahead of you or by a situation you find stressful (Cottrell, 2013). Claxton's (2002) view of resilience emphasises the ability to focus and concentrate on the current task so that external influences do not distract you from making progress. This single-mindedness of purpose leads to tenacity and perseverance to acquire skills or to grasp ideas which support the development of capabilities and understanding.

Resourcefulness

Resourcefulness is the ability to develop different strategies and draw upon one's own resources when coping with a situation that requires a different

approach in order to achieve one's goals. Many of us do not recognise how resourceful we are until faced with a situation that pushes us out of our comfort zone. Such a situation might cause an element of stress and even anxiety, but this is where a certain amount of tolerable stress enables us to develop different strategies and draw upon resources that we did not know we were capable of accessing. Stress can mobilise us to action. If we are able to regulate the stress and reduce the anxiety, we can reflect upon the experience (see 'Reflection' below) and consider our achievements. As a result we can derive an enhanced sense of self-esteem and a better understanding of our self-efficacy, which in turn leads to an increased self-awareness, which has an impact upon our health and well-being.

Reciprocity/relationships

Reciprocity is about the relationships in learning. Claxton (2002) considers how learning situations involve *orchestrating*, *explaining* and *commentating* by practitioners and how learning experiences are *modelled* on others. Learning cannot take place in a vacuum and invariably relies upon other people to inform and create our learning experiences. For example, in a group learning situation, such as a problem-solving task, the goal of the exercise might appear to be to solve the problem, but incidental learning may also occur, such as learning about ourselves as a learner within a group – whether we took a lead, whether we learnt by observing, whether we collated others' ideas or facilitated others' learning. In assisting others and explaining processes we also learn about our own learning.

Reflection

For meaningful learning to take place there needs to be reflection on what we have learnt and also *how* we have learnt – in other words, the *process* of learning – as this can inform future learning. Reflection might not be immediate but may require time and distance so that our minds can process how we approached the task, the difficulties we encountered, how we felt about doing the task and – the important part – how we would change our approach if we replicated the task. It is from this reflection and acknowledgement of our strengths and limitations that the greatest learning can occur. This includes reflecting on when we make mistakes or do not achieve a goal. It is important to evaluate our actions in a positive light. If we do not learn to develop a capacity to learn from our mistakes, we may personalise this as a failure, which may affect our self-esteem and resilience to continue learning. This can be detrimental and impede progress if we transmute failure in one situation to another, forming a future barrier to learning.

Mindful Moment

Think of a learning task that you found challenging. Can you relate your experience to the four R's:

- *Resilience*. Did you display resilience in tackling the task? Did you achieve your goal?
- *Reciprocity*. Who helped or encouraged you and how did they do this?
- *Resourcefulness*. What resources did you draw upon to cope with the situation?
- *Reflection*. Reflect upon the process and/or the task – what did you learn about your own learning?

The relationship between the four R's

There is a clear overlap between the four facets of learning and they are interconnected. Relationships interact with reflective processes which can help a child to identify their own resourcefulness and in turn can assist them in the process of harnessing their resilience and determination to succeed in future tasks. The following case study from a Wiltshire primary school provides an example of Building Learning Power in practice and how it might be applied in an early years classroom.

Case Study

Building Learning Power in practice

At Fynamore Primary School, Wiltshire, Building Learning Power (BLP) was introduced to the Reception children through stories that brought the complex words of Resilience, Resourcefulness, Reciprocity and Reflection to life. For example, rather than considering the term Reciprocity in isolation, the children announced themselves as Reciprocal Rabbits that worked as a team, while they conducted tasks such as carrying boxes together across the classroom.

Each of the four R's was represented by a particular creature which stood for the BLP aspect and as such this enabled a common language that could be used and understood by both pupils and early years practitioners.

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Wall charts were used to display the four R's and to identify which R they were using or achieving. Each of the four R's has acted as a powerful motivator in encouraging independence and building self-esteem. For example, one child in the class who had difficulties with hand-eye coordination and scissor control chose the most challenging shape to cut out. However, the challenge did not deter her and she worked for a sustained period of 20 minutes. This determination and perseverance was praised and encouraged by the adult. The child declared, 'I'm being a Resilient Robin, because I'm not giving up!' The model gave the children an opportunity for reflection, validated the child's effort and sharing the accomplishment with others, such as visitors to the classroom, boosted the child's self-esteem. Equally, resilience has been used to challenge and encourage children working at the highest level within the class. For these children, an understanding of resilience has provided validation that the journey is just as important, if not more so, than the final outcome. They have been able to demonstrate tenacity and perseverance which has allowed them to overcome fear of failure and grow and develop. For some of the most able children, this common language has begun to provide a sense of relief as they previously may have been worried about failing.

(Rosie Pritchard, teacher, Fynamore School)



Figure 9.1 BLP display of animal symbolisation for Learning Power

(Display by Tracey Barnett, teacher, Fynamore School)

Adult assistance – the skilled practitioner

As we have seen, the development of resilience is predicated on interpersonal relationships. This resonates with the work of Vygotsky and his theory of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Vygotsky's (1978) theory represented a social constructivist view that stressed the importance of the social context of learning. He recognised that there are tasks a child can complete independently and tasks which are too difficult for them to manage alone; somewhere in between is the Zone of Proximal Development. Berger (2011) refers to this as the *magic middle*, where the child can achieve a task through the assistance of more knowledgeable others. 'Tasks at this level would be stimulating, challenging and attainable with assistance' (Richards, 2011a: 43).

An enabling environment needs to promote a balance between offering children opportunities to reinforce learning and to stimulate new learning. If the new learning challenge seems insurmountable and does not fit with the child's *perception* of what is achievable, then the child may disengage and it may be difficult to persuade them to attempt the task, so practitioners may be able to work within the child's ZPD to support their progression. If the learning is broken into smaller, manageable steps, then the task is less onerous and may feel attainable – it provides a *scaffold* for the child, to coin Bruner's term (Wood et al., 1976). The role of the adult might entail encouragement or lending a helping hand when the energy and enthusiasm appears to flag in an attuned and contingent manner and then gradually *fading* so that the child does it for themselves (Claxton, 2002). This assistance could also be provided by peers in collaborative learning situations. These ideas link closely to the notion of *sustained shared thinking*. Sustained shared thinking is a process of engaged attention between two people as they work together to resolve a problem or develop an idea or skill (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002). The adult role within this can encompass a range of strategies to support the child such as showing a genuine interest, listening attentively, role modelling, asking open-ended questions, offering encouragement, making suggestions and/or clarifying ideas.

Dimensions of learning

Deakin Crick (2006) developed the idea of Learning Power further and her work with Claxton and others identified various dimensions of learning that practitioners should acknowledge to develop a more effective enabling environment. This focuses on a learner's self-awareness of their learning, such as how they feel about learning, the learning relationships and the context of the learning experience. This draws upon the *ecology*

of learning (Deakin Crick, 2006; Hutchings 2008) and examines factors such as the *climate* for learning within the setting, that is the conditions that enable effective learning to take place. This can be affected by, for example, the statutory curriculum or the setting's ethos, or by the values and beliefs the practitioner brings to the learning situation. All these factors will have an impact upon the child by the selection of what learning experiences are promoted and how they are supported. The wider cultural context of learning will also influence what is valued in terms of learning. For example, in learning about gender relationships, the influence of what is considered appropriate education and learning for different genders can vary across cultures and according to an individual's belief and value system.

Deakin Crick et al.'s (2004) research identified seven *dimensions of learning* which were considered important for all forms of learning, not just in a setting but in the wider world and for personal growth and development. The seven dimensions of learning were regarded as being on a continuum with polarised dimensions at either end of the scale. These are summarised in Table 9.2.

Table 9.2 Dimensions of learning

Dimension of learning	As opposed to . . .
Changing and learning	Being static
Critical curiosity	Being passive
Meaning making	Fragmentation
Creativity	Being rule bound
Learning relationships	Isolation and dependence
Strategic awareness	Being robotic
Resilience	Fragility and dependence

Essentially, the dimensions explore approaches where the learning is learner-centred and the individual is proactive in taking responsibility for their own learning. They provide a sound framework for the examination of an individual's attitudes towards learning. Reflection was not included explicitly in the proposed dimensions although the individual has to assess themselves on the scale which does entail a degree of reflection. The seven dimensions combine *thinking, feeling and doing* and this underpins the development of Learning Power (Deakin Crick, 2006). Children are active participants in their own learning (*doing*). They *think* about their learning and examine how they *feel* about the learning tasks and situations. They then apply their new-found knowledge and implement

change. This could involve approaching the tasks differently and *doing* them in a different way. These ideas link to the characteristics of effective learning identified in the EYFS and show how the Learning Power model can be related to early years contexts, as Table 9.3 demonstrates.

Table 9.3 Characteristics of effective learning

Characteristics of effective learning

Active learning – motivation (FEELING)

- *Being involved and concentrating*
- *Keeping trying*
- *Enjoying achieving what they set out to do*

Creating and thinking critically – thinking (THINKING)

- *Having their own ideas*
- *Making links*
- *Choosing ways to do things*

Playing and exploring – engagement (DOING)

- *Finding out and exploring*
 - *Playing with what they know*
 - *Being willing to 'have a go'*
-

Source: Early Education (2012).

Mindful Moment

Consider the seven dimensions of lifelong learning identified by Deakin Crick et al. (2004) which help to build Learning Power and compare these to the characteristics of effective learning. Can you find each of the seven dimensions within the various characteristics of effective learning? How do you help to build young children's Learning Power?

The role of stress in developing resilience and self-efficacy

We have seen previously how new learning can excite and inspire but may also create a cognitive imbalance which generates a need to restore homeostasis in our brains and body (see Chapter 7 and Piaget's concept of

cognitive equilibrium). Positive stress, or *eustress*, can be helpful as it pushes us to the limit and makes us more resourceful so that we develop our capacity to cope in adverse situations (see Chapter 3). It may only be when we are out of our comfort zone that our resources are really tested (Richards, 2011b). The novelty may generate a stress response such as anxiety, requiring down-regulation in order to learn effectively, but in order to learn we all need to be alert and responsive to the new stimulus.

The brain and body's need to establish homeostasis has implications for the practitioner role and how we support young children within the enabling environment. Earlier, we discussed some of the ways we can promote learning within the ZPD or *magic middle*. It is a contingent relationship that is fed by the child's responses, needs and interests. The early years practitioner needs to strike a careful balance between allowing a child to experiment and work things out for themselves and offering support when needed. However, our overarching aim is to promote emotional and cognitive self-regulation which will enhance a child's sense of achievement and self-efficacy. Ogden (2012) draws upon the work of Lazarus and Folkman, who identified self-efficacy as being instrumental in the coping mechanisms for alleviating and dealing with stress. Confidence in one's own abilities to cope with a stressful situation can lead to a reduction in the level of stress and therefore of the physical symptoms associated with stress. Ogden also cites Kobasa et al.'s notion of 'hardiness' which equates to Claxton's resilience. An individual displaying hardiness exhibits self-control, views problems and potential stressors as 'challenges' and displays commitment (Ogden, 2012).

Mindful Moment

There is a well-known saying attributed to Niebuhr (1892–1971) which is to

'... grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference'.

What do you think of Neibuhr's saying – is it limiting or realistic? As early years practitioners we may have to make judgements about achieving a balance between setting attainable (often statutory) goals for the children, ones which are within reach and which they can realistically attain, and providing sufficient extension to enable them to reach their potential.

Personality and resilience

Personality is the compilation of the character traits that evolve from your innate temperament and your life experiences. There has been much discussion and research about personality types such as Type A people who are driven to succeed, respond to time constraints and have a compulsion and determination to achieve goals and Type B people who are less goal-driven and more laid back (Ogden, 2012). There is considerable research (Straub, 2014) to suggest that being goal-driven could have detrimental health consequences, such as an increased susceptibility to developing cardiovascular disease, coronary heart disease (CHD) and high blood pressure which can be life-threatening. More recent research has focused on the degree of hostility or anger which has been linked to an increase in CHD. This indicates the importance of emphasising the process of self-regulation and empowering children so that they can deal with the stress in order to avoid potential harmful effects on their health in the future.

With the increasing *schoolification* of early years practice around the world, early years practitioners are often under pressure (or obligated by law) to help children achieve set goals (Rose and Rogers, 2012b). This can contribute to the tensions they face in deciding how to support young children's learning and development. This chapter has explored the importance of encouraging children to develop resilience and to increase their self-efficacy in respect of achieving their goals. However, it is equally as important to provide a balance so that they do not develop into adults that are so driven by their will to succeed that their actions become a way of life that may prove detrimental to their health.

Key Points

- The health and well-being of children is linked to their ability to develop resilience and self-efficacy, which will enable them to withstand life's knocks.
- Learning Power can be developed and enables the child to take control of their own learning.
- Resourcefulness, reciprocity, relationships and resilience are key features in developing and Building Learning Power.
- The seven dimensions of Learning Power and the key characteristics of effective learning can provide a useful framework for analysing children's learning.
- Adults can work with the children to scaffold the development of resilience and help them to achieve cognitive and emotional equilibrium.

Useful Further Reading and Websites

- Rose, J. and Rogers, S. (2012) *The Role of the Adult in Early Years Settings*. Maidenhead: Milton Keynes. This book provides an effective framework for considering your role within an early years setting and suggests ways to resolve some of the tensions within this role. ‘The Facilitator’ chapter is particularly useful for exploring how adults support young children in their learning.
- Claxton, G. (2002) *Building Learning Power*. Bristol: TLO Ltd. This book outlines the concept of Learning Power and how it can help practitioners to frame their practice and support young children to develop lifelong learning skills.
- Most children’s charity websites have a section on resilience and are worth investigating for resources and clarification on the subject of resilience, for example Barnardo’s at: <http://www.barnardos.org.uk/>.