

Healthy Minds/ Healthy Futures: South Australian Child Resilience Study

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Healthy Minds/Healthy Futures is a research study using a 'strengths-based' approach to examine the mental health and resilience of a cohort of young children from the state of South Australia. Funded by the *Australian National Health and Medical Research Council*, *Channel 7 Children's Research Foundation*, and *Australian Rotary Health*, this research project was designed and conducted by a collaborative multidisciplinary team of researchers from the University of Adelaide and the Health and Education government departments in South Australia.

The focus on mental health developed as a result of the professionals working in the preschools expressing increasing concerns about the mental health and wellbeing of the young children in their care. We chose to focus on children's strengths that help them develop positive mental health, rather than on their deficits. This led to an interest in examining the development of mental health resilience, which we defined as having 'better than expected' mental health outcomes, given exposure to one or more risk factors.

The purpose of our research is to investigate the protective processes and pathways that help young children cope positively with adverse family circumstances. To achieve this goal, we are conducting a three-year longitudinal study tracking 700 young children from preschool (age 4) into the first two years of formal schooling (ages 5 and 6). The project recruited parents of children attending the 27 preschools in the southern metropolitan and rural Fleurieu Peninsula regions of South Australia.

During preschool, teachers completed surveys on 700 children, and parents completed surveys on 601 of these children (72% and 62% response rates, respectively). One year later, when children had started school, teachers and parents completed surveys on the vast majority of these children. For each assessment, both parents and teachers completed the DECA protective factor

scales, as well as surveys on children's mental health, self-concept, family circumstances, and relationships with parents and teachers.

Data from the first two assessments of this study were presented at the 16th Biennial Conference of the Australasian Human Development Conference in July 2009. Greater exposure to family adversities (e.g., poverty, parental separation, stressful life-events) was associated with greater child mental health problems one year later. Accounting for risk exposure, we examined whether the children's preschool scores on each of the DECA protective factor scales (initiative, self-control, and attachment) could predict their level of resilience one-year later, after they had entered school.

Higher self-control, initiative, and attachment, were each independently able to predict subsequently higher levels of parent-reported and teacher-reported resilience one-year later. When all predictive factors were examined together, the factors that uniquely predicted subsequent resilience were higher self-control, better self-concept, and higher-quality relationships with their teachers and parents. Furthermore, relationship quality with parents and teachers influenced children's mental health resilience through their effect on the child's self-control and self-concept. Children with more positive parent-child and teacher-child relationships had higher self-control and self-concept, and in turn had greater mental health resilience once they had entered school. Future analyses will examine whether these findings can be confirmed longitudinally when the children reach age 6.

One key to effective evidence-based early-intervention programs is knowledge about protective factors and pathways that can lead to better developmental outcomes in children. Our findings provide support for the implementation of early-intervention programs, such as the DECA Program, that aim to foster protective factors and assist teachers and parents in building high-quality supportive relationships with young children. Such preventative strategies may help to protect the mental health of children facing family adversity, therefore fostering resilience.

Reference:

Miller-Lewis, L.R., Sawyer, M.G., Searle, A.K., Baghurst, P.B. (2009). Predicting mental health resilience in early childhood: Preliminary findings from the South Australian Child Resilience Study. Conference Presentation for the 16th Biennial Conference of the Australasian Human Development Association. (July 6-8, 2009, Adelaide, Australia).