

## More About Risk and Resilience

Excerpts from:

Risk and Resilience in Family Well-Being During the COVID-19 Pandemic  
H. Prime, M. Wade, D. Brown (2020). *American Psychologist*, 75, 631–643  
<https://psycnet.apa.org/fulltext/2020-34995-001.pdf>

“The COVID-19 pandemic poses an acute threat to the well-being of children and families due to challenges related to social disruption such as financial insecurity, caregiving burden, and confinement-related stress (e.g., crowding, changes to structure, and routine). ...

An illustration of the centrality of family processes in buffering against risk in the context of COVID-19, as well as promoting resilience through shared family beliefs and close relationships, is provided.... It is important for families to preserve and nourish their relationships and shared beliefs as a way to provide security and hope for children during this time of stress and uncertainty....

A critical principle here is that the links between hardship, caregiver well-being, family well-being, and children’s adjustment are not unidirectional; rather, the links operate within a mutually reinforcing system, whereby stress and disruptiveness in one domain begets the same in another.

Preexisting vulnerabilities within families increase susceptibility to social disruptions and the sequelae of the pandemic, whereas intact or strengthened family well-being will serve to protect children and families from such stressors. The presented model is guided by five key principles,

- >Child adjustment is multiply determined, with influence from both distal factors (e.g., social disruptions due to COVID-19) and proximal processes (e.g., relationships with close others such as family members, teachers, and/or peers}. Contextual risk “gets inside the family” by altering the interpersonal relations within the family. In turn, these disruptions to family well-being “get under the skin,” affecting key biobehavioral systems in the developing child and associated behavioral, social, cognitive, and emotional outcomes....
- >Caregiver well-being may serve as a funnel through which social disruptions due to COVID-19 infiltrate family functioning via changes to marital, parent–child, and sibling relations....
- >The functioning of one family member may lead to changes in the functioning of all family members....
- >There are key mediating processes within the family that channel and/or modify risk emanating from social disruption to individual (mal)adaptation. Guided by Walsh’s (2015) family resilience framework, family well-being is conceptualized by three overarching processes:
  - (a) communication (clear information, emotional sharing, collaborative problem-solving, dyadic and family coping),
  - (b) organization (adaptability, connectedness, and access to social and economic resources),
  - (c) belief systems (meaning-making, hope, and spirituality).

These processes are purported to be disrupted or altered in many families in the context of the pandemic. They can also serve as sources of resilience....

- >There will be considerable variability in how families will be impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Some families will be more vulnerable to the sequelae of the pandemic than others, based on preexisting vulnerabilities, such as families with low income, mental health and/or special needs, and/or experiences of racism or marginalization. Other families may experience resilience or posttraumatic growth—the ability not just to survive but to thrive in the face of adversity. For instance, the quality of children’s family relationships has been shown to support children’s coping with disasters and other severe adversities. Thus, resilience may be more likely if family well-being is preserved or enhanced during this time....

Consistent with systemic frameworks around families’ tendencies to adapt in the face of challenge, all families will be doing their best to mitigate the amount and type of disruption taking place. At least two

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\*This excerpt was done by the national Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports at UCLA. The center is co-directed by Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor in the Dept. of Psychology, UCLA, Website: <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu> Send comments to [ltaylor@ucla.edu](mailto:ltaylor@ucla.edu)

general processes in family resilience will support this phenomenon: (a) the building and maintenance of family relationships that offset the fallout of the otherwise distressing situation, and (b) the optimization of family belief systems in providing a frame-work of understanding events related to COVID-19. Just as family relationships may serve as a pathway through which distal risk impacts psychosocial adjustment, they can also serve as a buffer against a multitude of sociocontextual risk, supporting child adjustment in the face of adversity....

Close relationships within the family can also help to weather unfavorable circumstances within the family system (or subsystems; e.g., caregiver psychological distress and/or marital conflict) that may arise amid the social disruptions of COVID-19. ...

Families have encountered social disruption; family illness; and, for many, death and grief. They will experience the highest levels of adaptation when they are able to “make sense” of the disaster by incorporating the events into their existing worldview, or by modifying their views, in a way that promotes health, togetherness, and a sense of coherence. This will be greatest when families (a) view themselves as being “in it together”; (b) consider their current plight as specific, not the personal fault of anyone, time-limited, and manageable; (c) resist repeatedly forecasting the worst-case scenario; and (d) minimize catastrophic thinking...

This may include, for instance, emotion-focused discussions about ongoing changes within the family and society that allow for sharing and normalization of difficult feelings, as well as reassurance. Collectively, these orientations can help families to embrace hope during this difficult time, with corresponding optimism and a shared sense of family agency. Furthermore, it is also possible that shared family experiences of struggling and coping with this major life challenge may lead to positive family transformations, as in posttraumatic growth...

Notably, spirituality is an overarching construct encompassing both religious and non-religious experiences, such as prayer or meditation, communion with nature, expressive arts, and other forms of transcendent inspiration. This literature suggests that the capacity to coherently view the COVID-19 pandemic in a shared family metaphysical framework will likely result in more positive outcomes for families. Taken together, it is clear that family relationships (and the emotional security arising therein) and family beliefs are implicated during stress and major life events. Families with preexisting strengths in relationships, those who can maintain closeness despite heightened family stress, and those who build closeness through the help of professionals or other social supports will likely evidence better coping and resilience during this unprecedented time. Preserving and/or building supportive family relationships and systems of belief will give children the opportunity to confide in close others, engage in positive shared family activities, and benefit from emotion regulation support from their parents such as emotion coaching and cognitive reappraisals and restructuring. These opportunities will provide children with connection and growth during these emotionally difficult times, helping them to not only cope but thrive alongside their family members....”

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For more on resilience, see our Center’s Quick Find

>*Resilience/Protective Factors* <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/resilience.html>

One of the items there is the Center’s Sampler

>*Protective Factors (Resiliency)*

<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/sampler/resiliency/resilien.pdf>

For more on risk factors, see the Quick Find

>*Barriers to Learning* <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/barriers.htm>

For more discussion and resources for staff development and school planning, see

>*Improving School Improvement*

>*Addressing Barriers to Learning: In the Classroom and Schoolwide*

>*Embedding Mental Health as Schools Change*

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