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Fostering Resilience for Children in Appalachia

In this issue we focus on best practices for fostering resilience for children and families in Appalachia. The research article was written by Dr. Ann Masten, an internationally known expert on the topic, and Ms. Hopewell Hodges, a doctoral student in clinical psychology. The practitioner article was written by Ms. Becky Handa, who is a clinician who works with families in the Trimble area. Both articles are outstanding and make some very similar points based on their own experience and expertise on this topic.



Research Perspective

Ordinary Magic: Promoting Resilience in Children and Their Support Systems

Ann S. Masten, PhD, & Hopewell R. Hodges, MA

The development of many children growing up in Appalachia, as in many other regions of the United States, is threatened by high levels of cumulative risk and adversity. In this article, we describe lessons gleaned from research on resilience that offer clues to strategies for nurturing positive development in children growing up in hazardous conditions.

Major Takeaways from Half a Century of Research on Resilience in Children

Resilience science grew out of questions about how children overcome developmental risks and exposure to adverse childhood experiences, such as maltreatment, war, and natural disasters. The main goal of research on resilience in children is to inform practices and policies to foster healthy development and well-being, particularly among those whose lives are threatened by adversity and disadvantages (Masten, 2025; Ungar & Theron, 2020).

Definitions of resilience in child psychology have evolved and changed over time as research has progressed. Early definitions referred simply to doing well (or better than expected) despite exposure to known risks or adversities. Initial research aimed to identify who did well and how, with the goal of informing interventions. It soon became apparent that the capacity of children to adapt to challenges depends on many systems that extend beyond the individual. Moreover, multisystem challenges—such as natural disasters, the COVID-19 pandemic, intergenerational poverty, and armed conflict—clearly affect children through disruptions to multiple systems, requiring multisystem responses. A consensus emerged in support of defining resilience in a way that is scalable across system levels and portable across disciplines, to support integrated knowledge and interventions (Masten et al., 2021).

Resilience can be defined as the capacity of a system (a child, a family, a community, or other complex adaptive systems) to adapt successfully to challenges or adversities that threaten its survival, functioning, or development (see Masten, 2025). A child’s capacity to adapt depends on the operation of multiple systems inside the individual (e.g., a well-functioning immune system and central nervous system) and around the child (e.g., family, school, healthcare, public safety, and other community systems). Close and supportive relationships play a key role in human adaptation to adversity, beginning in infancy and continuing across the lifespan.

Promotive and Protective Factors, Processes, and What They Mean

Research on children exposed to adverse experiences consistently points to a set of familiar factors associated with better outcomes. The first author of this article has described the most salient psychological and social resilience factors observed in the literature as the *short list* (see Table 1; Masten, 2001, 2025). She argues that these indicators of resilience reflect fundamental—though ordinary—adaptive systems that generally promote healthy development under most circumstances, but also protect children faced with adversity. As the short list makes clear, capacity for resilience does not depend on rare qualities or processes, but rather on basic and common capabilities and protective systems (biological, psychological, social, and cultural) that evolved over generations to promote the survival of individuals and their communities. Collectively, these systems yield what Masten describes as the “ordinary magic” of resilience (Masten, 2001, 2025).

Table 1. Ordinary and Powerful: A Short List of Psychological and Social Resilience Factors for Children

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Close relationships, caregiving, and social support• Belonging and engagement with family, school, community, and/or culture• Problem-solving skills• Self-control of emotions and actions• Faith, hope, and optimism• Sense of purpose and belief that life has meaning• Motivation to adapt or succeed• Positive views of self and one’s capabilities• Positive routines, rituals, and cultural traditions• Effective education, healthcare, and public safety systems

- Supporting caregivers during crises
 - Programs to increase school attendance and engagement
 - Community celebrations to build pride and cohesion
 - Opportunities for children to develop talents and skills
 - Developmentally appropriate opportunities for children to help others
 - Coordinating investments and policies for child health, education, and services
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The resilience literature also makes a strong case for consideration of developmental and historical timing and cultural sensitivity in the design and implementation of practices and policies (Masten, 2025; Goldstein & Brooks, 2023). Conditions continually change, and so do children. The needs of children at a given time will vary, depending on their history and culture as well as the capacity for resilience available to them through connections to surrounding systems.

Putting it All Together: Resilience-Informed Intervention and Investment

There is a growing movement to build human as well as planetary resilience at multiple levels, likely motivated by the global challenges of our times, marked by a pandemic, large-scale armed conflict and forced displacement, the rising severity of natural disasters, and concerns about biodiversity collapse. There are increasing efforts to nurture the resilience of entire regions through coordinated efforts like the Appalachian Children's Coalition (appchildren.org) and the Resilient Cities Network (resilientcitiesnetwork.org). The literature on resilience in human development suggests that investing in the resilience of children, including the systems that support child development (e.g., families, schools, and communities), not only protects children in the present but also builds the future resilience of their societies. Research on resilience continues and our knowledge will undoubtedly grow, but in the meantime, there is informative evidence to guide practice and policy for today's children.

About the Authors

Ann Masten, Ph.D., LP, Regents Professor Emerita at the University of Minnesota, has studied resilience in human development for decades. She has published more than 300 scholarly works, including the book, *Ordinary Magic: Resilience in Development* (2nd edition 2025) and offers a free online course on resilience through Coursera.

Hopewell Hodges has master's degrees from both Yale University and the

University of Minnesota, where she is currently completing her PhD in clinical child psychology. She studies risk and resilience in trauma-affected children and families and school-based interventions for immigrant and refugee children.



Practice Perspective

Fostering Resilience Through A Trauma Informed Lens

Becky Handa, B.S.

Resiliency can be defined in many ways, but definitions often include the ability to withstand or recover quickly from difficult conditions, crises, stress or hardships. Resilience is bouncing back, adapting and thriving after experiencing adversity while maintaining well-being despite facing challenges. Resiliency isn't something we are born with, instead it is a set of skills that develop over time based on individual experiences, awareness, problem solving and practice.

In addition to the abilities of the individual, resilience can be facilitated by factors in the environment. Adults can help shape the environment to support resilience. Being trauma informed can help adults recognize children and families who need this support and help them understand the type of support that can be beneficial. What does it mean to be trauma informed? Most simply it means to be sensitive to the impacts of trauma on an individual or group of people. When recognizing and understanding the impacts of trauma, safe and supportive environments can be created. When safe environments are created, we start building trust, empowerment and ultimately resilience.

Fostering resilience in families and children using a trauma informed lens requires many key factors that should always be considered. Arguably the first and most important key factor is creating a safe environment. Meaningful connections between people cannot form if a person does not feel safe. They must feel physically, emotionally and psychologically safe to confide in you. To help a person feel safe you must set boundaries, give respect, build trust and be honest. Second, it is important to relinquish the notion that your experiences

and education make you the expert and it is your job to tell the person what they need to do. Give credit where credit is due. Individuals are their own experts of their life experiences, emotions, and capabilities. When working with families and children, adults can be most effective at facilitating resilience when they work to establish a mutual and collaborative partnership. Third, be present in the moment and actively listen. It should be an honor to be considered a safe person in someone's life. When a person is entrusting you to listen, guide and support them through a process as they can feel vulnerable and scared. This trust conveys a responsibility that should be embraced with tremendous care. Effective communication requires eye contact, feedback of understanding, follow up questions, respect and empathy without judgement, or bias. When communication is strong and the person is well informed it reduces uncertainty, fear and anxiety. Four, be reliable. Reliability builds trust that ensures your connection with a person stays strong. It is extremely important to follow through on what you say you're going to do. Helpful adults keep track of their commitments to the child and family and maintain priority for the recommendations and next steps. Knowing who is responsible for each task and what support systems are in place is crucially important for maintaining trust. Facilitating resilience often involves helping a family identify a safety net and support community. A strong support system is crucial to promote resilience. Having a network of support makes embracing change easier, supports the development of healthy coping skills, reduces stress and promotes emotional wellbeing. Finally, with many families resilience can best be supported by using a strength-based approach. This method emphasizes the person's capacities, abilities, resources and what they can do rather than what they lack. (<https://www.ebsco.com>). Focusing on a person's strengths can help them overcome challenges which help them feel successful and increase their self-confidence. Empowering families to build upon what they can do well will help them to complete tasks and achieve goals. A strength-based approach is a family-led/child-led process that helps them develop a sense of self and confidence (i.e., resilience)! When you meet a person where they are you show respect for their situation, this can encourage them to make choices and set their own goals. This can help families get unstuck and move past feeling stagnated and overwhelmed. When you practice with a strength-based approach your work is solution focused and helps the parents and children successfully address their own challenges by fostering resilience and confidence.

In conclusion, I encourage you to practice the three C's of resilience developed by the psychologist Suzanne C. Kobasa (<http://leapjourney.org>). I use these to

guide my work as they shape my goals for working with children and families. I check my plans and conceptualization of children and families against these three standards to make sure I am appropriately focused on enhancing resilience.

Challenge: Resilient people see challenges as an opportunity for growth, rather than threats. They are more likely to embrace change and new experiences.

Control: Resilient individuals believe they have some influence over their own lives and outcomes. They focus on what they can control and avoid dwelling on things they cannot.

Commitment: Resilient people stay committed to their goals and values, even when facing adversity. They are persistent and believe that their efforts are meaningful.

About the Author

Becky Handa, B.S. works at the Athens County Children Services as a School Outreach worker in Trimble. Becky grew up in Appalachia and brings passion to her work providing social-emotional services and resources to the children and families attending Trimble Local Schools. Becky is highly regarded by her peers and excels at developing trust with families and establishing supportive relationships that facilitate resilience.

ACC Data Dashboard

As part of our commitment to providing access to the best health and well-being information related to Appalachian Ohio children, the Appalachian Children Coalition developed the Ohio Child & Family Health Data Dashboard. The dashboard, developed with funding from the Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services and in partnership with the Ohio University Voinovich School of Leadership and Public Service, is a one-stop source of Appalachian Ohio community health and wellbeing data. It includes over 200 child and adult health indicators. The tools and data on this site are available to assist healthcare practitioners, health departments, ADAMH boards, school districts, social service agencies, policymakers, local leaders, researchers, and community members better understand and address root causes of inequities across Appalachian Ohio and improve the health and well-being of our region's children and families. The Dashboard can be accessed at [this link](#).

The Dashboard includes data for the entire 32-county Appalachian Ohio region as well as separate data summaries for each of those 32 counties. We update the dashboard regularly so you will know you are accessing the most current data available.

Upcoming Professional Development

Check out these upcoming professional development opportunities

- **Mid-Ohio Psychological Services Public Trainings** ([MOPS](#))
 - All trainings are virtual and open to the public with CE credits available
 - **Working with Disruptive, Impulse-Control, and Conduct Disorders** (6/30/25 from 8:45am-4pm)
- **Cultivating Resilience Summit**
 - The Cultivating Resilience Summit is a vital gathering, hosted by MCADAMHS and the PROTECT Advisory Council, dedicated to transforming Montgomery County into a healing-centered, trauma-responsive community. This event unites professionals and community members to learn about mental well-being, evidence-based prevention strategies, and how to become leaders in education and advocacy. Attendees engage in discussions and workshops covering critical topics like childhood trauma, suicide prevention, and health equity, fostering collaboration and empowering collective action to build a stronger, more resilient community.
 - June 25th and 26th at the Sinclair Conference Center in Dayton, Ohio
 - [Click here to learn more](#)
- **Montgomery County ADAMHS Board Trainings**
 - **Navigating New Laws: Gender Affirming Care and HB 68** (6/6/25 from 9am-5pm)
 - In-person at 409 E Monument Ave St 102, Dayton, OH 45402
 - **Trauma 101: Create a Shift in Thinking** (6/27/25 from 1:00-4:15pm)

- Virtual
 - CEU credits available for all events
 - [Click here to learn more](#)
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About the Editors

The editor of this newsletter is Dr. Steven Evans who is a Distinguished Professor of Psychology at Ohio University (SACeditor@appchildren.org). The assistant editor is Ms. Carolyn Campbell (SACnews@appchildren.org) who is a doctoral student in clinical psychology working with Dr. Evans.

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