

PROMOTING RESILIENCE IN LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN

In September 2011, The Moray Council had 54 looked after children living at home and 158 children looked after living away from home (primary and secondary).

Changes to The Education (Additional Support for Learning (ASL)) (Scotland) Act (2009), means that looked after children are now deemed to have additional support needs unless the education authority considers that they do not require additional support. Research examining the academic outcomes of looked after children evidences that looked after children achieve significantly lower results than their non-looked after peers. Furthermore, looked after children are more likely to be excluded, have behavioural difficulties or need additional educational support.

More particularly, looked after children living at home were often considered to “slip through the radar” as more often it was looked after children in residential or foster care that were the targeted group in interventions (Connelly and Chakrabarti, 2007). Therefore, the key message from this 2007 paper is that looked after children living at home (LAC) need to have a heightened profile to ensure that they are not overlooked.

Despite the difficulties that some LAC experience, it has been evidenced that a number of LAC do experience positive outcomes despite significant risk factors and adversity. Resilience has been identified as a key factor that enables these children to experience positive outcomes and ultimately contributes to academic achievement and positive social and emotional development. It has been found that the prevalence of protective factors in an individual's life (e.g. safe environment, talents and interests, school achievement) can help explain why one child may be more resilient and cope better with difficult times. Therefore, it has been argued that it is paramount to actively place an emphasis on positively enhancing protective factors in order to help increase wellbeing. Assessment should focus on identifying potential and should not just revolve around the identification and elimination of challenge and risk.



Resilience has been defined as ‘the ability to manage everyday challenges and concerns such as stress, difficult transition periods, life risks, academic challenge or family dispute’ (Rutter, 1990).

Research has proposed that there are three main categories of resilience pertaining to the:

1. **Individual** (e.g. positive self-perception, talent)
2. **Family** (e.g. support, guidance, comfort)
3. **School / community** (e.g., good attendance, access to clubs and activities and teacher support)

With this latter category in mind, it has been argued that the school can play a powerful influence in contributing towards resilience as many of a child's protective factors can be developed within this setting. Some individualised factors have been related to helping develop a child's potential talents and interests or by fostering a greater sense of academic self-concept (Gilligan, 2001). However, having a supportive teacher or significant adult to offer consistent support has been

identified as a significant protective factor (Dent and Cameron, 2003). Creating a safe, secure and positive classroom climate has also been identified as being important (Lewis, 1999).

Individual experiences mean that there can be an enormous variation in what promotes resilience from one child to the next. Therefore, there is a need for a careful assessment of each individual's strength and risk factors to help provide efficient and targeted support. It is thought that interventions that seek to develop protective factors have been shown to promote resilience and achieve more positive long-term outcomes, as well as help alleviate potential risk factors.

Nationally, Getting it Right for Every Child (The Scottish Government, 2011) now advocates that services should be increasingly working within a multi-agency context so that children are supported across all ecological levels (i.e. at the individual, family, school and community level).

Resilience should be being promoted across all aspects of a looked after child's life (e.g. by increasingly developing opportunities, support networks and guidance out of school). Although schools can play an extremely powerful contribution in developing resilience, ultimately, it is hoped that, by working collaboratively, resilience will be promoted across all levels of a child's experience – thus maximising the potential to nurture protective factors and support the development of resilience in all looked after children.