

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Purpose

The Resilience Project is a recent Family and Children's Services collaborative project that aims to provide realistic and effective opportunities to children and youth, to help them develop essential protective factors important to enhance their life skills, reduce challenging behaviours, improve relationships with family members, and play a productive role within the community. Children who have participated in the Resilience Programs have either received services from Family and Children's Services or one of our partners also servicing at risk children, most of them have experienced difficult risk factors such as family separation, negligence, or maltreatment, that have resulted in trauma, and emotional-behavioural problems. In neuroscientific terms, when a child's brain faces danger a chemical cascade is initiated that allow the child to run away from risks. Thus, children's brains naturally produce resilience to stress (Stix, 2011). For Bonanno (2004), coping and recovery is not enough to attain an optimal functioning. The author states that resilience programs can help people to increase the innate ability for resiliency. Thus, it is fundamental that the Resilience Project through its programs effectively provides evidence-based protective factors to children and caregivers that contribute to restore their abilities to cope and function in their lives.

Hypotheses

- Hypothesis 1 • Programs will increase children's sense of security.
- Hypothesis 2 • Programs will boosts a sense of belonging.
- Hypothesis 3 • Programs will encourage the use of strengths to face adversity.
- Hypothesis 4 • Parental programs will enhance parental resilience

Methodology

Sample

- A mixed method approach was taken for the evaluation. For the quantitative evaluation, there were 104 children ages 6-12 who completed the pre- and post-test questionnaires. Fifty-one percent of children were females and 49% were males. Fifty-four caregivers took part in the pre- and post-test questionnaires for the parenting programs. Finally, 46 individuals (16 group facilitators; 19 caregivers; 10 children) took part in the qualitative interviews.

Procedure

- Recruitment to the programs could be facilitated through referrals from child protection workers (for children who are involved in Family and Children's Services), or through the programs being open to the public for referral. Formal programs are those 10 weeks or more in length (*The Creative Space, Players Theater, Mindful Kids, Mountain Bike Madness, Family Centre Players and SMILES*). For caregivers, formal programs are Mindful Caregivers, and Trusting Loving Connections, while informal programs are drop-in programs, or Family Fun Activity days.

Measures

- To assess children and youth's resilience, participants were presented with 40 items measuring their developmental assets (Search Institute, 2011). Developmental assets are related to resilient factors: when youth score highly in developmental assets, they are less likely to participate in risky behavior (Search Institute, 2011). The scale is composed of eight subscales: four, which are internal assets (exist within the person) including Positive Values, Commitment to Learning, Social Competencies, and Positive Identity; four, which are external assets (exist outside the person) including Use of Time, Empowerment, Boundaries and Expectations, Support.

Overview of Results

Sense of Security

- *Attachment with dependable adults* – children were able to make stronger connections with family members (Strengthening Families), and had constant exposure to supportive adults (Trauma informed facilitators across various programs).
- *Self Esteem* – children's view of themselves increased across the multiple programs, with statistically significant increases experienced in children who were part of Creative Space, Mini Me-to-We, Music Academy, and SMILES.
- *Social Competence* – increases in children's social skills were found across the various programs, with significant increases seen in children who were part of Creative Space, Mini Me-to-We, Music Academy, SMILES, and Strengthening Families.

Sense of Belonging

- *Belonging with Peers* – Parents reported that the Family Centre was a safe place for their children to participate in programs, they thought other children with similar experiences would make their children feel more connected to their peers (Qualitative Analysis)
- *Belonging with Adults* – Children felt they were able to significantly open up to adults as a result of their participation in Strengthening Families and SMILES; however, increases in feeling supported by adults was seen across all programs.
- *Belonging with Community* – using Boundaries and Expectations as a proxy for belonging in the community, children reported increases across all programs, albeit none was statistically significant.

Use of Strengths to Face Adversities

- *Personal Power* – although children felt more empowered by sharing their skills with others in the programs, no statistically significant changes were seen across programs.
- *Self-Efficacy/Positive Values* – Most programs seen a statistically non-significant increase in Positive Values, while SMILES and Strengthening Families saw statistically significant increases in ability to have fun and enjoy time with family.
- *Constructive Use of Time* – children reported statistically significant increases in their use of time in constructive activities for children who participated in Creative Space, Music Academy, SMILES and Strengthening Families.
- *Commitment to Learning* – across the various programs, parents reported seeing children commit to the activities they were learning, even when they were challenging. Children who participated in Music Academy reported a statistically significant increase in commitment to learning.

Parental Resilience.

- *Sense of Security* – Strengthening Families and Trusting Loving Connections saw a statistically significant increase in parents ability to support their child or see their child’s behaviour as more positive, both of which are linked to better attachment with children.
- *Sense of Belonging* – Strengthening Families was the only program that measured this construct, and it was found that parents who completed the program felt that they could enjoy their time with their children more. This construct needs more rigorous evaluation in future studies.
- *Use of Strengths to Face Adversities* – Parents who participated in Strengthening Families reported being able to say nicer things to their children after participating in the program. This construct needs more rigorous evaluation in future studies.

Learnings

- Engineering resilience is a multifaceted and dynamic process that promotes the ability to navigate psychologically, socially, and physically to restore emotional equilibrium and respond to challenges in a positive way.
- Children and youth who have a sense of security are able to feel more comfortable challenging their limitations to reach their full potential within the community. This challenging of self enables children to be more productive and not only receive benefits from the community, but also give back to the community
- Boosting sense of belonging and acceptance allows youth to increase their self-esteem and confidence as it increases the likelihood they have people in their lives that think highly of them. Various agents (communities, schools, agencies) play a pivotal role in helping children feel like they belong.
- Helping to nourish the strengths children and youth have essentially creates a bubble of support around the child to persevere through adversities. This can be achieved by offering children and youth informal and formal programming to nurture their strengths.
- Providing programs that increase attachment and provide ways to regulate parents’ emotions is essential to family functioning.

Recommendations

- Learnings from our qualitative analysis suggested an expansion of resilience based measurements. At times, resilience constructs were not captured adequately but the tool utilized and proxies had to be used.
- Expansion of programs to different populations to help build resilience on a greater scale.
- More collaboration between organizations to help build capacity in one another in offering resilience based programs.

To access the full report please visit:

<https://www.facswaterloo.org/familycentre/projects/building-resilience>