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## The Importance Of Resilience

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By??all??outward??appearances,??11-year-old??quashone??perry??was headed for jail or the morgue in 1989. An older brother ran with a tough crowd in the dangerous Miami neighborhood where they lived with their single mom, who worked long hours at two jobs and was barely getting by. On one particularly inauspicious day, a spat between rivals led to a drive-by shooting in which a bullet grazed Quashone. "The first thing that came to my mind was to go get my brother's gun and shoot back at the guy who did it," he recalls. Luckily for him, when he told his mother what he was planning to do, she not only talked him out of it but also quit her jobs and moved the family to a different part of Miami.

Fifteen years later, Perry's life is a blueprint for achievement. He graduated from college, is married and is starting his second semester of law school. And he owes some of that to, of all things, ballet. After the shooting, his mother insisted that he take ballet lessons after school. Perry, who loved football, was more than a little reluctant at first, but the encouragement and persistence of one teacher helped him master dance so well that he ended up playing leading roles in *The Nutcracker*. And that, in turn, gave him a new focus and perspective on his life. "It's scary to go back to where I used to live," he says. "It gives me the chills, how far I've come."

Why are some children like Perry able to overcome extreme circumstances--poverty, a parent's absence, a violent neighborhood--and find happiness while others are defeated by the mildest of setbacks? What allows people to start over after a horrific calamity--such as last month's tsunami in the Indian Ocean--and create a new life for themselves on the shattered foundations of the old one?

Psychologists use the word resilience to describe this ability to bounce back from adversity. "It's amazing what kids can go through," says Emmy Werner, a professor of human development at the University of California at Davis, who as a child suffered the saturation bombing of Germany during World War II. But whether the context is war, natural disaster or a more private hell, many of the same factors seem to play a role in whether children grow up to become successful adults. "Some of it is sheer luck, of course," says Werner, who began researching resilience in youngsters in the 1950s, "and the scars will be there. But, terrible as it is to say, you adapt."

Some characteristics appear to be fundamental. The strength of the parental bond established in the first three years of life, for example, seems to set the tone for the rest of our days. Studies by Werner and others

that follow children to adulthood show that parental bonds influence future success more than almost any other factor. So does being born with the right personality. A child with an easygoing temperament or a certain amount of intelligence appears to have an advantage.

But what of the external factors, the things you aren't born with? Can kids learn particular skills to help them overcome adversity? The answer is a qualified yes. You can't teach resilience, but researchers have identified some skills--such as developing a sense of autonomy or being a good reader--that increase the chances that a child will become a productive member of society. Belief systems--whether something as straightforward as believing you have a future or as nuanced as practicing a religious faith--also play a critical role.

Resilience, researchers agree, is a complex process that is in some ways as unpredictable as the weather. "This is not a one-dimensional thing," says Arthur Reynolds, a professor of social work at the University of Wisconsin. "There is a sort of chain reaction that leads to resilience later, and that chain reaction begins when children are very young."

A number of negative factors may weaken resilience. Among the most common in the U.S.: violence, physical or sexual abuse, direct exposure to alcoholism and removal from the home. As the major risk factors add up, so does the toll. "It's cruel to ask a man who has no bootstraps to pick himself up by his own bootstraps," says Mark Katz, a psychologist who heads a resilience program in San Diego. "If resilience is strength under adversity, then multiple-risk exposures--four or more--limit emotional endurance."

So much for the caveats. Even the most cautious researchers agree that luck and favorable genetics aren't everything. There are concrete things you can do to help a child grow up to be a relatively happy and successful adult. Indeed, as the more innovative children's programs in the U.S. demonstrate, many of the same elements show up again and again. Among them:

**HONE A TALENT** Kids who are resilient have often found something to be better at than anyone else. Dance was the avenue for Perry--a skill that would set him apart. At the age of 12, he won a scholarship to study with Miami's Thomas Armour Youth Ballet. Perry rose through the ranks to become a professional dancer, a career he might resume after law school. "Ballet is not about instant gratification," says Ruth Wiesen, the group's director. "Sometimes it's very difficult for kids. They learn by showing up every day and working hard that success can be as simple as that."

**FIND A CHAMPION** It also helps to have a Ruth Wiesen in your life--someone who believes wholeheartedly in you, the way Wiesen has in Perry and hundreds of other budding ballet students. She recognized Perry's talent immediately, but she also saw that he needed extra attention, particularly when it came to attendance. "It was just my calling him to say, 'Come, come again and, O.K., come again' if he didn't show up for class," she says. Teachers make excellent champions, of course, but so do grandparents, coaches, police officers and janitors. The point is to take an interest and maybe have an expectation or two.

Studies show that boys even more than girls need that external, emotional support and often fail to succeed without it.

**LOOK WITHIN** Some things clearly are out of a child's control. But believing that everything--from passing a class to getting into a fight to becoming pregnant--is basically a question of luck tends to compound the problems. Fortunately, attitudes can change for the better. "Part of resilience is learning some skills, some tools to stay safe," says Jerry Moe, who works with children of alcoholics at the Betty Ford Centers in California and Texas. One technique Moe uses a lot is playing a game he calls wheel of misfortune, in which kids brainstorm on ways to handle situations like being yelled at by a drunken father or a mom's wanting to drive them somewhere when she's had three too many.

**BE YOUR OWN RECRUITER** "Get help" may be the most obvious piece of advice anyone can give a kid heading for trouble. But studies show that the most resilient kids have a way of drawing in other people to help them. Usually those boys and girls are open and engaging, not reserved and sullen. Perhaps they have a winning smile or have learned to develop a quick sense of humor. In other words, they make you want to help them and have become good enough judges of character that they know whom to tap to get the help they need. If one person lets them down, they find another. Some preschool programs pair a child who is adept at asking for help with one who isn't, so the second one can learn by imitation.

**HELP OTHERS** Another common thread among adults who rebound from adversity is that as children they were required to help others. Selfless acts that have no apparent reward--like giving up a seat on a bus to an older person or participating in a service project--seem to give children some perspective on their lives and troubles. It's another way of not being alone, not being the only person with a problem.

**MAKE BETTER PARENTS** This insight is central to the approach of the federally funded Child-Parent Centers, a Head Start-- like program in Chicago. It goes way beyond persuading parents to volunteer at bake sales or help chaperone a field trip. Consider, for example, the Lorraine Hansberry Child-Parent Center in the city's North Lawndale section, where most of the families are poor and unemployment runs high. In addition to its preschool and elementary programs, the center offers parents and other caregivers classes designed to enhance parenting skills, including sessions on child development, how to talk with their kids, deal constructively with conflicts and the right way to help with homework. "Especially with the parents who spend a lot of time here, you can see them growing as they try to make themselves a better life," says Shelly Bailey, who is responsible for many of the parent classes. "We encourage them to go back to school, to strive for better things."

The results are striking, according to Wisconsin's Reynolds. For the past two decades, he has been following young people who graduated in 1985 from several of what were then 25 Child-Parent Centers in Chicago. (There are now 15.) As a group, they are much less likely than their peers to commit a crime or be the victim of one and are more likely to graduate from school on time. "If we provide education and family support for kids at high risk, it leads to great levels of success for kids," he says. "And if they get in that success stream, they often stay in it because of the positive early advantages."

Latonya Thomas, 32, and her two children Bryant, 14, and Shana, 7, are prime examples. All of them have attended classes at the Lorraine Hansberry center. "I love this program," says Thomas, who credits the center with instilling a love of school in her daughter and providing a strong foundation for her son, who is on the ninth-grade honor roll. As much as it has helped Bryant and Shana, however, Thomas acknowledges the changes it has made in her life as well. "I have more patience with the kids, I know how to talk to let them know I'm there for them," she says. Wouldn't she have done that anyway? "Yes," she says. "There's my way and their way. When I put them together, it works just fine." The center also inspired Thomas to upgrade her job skills, and she is studying to be a lab technician.

As these success stories illustrate, resilience is real, but it's not inevitable. Someone has to take a chance. Someone has to care. And a certain amount of time and treasure are required. We know human beings can survive many things. Otherwise we wouldn't be here. It's a lesson that is repeated in every generation. The ones who learn it best help one another muddle through. --Reported by Sarah Sturmon Dale/ Minneapolis, Wendy Grossman/ Houston, Kathie Klarreich/ Miami, Jeanne McDowell/ Los Angeles and Leslie Whitaker/ Chicago

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