

Resilience: More Than Bouncing Back

Joan Almon

When I imagine resilience in its simplest form, it looks like the pop-up doll I had as a child. It was egg-shaped, full of air, and had a round bottom that was weighted. It was as large as I was. I could push it over and it would always pop back up again. I loved that doll and the picture of resilience it communicated.

But resilience is more complex than simply popping up again, although that is one aspect of it. Reflecting on why we fall so that we can understand the experience is another. And using the experience of the fall—or the failure—for growth and transformations is yet another. Resilience in its fullest meaning embraces all of these. This multi-dimensional resilience allows us to face life's obstacles and transform them into stepping stones.

Our biographies often reveal difficult experiences that became the impetus for intense change. We may not see that possibility at first. It takes time and hard work to experience it. Then the picture of the pop-up doll is replaced by the image of the phoenix rising from its own ashes.

The capacity for being resilient seems to abide in all of us, but whether it comes to the fore or not depends on a child's own nature, upbringing, and education. In the U.S. there is growing concern that today's children are growing up without enough resilience to meet the demands that will face them when they are adults. In many cases they have been cosseted and over-protected by their helicopter parents. They have been praised and rewarded for the most common accomplishments, and they've been protected from risk and failure. Will they have the grit and determination to survive life's challenges, and will they have the inner strength to transform life's challenges into opportunities for transformation?

What research tells us about resilience

A central question in the study of resilience is why some children manage to succeed in life, even against great odds, while others do not. An important study of resilience took place on the island of Kauai in Hawaii. Researcher Emmy Werner and Ruth Smith followed a cohort of nearly 700 children from the time they were born in 1955 until they turned 40.

About a third of the children were from difficult backgrounds with one or more risk factors in place. About a third of these at-risk children showed signs of having matured into caring, competent, and confident adults. How did they do it? The researchers identified three clusters of "protective factors" that helped the individuals overcome their difficult beginnings. These same factors are important for all children, not only those with known risk factors. The following descriptions, including quotes, are from a paper about this study.¹

1. Protective factors within the individual

The children in the study who were later very resilient seemed blessed with many fine qualities even as infants and toddlers. They were sociable and elicited positive responses from others. Also, their language and motor development tended to be well developed. By age 10, they were able to read better than those who developed behavior or learning problems. They also had special talents that helped them become self-confident.

They willingly assisted others who needed help. By late adolescence, they "had developed a belief in



their own effectiveness and a conviction that the problems they confronted could be overcome by their own actions. They had more realistic education and vocational plans, and higher expectations for their future than did their peers with coping problems.”

2. Protective factors in the family

What was especially important for the children who succeeded against the odds was their developing a close bond “with at least one competent, emotionally stable person who was sensitive to their needs.” The person might be a parent, grandparent, older sibling, aunt, or uncle. The resilient children seemed to be especially capable of “recruiting” alternative parent-figures when their own parents could not play this vital role. Also, their families tended to hold religious belief that provided some stability and meaning for the children.

There were some differences by gender, with boys needing more rules and structures than girls and also needing a male role model. But they also were encouraged to engage in emotional expressiveness. Resilient girls were raised to combine independence with reliable support from a female caregiver.

3. Protective factors in the community

“Resilient youngsters tended to rely on elders and peers in their community for emotional support and sought them out for counsel in times of crisis. A favorite teacher was often a positive role model; so were caring neighbors, elder mentors, parents of boy- or girlfriends, youth leaders, ministers, and members of church groups.”

The role of the Waldorf early childhood educator in building resilience

The Hawaii study identified many factors that were important to children who developed resilience. Among them was a relationship with a caring teacher. In our work as Waldorf educators, we have a chance to help children develop a high degree of resilience. While many of our children may come from strong homes and are not burdened by the multiple risk-factors facing the children in the Hawaii study, modern life itself can be hard on children, with its emphasis on a hurried lifestyle, too many structured activities, a large amount of screen time, and only small amounts of time spent in nature or engaged in creative play.

In addition, the world is rapidly changing and the problems associated with climate change, poverty, and terrorism, to name a few, are growing greater. We can only guess what challenges today’s children will meet as they grow up. We want them to be survivors, but even more we want them to thrive so that they can meet life’s difficulties with courage and hope. We hope they will want to be of service to others and to the world at large. How can we, as teachers, help them grow up to be highly resilient



people who meet life with confidence and who turn obstacles into opportunities?

Build relationships with the children. First and foremost teachers can cultivate warm, supportive relationships with the children. Such loving care becomes an extra sheath for the child, and it protects and nourishes at the same time.

The research described above found that the children who showed the greatest degree of resilience later in life had qualities when they were very young that endeared them to people. We've all known babies and children who simply enchant us and draw us into their sphere. But there are also children who are not so endearing, who approach the world with prickles or other forms of unhappiness. It is more difficult to come near such children, and as a teacher I found I had to work especially hard to reach such children and help them become more confident with the world.

I recall one five-year-old boy whose general attitude toward life was colored by antipathy. I worked hard to appreciate him and we made progress together. At the end of the year he gave me a drawing I still cherish. It had a child with a very smiley face but down the side he wrote "no, no, no" four or five times. His tendency toward antipathy was not yet overcome, but at least he was balancing it with some of the joy of life.

On another occasion I worked with a four-year-old girl who was very formal and stiff in the group. She expressed a lot of fear of the other children, especially the "big boys." She spoke in a very high-pitched voice that, I'm sorry to say, grated on my nerves. I did all I could to be relaxed and receptive to her, but it was a constant effort. Then one day she brought me a knot doll and a cheese cloth about ten feet long for wrapping it in. I was about to send her back for a smaller cloth, when I hesitated and instead began swaddling the baby. Slowly, slowly I wrapped the baby, thinking I would speed up if she grew impatient. She did not, but waited to receive her baby with deep satisfaction. After that, she relaxed considerably, stopped being fearful of the other children, and spoke in a normal tone. It was as if she had needed swaddling and was able to grow a protective skin when her doll was wrapped. She became a full participant in the classroom and never seemed thrown by any of the ups and downs of classroom life.

Attuned to the natural world. The Hawaii study did not comment on children's attunement to nature as a factor in their resilience, but I've generally found that when children are at home in nature, they are also at home in the world, in, they are also at home in the world, in general. I recall one three-year-old who was afraid of school, of the other children, and of the worms and other creatures on our playground. Through stories and tender ministrations to the worms, I helped her overcome her fear of them, although I then had the problem of convincing her to leave them on the playground and not bring them in the classroom as pets. As she became more comfortable with nature, including the mud



puddles in our yard, she also stopped being fearful of the other children and became an active participant in preschool life.

The seasonal cycle. Working with the seasons brings us through the birth of spring, the expansiveness of summer, the contraction of all, and death in winter. Then the cycle begins again. Year after year children sing songs, hear stories, eat seasonal foods, do seasonal work, and celebrate festivals. They expand and contract with the seasons and display a growing confidence in meeting all the seasons' diverse moods, including a winter-like experience of death.

One day in my classroom one of my kindergarten children said to her friends, "Let's pretend I'm dead and you've come to help me." (That morning her mother had taken me aside to say that a family friend had died suddenly and the child and the parents were quite upset about it.) The child's friends did not find this a morbid request. Rather, they lit up as if they were thinking, "Wow, we never played that before." They brought out a wide plank and the child lay down on it. The children carried her around in stately procession and then gently set her down. They built up a beautiful scene around her with flowers and candles, crystals and shells. Periodically they would carry her around again. On the third day of playing out this ritual, they invited me to join in. I approached with a basket of Easter eggs in my hand. As I knelt beside her she sat up with her arms in the air and announced, "I'm alive again, I'm alive again." Her play of death was now complete.

A few years ago I attended her mother's funeral. The child had become a lovely woman in her 30s with a husband and a beautiful child of her own. We spoke warmly with each other and I described this play scenario, which she did not recall. She listened intently and at the end said, "I worked it through." "Yes," I replied. What hung in the air between us were the words, "And now I'll work it through again." Meeting the death of a loved one with sorrow and courage is an act of resilience, perhaps one of the greatest of all.

There are other ways that children's resilience is supported in a Waldorf early childhood classroom. I think in particular of fairytales in which characters overcome difficulties and become transformed in the process. The golden girl in Mother Holle is a good example. Hansel and Gretel is another. In many fairy tales enchantments are broken through the intervention of someone else. That, too, is part of resilience. In the Hawaii study the resilient children sought out the help they needed from members of their family or community. Often we cannot overcome life's difficulties on our own, but need someone else to help us transform the situation. Knowing that and seeking help is also part of resilience.

Endnote

1 Werner, Emmy (2005). "Resilience and recovery: Findings from the Kauai longitudinal study," *Research, policy, and practice in children's mental health*, Summer, Vol. 19 No. 1, pp. 11–14. Available online at <http://www.pathwaysrtc.pdx.edu/pdf/fpS0504.pdf>.

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