

Nurturing Resilience to help Children flourish in the Early Years

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Abstract

Resilience can be broadly defined as the ability to recover from setbacks, having protective qualities that lead to successful adaptation to life events (McGrath and Noble 2011). A review of the literature indicates there are a growing number of programmes available internationally that aim to support resilience in children. However, these tend to be exclusively targeted at school-aged children from age 5 years and up. There is an absence both nationally and internationally of such programmes which focus directly on the very early years, that is, 0-4 years. This article presents an educational evaluation on the extent to which resilience in this age cohort is supported in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) practice. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ECCE professionals to establish how they currently nurture resilience in their professional practice. Preliminary findings indicate that, while many of the components that enhance resilience are present in early years settings, they occur as an indirect consequence of other activities. We conclude that a greater focus on nurturing resilience in young children should be provided for ECCE professionals through CPD psychology programmes, and in developmental psychology modules for undergraduate students.

Keywords: developmental psychology; ECCE practice; learning; resilience

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Introduction

This article addresses the concepts of resilience and flourishing in the preschool years. A description of the developmental psychology currently taught on Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programmes is provided. This represents the typical psychology which ECCE students learn and it informs their professional practice working with young children. Relevant literature on resilience and flourishing in the early years will be presented followed by a description of how they are currently being addressed in selected ECCE settings in the North West of Ireland. Finally, implications for the future training of ECCE students and professionals in developing skills and competencies to nurture resilience and help children flourish, will be explored.

The authors of this article are developmental psychology lecturers who teach on a B.A. in Early Childhood Care and Education in the North West of Ireland. This programme provides students with a professional qualification which enables them to work in a variety of early years settings. Psychology is a core component of study on this course, as in all childcare programmes in Ireland.

Developmental Psychology on ECCE programmes

In Ireland, ECCE students study the psychological changes that take place throughout childhood, in order to acquire a deepened awareness and understanding of child development and to provide developmentally appropriate practice ([Kane and Walsh 2015](#)).

On undergraduate ECCE programmes, attention is given to attachment theory, which emphasizes the importance of early relationships in a child's life. The significance and function of attachment is studied in some depth, with emphasis placed on nurturing relationships contributing to the development of a secure attachment. Therefore, the importance of sensitive, responsive, consistent care (SRCC) to support children's emotional development is highlighted in most developmental psychology classes. While on practice placement, early childhood students are afforded the opportunity to work directly with infants, toddlers and young children, thereby linking attachment theory to practice.

In the past decade, however, with an increase of research into the concepts of resilience and flourishing, the authors of this article question whether a greater emphasis should be placed on the nurturing of resilience and flourishing in undergraduate developmental psychology modules and on CPD programmes for ECCE students and professionals.

Resilience and flourishing

Resilience can be broadly defined as the ability to recover from setbacks, having protective qualities that lead to successful adaptation to life events ([McGrath and Noble 2011](#)). It means having inner strength and being able to adapt well to changes and difficulties ([Hands on Scotland 2009](#)). For the majority of children, life setbacks tend to be minor and generally involve having to deal with everyday disappointments and frustrations ([Hooper 2012](#)). Ginsberg, an American Paediatrician, holds that while we cannot immunize children from stress, resilience can be nurtured in children – even in those as young as 2 years of age ([Ginsberg 2011](#)). Resilient children are able to regulate their emotions; they feel competent, have hope, trust and are empathetic ([Grotberg 1995](#)). When children are confident, happy, compassionate and are emotionally and socially intelligent, they flourish. The concept of flourishing is probably less clearly defined than resilience, but generally refers to having good emotional health where one is coping well.

Why focus on resilience and flourishing in the early years?

It is widely accepted, nationally and internationally, that child emotional and mental health problems are affecting the health and wellbeing of children and young people. Both anxiety and depression are increasing in children and adolescents ([Hooper 2012](#)). Up to 20% (1 in 5) of Irish children (0-18) have psychological problems according to the [Irish College of Psychiatrists \(2005\)](#). The Growing up in Ireland longitudinal study ([Williams et al. 2009](#)) says that Irish 9 year olds are doing well without any significant emotional or behavioural problem. However, 15%-20% are classified as displaying significant levels of difficulty; girls are more likely to have problems of an emotional nature, and boys of a behavioural nature.

Nevertheless, writers such as [Seligman et al. \(2007\)](#) and [Ginsburg \(2011\)](#), among others, tell us that children can be taught to develop positive coping skills that can help develop resilience and allow them to flourish. This has been achieved very successfully in several countries but with older children. Current resilience programmes seem to be designed to work with school-aged children, from 4/5 years and up, and this includes the Australian 'Bounce Back' ([McGrath and Noble 2011](#)), New Zealand 'Fun Friends' ([Barrett 2008](#)), and the American Penn Resilience programmes ([Positive Psychology Centre n.d.](#)). However, none focus on the preschool years.

Yet, the most phenomenal growth and development occur in the early years. Research in neuroscience tells us that, at birth, the human brain is 25% of its eventual adult weight, but by age two, it is 75 % of its adult weight. By age 4 it is 90% of its adult weight, indicating the rate of development in the first years of life ([Sinclair 2007](#)). While sensitive, responsive, consistent care during the early years is crucial for a young child's overall development; persistent, insensitive caregiving creates elevated cortisol levels in young brains. [Mathers et al. \(2014\)](#) point out that while neural pathways show greatest adaptability up until the teens, the early years are a particularly sensitive time for selecting and establishing patterns of neural networks. The degree to which a child can cope with stress literally shapes their brain and, therefore, the first three years set the foundation for coping skills that will affect children's capacity to learn, affect their behaviour, and affect their ability to regulate emotions throughout life ([Bowby 1969](#); [Hayes 2010](#); [Mathers et al. 2014](#)).

With evidence from neuroscience on early brain development, together with knowledge from traditional developmental psychology, the authors of this article are of the opinion that positive coping skills to prepare children for life's ups and downs can be nurtured from babyhood. While, preschool children are not metacognitive, that is, unable to think and talk about their own thinking, [Seligman et al. \(2007\)](#) says they are 'tuned in' to the explanatory style of others, thereby passively absorbing their caregivers' optimistic or pessimistic thinking styles ([Seligman et al. 2007](#)). He suggests the early years are crucially important for developing positive coping skills and realistic, optimistic, thinking which can be taught by caregivers. This is important as people who are fortunate to have developed optimistic thinking patterns are more likely to persist when faced with difficulties, are motivated, have positive moods, have a greater sense of control over their lives and have better health ([Hands on Scotland 2009](#)).

Similarly, [Hooper \(2012\)](#) claims that younger children with underdeveloped metacognitive skills can be supported to develop positive, optimistic thinking from their interactions with observant caregivers. She maintains that the quality of relationships is the key to nurturing resilience and psychological wellbeing. [Sinclair \(2007\)](#) also stresses that sensitive care and a secure attachment in the first three years of life help children develop confidence and resilience. In relation to childcare, [Mathers et al. \(2014: 13\)](#) promote the idea that 'high quality early years settings, with warm, stimulating and responsive interactions' can 'directly facilitate children's resilience'.

What children need to become resilient and to flourish

From a review of the literature on both resilience and flourishing, it seems that there are common key components which occur repeatedly in the work of different authors and in the different programmes identified earlier. We have amalgamated these components into four interrelated and connected elements which are outlined in Figure 1 below.



Figure 1: Resilience and Flourishing cycle in young children (Walsh and Kane 2014)

In this cycle, the first component refers to positive relationships. For the child, these are with family, friends, school and community which enhance their sense of security. Nurturing relationships support the child's social, emotional and cognitive development and encourage a positive but realistic outlook. Equally, it is important for the child to have the opportunity for participation and engagement in activities that are of interest to her/him and which allow full absorption or 'Flow'. Having some level of cognitive understanding or sense of meaning (age and stage appropriate) is the third component. The final component is where the child develops a sense of mastery or competence, and this is acquired through experience interacting with the environment.

Research design

The authors were interested in finding out the extent to which resilience and flourishing are being addressed in early years settings in their local region. The aim was to ascertain what is understood by the terms resilience and flourishing, and to examine what is currently happening in practice. The data obtained from the educational evaluation will inform future undergraduate developmental psychology modules as well as a CPD programme for ECCE professionals in the region.

In order to do this, semi structured interviews with a purposive sample of ECCE professionals were conducted. Participants were graduates of the BA in ECCE from the Institute of Technology, Sligo. They have extensive experience in the sector, being owner/managers of three early years settings in the region. In addition, they were selected as each adopts one of three different pedagogical approaches, either Montessori, HighScope or Freeplay. The Montessori approach emphasises the importance of sensory stimulation where the child works in a planned environment at her own pace. In the HighScope method, the child plans, carries out and reviews their activities. In the Freeplay model, greater emphasis is placed on child-selected and directed activities ([Hayes 2010](#)). While three participants might be considered a small sample population, it should be noted that they employ and supervise fifty staff between them. The participants in this study all provide supervised practice placements for undergraduate ECCE students.

As undergraduates, the participants in this research did not study the concepts of resilience and flourishing in their developmental psychology modules. Nor is there a CPD programme available in their local region on these topics.

Participants were asked what they understood by the terms 'resilience and flourishing' and how these are nurtured in their practice with young children. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, and a thematic analysis was conducted. The key findings are presented under themes identified by the authors which emerged from an analysis of the data, and are examined in relation to the literature reviewed and the Resilience and Flourishing cycle in Figure 1.

Ethical considerations

Currently, a system for the independent review of ECCE research projects does not exist in Ireland. Therefore, this work was carried out adhering to the research ethics protocol of the authors' higher educational institution. Permission was sought and received from the Head of the Department of Social Sciences to conduct this research.

As members of the Psychological Society of Ireland (PSI), the authors' are bound by a code of professional ethics which addresses issues such as informed consent, confidentiality, and the prevention of harm to research participants. Guiding ethical principals were applied to the research, following PSI recommendations.

Participants were provided with a detailed account of why and how the research was being conducted, and confidentiality was guaranteed. They were informed that findings may be used in the future to enhance curricula and improve the training of ECCE students and professionals. Verbal consent was obtained from the participants, who were all over the age of 18.

Findings and discussion of findings

Participants were asked about the concepts of resilience and flourishing in their practice with young children. They defined resilience, but they did not address the concept of flourishing. Participants described resilience as being the ability to bounce back from setbacks.

The HighScope professional said it was: *'bouncability in a child'*, it is a *'strength of character... knowing that when they have a knock they will recover.'* The Montessori professional claimed, *'it's about bouncing back, it's about coping'*. These descriptions are consistent with definitions of resilience in the literature reviewed ([Ginsburg 2011](#), [Grotberg 1995](#), [McGrath and Noble 2011](#)).

All participants linked resilience to attachment. This is interesting, but not surprising considering they all studied attachment theory in their undergraduate psychology modules. As students, they learned that nurturing relationships facilitate a secure attachment which enhances confidence and self esteem for the child ([Bowlby 1969](#), [Erikson 1997](#), [Hayes 2010](#), [Klein 1957](#)). The participants associated resilience with a secure attachment in which children trust their caregivers, have empathy and are competent at regulating their emotions. The Freeplay professional claimed that *'everything boils down to social and emotional development...if a child feels supported and loved it will thrive'*.

The ECCE professionals believe that they continue the attachment relationship, expanding the child's attachment networks. They do this through their settling-in policies and the key worker system in their settings. The Freeplay professional pointed out that, for a child, *'feeling attached, feeling secure is so important...there is always a transition in life'*. In relation to a baby's transition from home to the service, she claimed *'we take over the role of supporting them and making them feel secure and loved'*. The significance of the key worker system was highlighted in the attachment network by the Montessori professional when she said *'children need just one person to give them positivity, TLC'*.

In addition, they believe that resilience can be nurtured. The HighScope professional told us that she has seen *'some children come in with no resilience and have left with resilience'*. This supports the opinion of [Ginsburg \(2011\)](#), [Hooper \(2012\)](#) and [Seligman et al. \(2007\)](#) that positive coping skills can be taught by caring adults to help children manage life's challenges and uncertainties.

Early years professionals use the medium of play to communicate and scaffold children's learning and development and it is through play-based activities they believe that resilience is facilitated in their settings. The importance of allowing the child to experience *'repetition'* in activities, and *'select what they want to do'* was expressed by the Montessori professional which, she says, is central to the ethos of their pedagogical approach. She went on to say that Montessori focuses on *'what the child can do and is ready for'*. This allows the child to develop a sense of mastery and competency.

Active engagement in play-based activities allows the child develop a sense of purpose and meaning in their play. The HighScope professional added that it should be acceptable to *'make mistakes and fail'* and highlighted that enough time is not spent *'revisiting things if they don't work out'*. Allowing the child this opportunity to revisit can also assist in the development of mastery.

In addition, the Freeplay professional stated that when working with children, it is important to *'find something about each child that they like, and tell them that they are great at it'*. This corresponds with the four components of resilience outlined above in Figure 1. Positive relationships encourage participation and engagement, and facilitate understanding which, in turn, results in competence and mastery for the child.

It seems that participation, engagement, competence, mastery and meaning are happening in early years settings, but as a consequence of play-based activities. These are the components mentioned previously in the resilience and flourishing cycle.

The ECCE professionals interviewed held that staff can be trained to support the development of resilience in children. Both HighScope and Freeplay professionals place new staff members to work alongside more knowledgeable staff, thereby modelling good practice.

Conclusions and recommendations

Currently, no explicit resilience/flourishing programme is being followed by the ECCE professionals interviewed. While many of the components that enhance resilience and flourishing seem to be happening in practice, they are not happening deliberately, explicitly or overtly, with little emphasis placed on the development of a realistic positive outlook in children.

Internationally, programmes such as Bounce Back, Fun Friends and the Penn Resilience programmes are available to support the development of resilience and flourishing in school-aged children. Currently, there seems to be little available nationally/ internationally for preschool children.

The authors of this article hold the view that, with appropriate training, ECCE professionals are in an ideal position to nurture life skills that enhance in young children, well-being and resilience. Professionals with a BA in ECCE already have a comprehensive knowledge and understanding of children's development and learning. Introducing the concepts of resilience and flourishing into a CPD programme of study with emphasis on nurturing a positive and realistic thinking-pattern in preschool children, could equip ECCE professionals with skills to prepare children with strategies to better cope with life's challenges. ECCE professionals would then have the additional competencies to promote in young children, essential social and emotional skills. In addition, placing greater emphasis in undergraduate developmental psychology modules on protective factors and the promotion of positive coping skills in young children, is worth considering.

The *Model Framework for Education Training and Professional Development in the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector* ([Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform 2002](#)) highlights the fact that high quality education leads to lasting cognitive and social benefits for children. The ECCE sector is a rapidly evolving profession in Ireland and significant advances have occurred in the last decade. However, we would like to promote the idea that a more explicitly focused teaching of resilience and flourishing through CPD and undergraduate ECCE programmes, will result in healthier *emotional* development thereby promoting greater positive mental health for young children. This will lay the foundation for psychological wellbeing throughout their lives.

Every child in Ireland is entitled to one year of free preschool education. By providing positive daycare environments with highly qualified competent staff, we can in turn directly facilitate the nurturing of children's resilience and help them flourish. We believe it is important to review educational practices in the training of ECCE professionals regularly, and keep up-to-date with developments in psychology to ensure students are provided with the best training possible. Current ECCE students are future early years professionals who can be trained to provide enriched childcare and the highest standards of pedagogical practices. We also believe that the provision of a CPD programme on resilience and flourishing for professionals working in the sector would ensure a more contemporary praxis.

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