



Mental Resilience in Schools. The Necessity of Developing Prevention and Intervention Programs

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Abstract

The concept of mental resilience refers to the individual's ability to display positive adaptive behaviors when dealing with complex and adverse situations. Many studies in the last decades have examined mental resilience in adults, children, education, and work context. In particular, the cultivation of mental resilience in childhood is essential since critical abilities and skills are developed during this period for better adaptation to the environment and the demands of modern life. Moreover, the earlier resilience is encouraged in individuals, the better they will cope with challenging conditions and stressful situations at different stages of their lives. The article emphasizes the necessity of developing prevention and intervention programs to strengthen and promote children's mental resilience and well-being.

Keywords: Mental Resilience; Adaptive Behaviors; Prevention and Intervention Programs; Children and Schools

Introduction

Research in recent decades investigates the coping skills that contribute to the individual's positive adjustment and mental well-being [1]. At the same time, the necessity for early recognition and treatment of difficulties and problems in individuals has highlighted that a positive approach to mental health issues is needed. Indeed, current studies examine how individuals can cope and respond to challenging situations. The concept of mental resilience plays a vital role in this approach. The roots of resilience research can be traced back to the 1970s in sociology and psychology [2]. For example, research in the field of developmental psychology found that children in high-risk groups (such as poverty and difficult life conditions) faced difficulties in a positive and healthy matter [3]. The scientific interest in the positive outcomes of these children reflected a notable departure from the symptom-

based medical models to positive approaches. Therefore, the need to highlight the abilities that protect individuals from adverse life conditions was recognized to develop programs and strategies to promote children's mental health.

Mental Resilience

The word "resilience" in English has a Latin origin (resilire) which means "rebound" or "recover after stress" [4,5]. Regarding the conceptual definition of resilience, it is controversial whether it is a dynamic process or an individual permanent characteristic. The first dimension concerns a dynamic process in which the individual can recover from difficult and adverse situations and contains protective and risk factors [6]. The second dimension concerns a personality trait that acts protectively on individuals, helps them mitigate the negative effects of stressful situations, and

promotes their adjustment [6]. Although, most researchers highlight the role of the dynamic process in mental resilience [7].

Considering mental resilience as a dynamic process, the individual displays positive adaptive behaviors when dealing with complex and adverse situations [4,8]. These conditions may include poverty, complex family environment, loss of loved ones, illness, natural disasters, and pandemic [9]. Additionally, the American Psychological Association has defined *resilience* as the individual's ability to adapt to adversity, traumatic experiences, and stressful situations [10]. During these situations, resilient individuals are able to use coping skills, which help them regulate the intensity of negative emotions, overcome, and recover from difficult and adverse situations [11]. Furthermore, resilience concerns the interaction between the risk and the protective factors, which are activated in an adjustable manner when individuals face difficult [12-14].

Applications of Mental Resilience

Research in resilience follows four "waves" [9]. The first wave concerns the study of the individual characteristics of resistant people. The second wave of research recognizes the interactions between individuals and the systems they function and interact. The third wave of research concerns the development of prevention and intervention programs that enhance resilience, such as school involvement and effective parenting skills [15]. Finally, the fourth wave of research concerns the study of genes and neural plasticity in developing resilience [15]. Especially the second wave of research identified protective factors that help individuals adjust, such as close interpersonal relationships and social and family support. Through this wave, various models of mental resilience were developed, which explain the interaction between individual and environmental factors in terms of promoting mental resilience and minimizing the effect of complex situations and risk factors [16].

One of the goals of research in resilience is the design, implementation, and evaluation of programs to increase people's well-being and strengthen protective mechanisms. Furthermore, these programs aim to reduce maladaptive behaviors [17-19]. These programs are implemented in various contexts, such as family, school, workplace, and community [9].

Mental Resilience in Schools and Children

Schools can promote children's mental resilience by implementing preventive and intervention programs with the cooperation of teachers and their families. Implementing these programs helps develop students' mental resilience and

creates a positive climate for learning, school adaptation, and school-family relationships. Furthermore, these programs reduce mental health problems and elicit substance use in children and adolescents [14,20].

According to Dray J, et al. [21] review study, resilience-focused intervention programs were effective relative to control groups in reducing depressive symptoms, internalizing problems, externalizing problems, and general psychological distress in children and adolescents, aged 5-18 years old. In addition, Hart A, et al. [22] review study identified specific effective, resilient practices that parents and teachers use through their interaction with children. Such practices are parental bonding, effective communication, teaching problem-solving skills, working at a systemic level, and providing positive support to children. Furthermore, Ungar M, et al. [23] study, reviewing 36 resilient-based interventions for middle school students, concluded that these programs reduce academic failure and disengagement from school by changing a student's social ecology.

Examples of Resilient Based Programs

Various programs have been implemented to strengthen mental resilience in children, which emphasize that it is necessary to cultivate mental resilience from a young age because children build adaptation and coping skills [4]. An intervention program implemented with positive results is the PATHS program (Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies) [24]. The program develops social skills, promotes positive relationships between students, and embraces self-control, emotional awareness, and self-esteem. In addition, the "Friends program for life" is a structured mental health program consisting of 10 sessions [25]. The program's goal is for children to learn to manage difficult situations and solve problems, supporting each other through a climate of positive emotions [26]. The program findings indicated an increase in children's mental and emotional health, self-esteem, and self-image, leading to lower stress levels and reduced incidents of victimization [26].

Acknowledging the crucial role of resilience in children and adolescents, the UPRIGHT Program (Universal Preventive Resilience Intervention Globally Health for Teenagers) was developed to improve and promote students' mental health and well-being at school settings. It is a research and resilience intervention program with a universal whole-school approach. UPRIGHT is a whole-school prevention program targeting adolescents 12-14 years of age, their families, and schools aiming to promote mental health by enhancing adolescents' resilience capacities [27]. Resilience-based programs can also be beneficial in facing social challenges. For example, the results of the "STRONG"

program, which was implemented in Canadian schools, were effective in increasing connectedness, stress management, coping strategies, and reducing distress among refugee students. As a result, these students were more likely to acculturate and adapt to a new country successfully [28].

Regarding the Greek school population, the school intervention program “Friends... help us overcome our worries” has been implemented positively for children aged 7-11. It is a group intervention program promoting children’s emotional resilience, strengthening self-esteem, and reducing anxiety [25]. At the same time, another program developed in Greece is the “SYN-FRONTIZO” program, which aims at prevention and intervention in the school environment to develop mental resilience [29]. In the context of this action, the following Programs were developed:

- The preventive program “Stiri-Zontas”, which is for the psychological support of children in the period of economic crisis,
- The teacher training program “WE” and the international teacher training program “WeC.A.R.E” which promote a positive school climate.

Considering the need to promote the mental resilience of children and the lack of these programs in Cyprus, the “We.R.Stars” (Well-Being and Resilience Stars) program has been developed [30]. The program is based on resilient evidence-based interventions and scientific literature. The program refers to children aged 9 to 12 and is being implemented in primary schools in Cyprus for the first time. The program’s main objective is the development of children’s mental resilience and well-being, as well as the development of their self-esteem and self-efficacy. The program is oriented around five key factors: personal empowerment, social skills, self-regulation, good links with the school, and positive parental involvement. The program consists of ten sessions with the children, which are conducted within the school context, and three meetings with the parents/guardians of the children, providing them with behavioral psychoeducation. Also, within the framework of the program, training and meetings are carried out with the teachers of the participating schools. The aim is to adopt a holistic/ecological approach that involves all the systems to which children belong and interact.

Conclusion

More generally, the applications of resilient programs in education help prevent the difficulties students face at school, such as reducing stress and pressure [31]. However, at the same time, the programs enhance children’s positive emotions and strengths, increase their self-esteem, and embrace their academic and social skills. Moreover, the earlier, from childhood, resilience is cultivated in individuals,

the better they will be at different stages of their lives to cope with challenging conditions and adapt to modern life’s demands. Therefore, developing such programs is necessary for raising resilient children with efficient adaptive and social skills. Finally, the contribution of teachers and parents to these programs is essential to strengthening a positive climate in schools, adequate parental bonding, and better cooperation between schools and families [32].

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