A Strength-Based Model of Assessment and Evaluation

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Introduction

The traditional idea of targeting risk reduction by focusing on the development of effective coping strategies and educational programs has strong merit in light of the research clearly reporting that multiple forms of problem behaviour consistently appear to be predicted by increasing exposure to identifiable risk factors (Jessor, 1993; Osgood, Jonhston, O’Malley, & Bachman, 1989). As a result, many of the community-based studies have focused on trying to better understand the biological/psychological or environmental risk factors that increase the likelihood of the development or maintenance of at risk behaviour in children/youth and the potential implications for prevention. This in turn has led to the conclusion that community and health programs need to focus on risk reduction by helping individuals develop more effective coping strategies and a better understanding of the limitations of certain pathologies, problematic coping behaviours and risk factors potentially inherent in high needs communities. However, policies and programs for youth that focus solely on preventing specific high risk behaviour have showed little appreciable success (Benson, et. al., 1998; Brown & Horowitz, 1993; Herman-Stahl & Petersen, 1996). They have remained focused on the negative behaviours of children and youth in high needs communities rather than on the potential resiliency and protective factors research clearly identifies as essential for navigating successfully the critical developmental challenges and milestones towards becoming healthy adults (Alvord and Grados, 2005).

Another area of research has proposed that preventative interventions should consider protective factors along with reducing risk factors (O’Leary, 1998; Resnick, 2000). Although not new, the concept of resiliency is generally defined as the capability of individuals and systems (youth, families, groups, and communities) to cope with significant adversity or stress in ways that are not only effective, but tend to result in
increased ability to constructively respond to future adversity (Lifton, 1993). As a result, the resiliency paradigm seeks to identify protective factors or developmental strengths in the lives of those who would otherwise be expected to be at risk for a variety of adverse outcomes (Coie, Watt, West, Hawkins, Asarnow, Ramey, et al., 1993; Masten, A. S., & Coatsworth, J. D. (1998); Rutter, 1987). By focusing on competence and wellness, rather than maladjustment, resiliency investigators have clearly indicated the need to identify and evaluate the protective factors in resilient children that buffer risk factors, decrease the likelihood of engaging in problem behaviors, and often promote successful transition through the developmental milestones towards adulthood (Ungar, 2003; Resnick, 2000).

A Resiliency Framework For Evaluation

Resiliency Canada presents the developmental strengths frameworks as a viable model to understanding the key components that contribute to the resiliency development and well-being of children, youth and adults in our communities. The resiliency factors/developmental strengths represent fundamental elements found to be essential for all children/youth to cope effectively with life’s challenges and to become productive, responsible adults in society. Based on this research, and the literature on resiliency and youth development, the 31 Developmental Strengths Framework, identifies the protective factors that encourage and enhance the well-being and development of all youth in our communities.

The child/youth resiliency framework developed by Resiliency Canada (Donnon & Hammond, 2007) is grounded in research on child and adolescent development in resiliency, risk prevention, and protective factors (e.g. parental support, parental experiences, peer relationships, community cohesiveness, commitment to learning at school, school culture, cultural sensitivity, self-control, empowerment, self-concept, social sensitivity and empathy). Surveys of more than 65,000 grades 3 to 12 youth in communities across the cities of Canada consistently show the importance of resiliency to refrain from risk and promote positive behaviours. The more resiliency factors or developmental strengths young people have, the more likely they are to make healthier choices and avoid risk-taking behaviours.

Understanding Youth Resiliency

Youth resiliency can be defined as the capability of children and adolescents to cope successfully in the face of stress-related, at-risk or adversarial situations. Resiliency Canada’s primary goal is to provide an understanding through applied and scientific research of why some child and youth are more resilient than others in the face of adversity. Based on this research, and the literature on resiliency and youth development, the 31 developmental strengths framework identifies the protective factors that encourage and enhance the well-being and development of all youth in our communities.
Role of Resiliency Factors in Youth Development

From time to time, most children and youth experience considerable stress, hardship and misfortune as a result of various personal and/or situational experiences. While some of these children or youth may develop serious and long-term educational, psychological and social problems, a greater number grow up to lead healthy and productive lives in adulthood. In a review of the literature and research on the development of resiliency, stress-resistant or “invulnerable” child and youth have common resiliency factors operating as two broad sets of developmental strengths which encourage and support the coping skills of children and adolescents:

- **extrinsic factors** such as family, peers, school and community, and
- **intrinsic factors** or personality characteristics such as empowerment, self-control, cultural sensitivity, self-concept and social sensitivity.

As such, the developmental strengths that contribute to resiliency exist within the individual and through the situational and relational experiences related to family, peers, school and community. In particular, the additive effects of both intrinsic and extrinsic strengths have shown that youth are able to cope with adversity more effectively than those that experience few of the developmental strengths.

Intended to be comprehensive in nature, the developmental strengths framework shown below illustrates the youth resiliency framework from results are formulated and reported into a Youth Resiliency Profile summary. Utilizing a holistic approach to understanding the resiliency factors that contribute to human development, the diagram depicts the extrinsic (outer ring) and intrinsic (inner pie) strengths related to youth resiliency.
Importance of Resiliency and At-Risk Behaviours

The chart below shows how important resiliency factors/strengths are to youth (N=6,000) in helping them to restraint from risk-taking behaviours. Resiliency Canada’s research consistently demonstrates that youth with higher resiliency factors and developmental strengths are less likely to be involved with a number of risk-taking activities. The average number of 14 risk-taking behaviours from all youth surveyed are grouped by six strength categories (0 – 5, 6 – 10, 11 – 15, 16 – 20, 21 – 25, and 26 – 30). There are 18 general questions used that measure risk-taking behaviours such as substance abuse (alcohol, tobacco, and illegal drugs), antisocial behaviour, violence, school problems and gambling.
Importance of Resiliency and Constructive Behaviours

The diagram below shows how important resiliency factors/strengths are to youth (N=6,000) in helping them to engage in positive and constructive behaviours. Resiliency Canada’s research consistently demonstrates that youth with higher resiliency factors and developmental strengths are more likely to be involved with a number of positive and constructive activities. The average number of 14 positive behaviours from all youth surveyed are grouped by six strength categories (0 – 5, 6 – 10, 11 – 15, 16 – 20, 21 – 25, and 26 – 30). There are 14 general questions used that measure the constructive indicators (success in school, values diversity, helps others, maintains good health, volunteerism, exhibits leadership, resists danger, delays gratification, and overcomes adversity).

Conclusion

Those who embrace a strength-based perspective hold the belief that children, youth, and their families have strengths, resources and the ability to recover from adversity (as opposed to emphasizing problems, vulnerabilities, and deficits). A strength-based paradigm for evaluation offers a different language to describe children’s and families’ difficulties and struggles. It allows one to see opportunities, hope and solutions rather than just problems and hopelessness. The new paradigm avoids labeling and assumes power in children and families to help themselves as well as casting service providers as partners rather than as experts, authorities, initiators and directors of the change process.
References


