



## It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken adults

By Julie Hampshire in conjunction with RWS, Dads Matter and Girlie Gatherings

You often hear people say things like *'kids are resilient, they are tougher than you think'* or *'kids can handle more than we think, they soon bounce back.'*

Some children that are brought up in an environment where stress, worry, sadness, turmoil are present can appear to adapt and 'cope' - to manage their feelings. They bury them deep because they don't know what they are feeling and how to deal with it and they want to be like everyone else and also, in many cases to protect the adults at home that are failing them.

As a child, in many ways it's easy to find and then lose yourself in pockets of happiness because happy activities and people to share it with are to hand...in the playground, afterschool clubs, in the park, playing out on the street. As you grow up this becomes harder as the 'reality' of the situation begins to dawn and expectations become higher.

But the reality is the negative feelings of stress, anxiety and rejection will materialise, maybe waiting until adult life but usually in behaviours and attitudes that often create their own problems and continue the cycle.

Recently, a child whose Mother had died as a result of depression when she was a very small baby, even though she was treasured and well cared for by her father, at 4 years old was found to be demonstrating sexualised behaviour associated with insecurity. This was a result of being exposed to such sadness, trauma and tragedy, it had left its mark and materialised as this comforting behaviour. Through a lack of awareness and ignorance, these behaviours were misinterpreted by school and social services and the child was considered at risk of sexual harm. The result was that a family that had already experienced more than enough sadness had to battle in court to stop a care order being enforced.

There are studies that show some children do have an instinctive ability to cope long-term, are incredibly resilient and able to bounce back and thrive naturally. In 1989 a developmental psychologist named Emmy Werner published the results of a thirty-two-year project where she had followed a group of six hundred and ninety-eight children in Kauai, Hawaii from before birth through to their third decade of life. Over two hundred of them were classified as 'at risk' due to their home circumstances and just over 150 of those did go on to develop serious learning or behaviour problems by the age of ten or had delinquency records, mental health problems or teen-age pregnancies by the age of eighteen. However, the remainder of those at risk developed into competent, confident, and caring young adults and attained academic, domestic, and social success.

Werner found that several elements predicted naturally occurring resilience. One was those who were having a strong bond with a supportive caregiver be it parent, teacher or other mentor-like figure, someone to role model and look up to. Quite a large set of elements were psychological and to do with the child's character and how they responded to the negative environment they found themselves in. From a young age, resilient children demonstrated an in-built core of confidence, they met the world and all it gave them on their own terms. They were self-sufficient and independent, would seek out new experiences and had a positive attitude. Though not especially gifted, these children used whatever skills they had well and believed that they and not their circumstances affected their achievements.

Werner also found that these resilient children did have a breaking point. Some were especially unlucky and experienced many challenges and at these vulnerable points, if the stress was so great it could become overwhelming and their resilience would evaporate. Resilience, she decided, is like a constant calculation, which side of the equation weighs more, the resilience or the stress? Most people have a breaking point.

The key is to help the young build up a strong pot of resilience – big enough to outweigh any challenges they might face.

Society, officialdom and the medical profession need to become more enlightened to the impact of mental and emotional wellbeing with the young. Introducing methods of recognising, preventing and addressing this through school and its associated activities like after-school clubs is a fabulous place to start.

A report published in November 2014 by the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) shows the link between pupil health and wellbeing and attainment. Pupils with better health and wellbeing are likely to achieve better academically. Effective social and emotional competencies are associated with greater health and wellbeing and better achievement.

The culture, ethos and environment of a school can influence the health and wellbeing of pupils and their readiness to learn.

An organisation that is seizing this opportunity is RWS **R**esilience, **W**ellbeing, **S**uccess, a social and emotional learning (SEL) programme developed by a Paralympian, a Cancer Conqueror and a Bounce-Back Mum to help children develop life-long skills in improving their resilience, their overall wellbeing and their success in all areas of their lives. These inspirational ladies have already delivered the programme to schools in the North of England with great results and feedback from pupils, teachers and parents. The programme is fully mapped against Ofsted 'Outstanding' criteria and the lesson plans tick all the boxes in response to curriculum expectations. The programme also teaches the same skills to teachers and other school staff, and to parents.

With all the discussion and debate recently over the pressure young people are put under with SATs tests, the RWS Programme helps pupils manage and reduce the stress associated with tests and exams. Whilst SATs, their content and the quantity of new tests being introduced by the DfE cannot be changed, pupils can be helped and shown how to minimise the associated stress.

In April 2016 the *CentreForum Commission on Children and Young People's Mental Health* published a damning 'State of the Nation' Report which stated that "Suicide is the most common cause of death for boys aged between 5 and 19, being the cause of 14% of deaths in this age group, and the second most common for girls of that age (9%), after land traffic accidents."

Anxiety and depression in childhood and adolescence mainly goes untreated in the UK. Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) is the primary service provider for the NHS and, according to the 'State of the Nation' Report, 23% (nearly a quarter) of children referred to CAMHS are being turned away. Waiting times can be as long as

6 months for a first appointment and 42 weeks for the start of treatment. Of the 77% that aren't turned away, 40% of those will be given effective treatments that will allow them to make a full recovery.

As the report states:

“Mental health problems are linked to premature mortality and can also be life limiting. Young people with an emotional disorder are more likely to smoke, drink and use drugs than other children; more likely to have time off school and fall behind in their education; and are more likely to earn less money as adults or to experience unemployment. As well as the personal cost, the estimated long term cost to the economy of mental health problems is £105 billion a year.”

A primary factor that positively affects the impact of adverse life situations like bereavement, separation and bullying is to have relationships that provide care and support, create love and trust, and offer encouragement, both within and outside the family. Also tools and techniques to help resilience, like the capacity to make realistic plans, having self-confidence and a positive self-image, developing communication skills and the capacity to manage strong feelings and impulses have an immense impact on our mental wellbeing.

These relationships, family, guardians, carers and friends are an untapped support resource and in the perfect position to help the young develop these skills and attitudes. Often, however, many struggle emotionally themselves, so being in a position to help children is not always an option. Two organisations that look to help and support people to help themselves and therefore their families are Girlie Gatherings and Dads Matter UK. Both are social enterprises based in South Yorkshire that focus on building the skills and abilities of parents to be able to understand and manage their own emotions. This puts them in a good place to be better role models and to pass these skills and behaviours on to their children.

Girlie Gatherings brings life coaching to women in an affordable and accessible way and addresses specific issues and helps them build self-esteem and better women, mothers, friends and partners.

Dads Matter UK provides information and support for dads worried about or suffering from depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

In the US, the benefit of working with children to break the cycle has been understood for many years. Launched in 1965, Head Start is one of the longest-running programmes that provides comprehensive early childhood education, health, nutrition and parent involvement services to low-income children and their families. As of 2005 more than 22 million had participated. It was originally conceived as a catch-up summer school programme to teach low-income children in a few weeks what they needed to know to start primary school. The Head Start Act of 1981 expanded the programme, which was enhanced and revised further in 2007.

The programme's services and resources are designed to foster stable family relationships, enhance children's physical and emotional well-being and establish an environment to develop strong cognitive skills

The 2011 federal budget for Head Start was \$8.1 billion. 85% was devoted to direct services and no more than 15% to administration, serving approximately one million students.

Other American programmes include the Big Brothers and Big Sisters of America, a non-profit organisation whose goal is to help all children reach their potential through professionally supported, one-to-one relationships with

volunteer mentors. It is one of the oldest and largest youth mentoring organisations in the United States. Big Brothers and Big Sisters mentors children of all ages in communities across the country.

A study was undertaken of the children in the programme - at the beginning of the study and then again after 18 months. The research found that the Little Brothers and Little Sisters, compared to those children not in the programme, were:

- 46% less likely to begin using illegal drugs
- 27% less likely to begin using alcohol
- 52% less likely to skip school
- 37% less likely to skip a class
- 33% less likely to hit someone

This evidence shows that tackling child and parental mental health should be no less a priority for our politicians and our health and social care professionals than the defence of the realm.

Resilience, Well-being and Success go hand in hand and children and parents need resilience training to allow them to “Bounce Back and Thrive”.

We need to start building emotionally strong children with the abilities and awareness to deal with the challenges and trials that life presents as it unfolds. Our focus needs to be on preventing broken adults as they are so difficult to mend.