

Children & Youth Advocate Manual

Section 7: Children & Youth Resilience



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Introduction & Importance

Resilience is the human capacity to face, overcome and be strengthened by adversity. Resilience is critical to healthy child development and overcoming trauma, including the trauma of exposure to domestic violence. Advocates need to actively incorporate the promotion of children, youth, and family resilience as a part of standard practice to advocacy. Programming for children and youth is strengthened when it is based on knowledge of how to aid youth and families on their resilience journey.

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Resiliency Definitions

The former Resiliency Workgroup through the [Office of Children's Mental Health](#) came up with their definition of resiliency that states, **Resiliency is the ability to use current skills and resources to survive and have access to learn new ones to overcome adversity and thrive.** With this definition, they support other established resiliency definitions. This group identified that the definition of resiliency can change depending on the domains: children & youth, families, communities, agencies & institutions, systems, and culture. The graphic below is the representation of how the Resiliency Workgroup supports resilience.



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10 Children & Youth Resiliency Assets

The following characteristics can support resiliency. Domestic violence (DV) agencies should consider these ten resiliency assets when designing services for children and youth. Childhood exposure to DV can have serious long-term negative consequences. Many children who grow up with DV survive and thrive.

1. Nurturing, Predictable Environments

- a. Create predictable environments for children and youth to feel secure and know what to expect.
- b. Form guidelines that are minimal, flexible, and trauma-informed.
- c. Incorporate age-appropriate space for playing and learning that accommodates the needs of children and youth and protective caregivers.
- d. Establish consistent routines and clear expectations for children and youth with the protective caregiver.
- e. ***Co-create a transition plan with the protective caregiver for when they leave shelter or services, separate from the abuser, or continue living with an abuser; that continues to reinforce the protective caregiver's values and views on safety.***

2. Relevant Relationships

- a. Provide opportunities for families to strengthen and rebuild their relationships.
 - i. Build respect between child and protective caregiver relationship.
 - ii. Protective caregivers can help their children feel safe and secure.
- b. Facilitate conversations between children and protective caregivers to foster healing from abuse.
- c. Offer community resources of interest to the children, youth, and protective caregiver.
- d. Offer spaces that will connect the family with formal and informal supports.

3. Support Protective Caregivers

- a. Provide caregivers with information on the effects of exposure to domestic violence on children, youth, and families.
- b. Offer opportunities to learn about child development.
- c. Support protective caregivers during times of stress and difficulty of [parenting in public](#).
- d. Verbalize when the protective caregivers use their positive parenting skills.
- e. Model healthy communication, respectful problem solving, and understanding children's needs.
- f. Model and teach positive parenting practices, when appropriate.
- g. Practice strategies that protective caregivers can use for relaxation and stress management.
- h. Offer protective caregivers' ways to help their children cope with trauma behavioral responses and reactions.
 - i. Protective caregivers who feel connected to the children's support group can discuss their own experiences with their family and support what their children have felt and learned.

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4. Individual and Group Education

- a. Children and youth should understand:
 - i. They are not alone in coping with trauma they have experienced.
 - ii. The trauma they experienced in their family is not their fault.
 - iii. The trauma their family experienced is also not their protective caregiver's fault.
 - iv. Their feelings and perceptions of the trauma they have experienced are valid.
- b. Cope with the complex feelings children and youth have for their caregivers.
- c. Provide opportunities to practice equitable, nonviolent problem solving.
- d. Teach age-appropriate critical thinking skills.
- e. Protective caregivers should be involved with individual education
- f. Protective caregivers should be provided information about the content of groups.
- g. Protective caregivers receive support for talking with their children about what they learned or experienced in group.

5. Individual and Family Safety Planning

- a. Coordinate safety planning for protective caregivers and children to avoid the unintended consequences of separate safety plans for the same family.
- b. Children and protective caregivers devise age-, culturally-, and language-appropriate plans for their family's safety.

6. Coping with Trauma Behavioral Responses

- a. Offer opportunities for children and youth to talk, be listened to, and feel supported in different aspects of their lives.
- b. Provide children and youth with opportunities to express themselves and process their experiences through words, art, and play.
- c. Practice expressing their feelings with different methods and in different environments.

7. Internal Strength Recognition

- a. Practice respectful conflict resolution, good communication and healthy social skills.
- b. Incorporate techniques for relaxation, self-soothing, stress management, anger management, and behavior regulation.
- c. Verbally recognize the unique strengths and abilities of each child, and foster recognition of the good within themselves.
- d. Offer children and youth meaningful participation in their family, school, domestic violence program, and community.

8. Health and Well-Being Promotion

- a. Identify each child's needs in these areas:
 - i. Physical, mental, and developmental health
 - ii. Behavior
 - iii. School
 - iv. Home life
 - v. Social relations
 - vi. Consequences of exposure to abuse
- b. Collaborate with the child and the protective caregiver to develop a plan to address these needs.
- c. Develop cooperative relationships with community organizations that serve children.

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9. Foster a Sense of Connection and Belonging

- a. Refer families to resources that will offer them access to health care, education, housing, employment, and social services.
- b. Provide opportunities where protective caregivers can build social support for themselves and their families among extended family, friends, religious organizations, community groups, etc.
- c. Offer volunteer opportunities for youth and their families who have been with the agency for a bit.

10. Cultural Traditions and Awareness

- a. Adapt and provide services that are consistent with each family's cultural values and beliefs.
- b. Refer families to events and groups where children and families can build strong cultural identity and pride.
- c. Develop ways of supporting the food, languages, holidays and customs of all families.

Agency Resiliency Characteristics

In addition to addressing resiliency in children & youth programming, Domestic Violence agencies can best assist families exposed to Domestic Violence by adopting sustainable, program-wide strategies that support both children and protective caregivers. Below are suggestions to consider incorporating into the whole agency. To accomplish this, programs can:

1. Train all staff to interact with children and youth and to support Domestic Violence survivors as protective caregivers (i.e. consistent cross-training amongst all staff).
2. Require all staff to understand how each of their job responsibilities affects children, youth and parenting, regardless of position.
 - a. For example, assisting protective caregivers with protection orders, locating housing, or coping with their own trauma responses may have repercussions for children that should be discussed with the protective caregivers. Protective caregivers may also want help with explaining these changes to their children.
3. Increase the number of adults available to positively interact with children and youth.
4. Increase adult-to-child ratio in children and youth support groups with staff, volunteers, and interns.
5. Offer or refer to [respite care](#) for protective caregivers, if available in your area.
6. Encourage informal interactions with children and youth such as play, individual conversations and help with homework.
7. Assist protective caregivers and children in managing trauma responses without blame or shame.
8. Fully integrate services for adults, children, and teens to create formal connections between family members.
9. Implement comprehensive, interactive, and sustainable training for new Children & Youth Advocates to prepare them for the many aspects of their position.
 - a. Training for new children and youth advocates should be as thorough and participatory as training for all other new staff positions.
10. Establish sustainable methods of children and youth services during staff transitions.
 - a. Doing so prevents a lag in services when new Children & Youth Advocates feel they need to reinvent the agency's children's programming during staff turnover.
11. Create and maintain youth-friendly spaces throughout the facility. For younger children, this may include stuffed animals, books and other toys. For older children and youth, this may include books, magazines and other age-appropriate activities.

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Support Group Practices that Promote Resiliency

Group Suggestions

Develop a group culture that all children and adults' practice mutually respectful behavior.

Create a predictable, structured environment and a routine group schedule so children know what to expect.

- Plan a variety of activities for the entire meeting and alternate periods of movement and quieter activities.
- Incorporate flexibility within groups to allow for adaptations to meet the needs of the children and youth in group. Don't be afraid to change plans spontaneously if group dynamics demand it.

***TIP:** Have a backup plan for inclement weather or same-day changes in group dynamics.*

Make group a good experience for everyone with activities, playfulness, humor, and snacks.

- Include activities that incorporate different learning styles; i.e. visual, audio, tactile.
- Reinforce group themes through art, play, games and music.
- Acknowledge and incorporate others' cultural experiences.
- Incorporate a meal before group and a snack for after group.

Many groups include an opening and closing activity, such as circle time.

- Opening activities can incorporate positive affirmations and expressing feelings.
- Closing activities can involve relaxation and reflection on the group.

Reinforce group topics by repeating important themes in reoccurring group meetings and incorporate them into routine interactions with children.

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Facilitator Suggestions

There should always be at least two adult facilitators.

- Groups tend to run more efficiently with at least two adults.
- One adult will be available to give individual attention to children who need it while the other runs the group.
- Especially important when there is a wide age range in group.

If you establish group guidelines with the children, make them positive, ensure that everyone in group understands the guidelines, and apply them consistently. Common guidelines for children's domestic violence support groups are:

- No physical or verbal abuse or threats.
- Respect each other's opinions, feelings and personal space.
- **Confidentiality:** What's said in group stays in group. This guideline is intended to protect the privacy of group members. It should not prevent kids from talking to their protective caregiver about their experience in group. Discuss this guideline with the group and generate suggestions for sharing their experience with their protective caregivers without using names or disclosing personal information about other group members.

Arrange a method of communicating with protective caregivers of the children in your group.

- Identify what will be shared if the protective caregiver is not in the same space during group.

When children are experiencing trauma response behaviors during group, give them opportunities to calm down and rejoin the group.

- Be calm, respectful, and supportive.
- Avoid shaming and reprimands.

When a child is experiencing trauma response behaviors

- Verbally recognize what you are witnessing.
- Offer 2-3 options when asking questions.
- If the child needs to leave the group
 - Have identified spaces where they would like to have a break.
 - Ask if they would like to talk when they are done with their break.
- If the child continues the trauma response behaviors talk with the protective caregiver about strategies while being in group.
- Have self-care activities for children to use during their break.
- Have self-care activities or items for children to use during group.

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Resources

Children of Domestic Violence: [The Change A Life Program](#) free, evidence-based online program. This program teaches you how to become The ONE for a child growing up with domestic violence – a caring adult who steps in and offers simple support and messages of hope that can foster a child’s resiliency and help change their life.

[Five for Families](#) is a statewide public awareness campaign developed as a universal prevention strategy. The primary goal of the campaign is to increase knowledge of the Protective Factors Framework, an evidence-informed, strengths-based approach to child maltreatment prevention and family well-being promotion created by the Center for the Study of Social Policy.

Here are some links to websites that offer different activities to help youth to calm down. [Relaxation games](#) and [Create Your Own Anti-Anxiety Kit for Children](#).

[Kelly McGonigal: How to Make Stress Your Friend](#) new research suggests that stress may only be bad for you if you believe that to be the case. Psychologist Kelly McGonigal urges us to see stress as a positive and introduces us to an unsung mechanism for stress reduction: reaching out to others.

Pretty Good Design has created [Your Kids Aren’t Too Young to Talk About Race: Resource Roundup](#). This resource contains links to podcasts, articles, books, toys, studies, and more to help adults talk about race to youth.

[Promising Futures: Promoting Resiliency](#) provides protective factors that promote resiliency among children and youth experiencing domestic violence.

*Please notify the LGBTQ & Youth Program Director, [Cody Warner](#), if **ANY** links are no longer working.*
