

## Fostering Resiliency in Underserved Youth Through Physical Activity

Thomas J. Martinek and Donald R. Hellison

Millions of children and youth in our country live in poverty. And yet despite the overwhelming adversity associated with poverty, many of these youngsters are able to bounce back. The purpose of this article is to describe social and psychological factors that help them defy the risks associated with being poor. We suggest ways in which resiliency can be fostered through school and community programs. Included in this are ways in which physical activity serves as an effective medium for promoting growth and renewed optimism. Guidelines for delivering physical activity programs for increasing resiliency are proposed. In these guidelines are personal requirements necessary for successfully working with underserved children and youth.

It's 7:30 on a frigid February morning in Chicago. We are on our way to Jackson School<sup>1</sup> hoping to get there by 8:00. Jackson School is located in the Englewood District on the south side of Chicago. Englewood has the highest crime rate in the city. Because there are no longer any businesses that can safely operate, the people who live in Englewood are virtually cut off from the rest of the city. In essence, Englewood has become an embattled island plagued by gang violence, drug trafficking, prostitution, and dysfunctional families. The population at Jackson is 100% African American. Many of the students are budding "gang bangers" who have succumbed to the protection and stability offered by gangs of the neighborhood. And yet, the school doors of Jackson open daily, teachers arrive to teach, and somehow kids get to school to be taught.

It is a trip we have made frequently. As we maneuver our way along the Dan Ryan Expressway, we talk about "our kids" of the basketball club. Much of the discussion centers on their struggles, whether they will all show up at the club, and what type of "attitude" they will bring into the gym that morning. It is a discussion we have had before, one that always reminds us how incredible the lives of these kids are and how miraculous it is that they are able to get to school at all.

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# Resiliency in Youth Through Physical Activity

Mark and Donald R. Hellison

Our country live in poverty. And yet despite associated with poverty, many of these young people purpose of this article is to describe social factors that help them defy the risks associated with being in poverty. Resiliency can be fostered through school and in this are ways in which physical activity or promoting growth and renewed optimism. Physical activity programs for increasing resiliency are personal requirements necessary for successful children and youth.

Every morning in Chicago. We are on our way to work by 8:00. Jackson School is located in the south side of Chicago. Englewood has the highest crime rate longer any businesses that can safely operate, are virtually cut off from the rest of the city. In an embattled island plagued by gang violence, dysfunctional families. The population at Jackson of the students are budding "gang bangers" and the isolation and stability offered by gangs of the neighborhood of Jackson open daily, teachers arrive to teach, to be taught.

Consequently. As we maneuver our way along the road to "our kids" of the basketball club. Much of the struggles, whether they will all show up at the end of the day they will bring into the gym that morning ahead before, one that always reminds us how hard it is and how miraculous it is that they are still here.

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As we arrive, a few of the kids are waiting to get into the gym. The rest will straggle in later. Most all of them show up on a regular basis. They look forward to shooting around and having us work with them on "moves to the basket" and shooting "the threes."

The basketball club includes approximately 15 hard-core youngsters who come to learn personal and social responsibility and basketball. With their futures so limited, our goal for the program is to increase their resiliency against the high-risk conditions of their neighborhood. We have learned, though, that fostering resiliency becomes illusive without a clear understanding of all its caveats. Some youngsters respond well, while others appear to remain vulnerable and easy prey to adverse conditions. What are the personal characteristics that make individuals more vulnerable or resilient than others? And how can schools and other community agencies create environments that support the qualities to be resilient? These questions have pushed us beyond merely looking at at-risk factors. Rather, they have forced us to examine ways to enhance a child's self-worth and dignity.

The purpose of this article is to help clarify our thinking about resiliency and vulnerability in underserved youth. Special attention is given to social and psychological factors that affect a youngster's response to adversity. We also suggest ways in which resiliency can be fostered through educational and community programs. Included in this are ways in which physical activity can provide opportunities for growth and renewed optimism for a better future. Guidelines for developing physical activity programs for increasing resiliency are proposed. Reflected in these are personal requirements necessary for successfully working with underserved youth. At the heart of these guidelines is the belief that long-term commitment is tantamount to planting seeds of hope.

While political pundits often feel that a get-tough crime bill will cure the evils of crime in America, we believe that a *preventive* approach makes more economic sense. Improving the resilience in our youth will eventually rule out the installation of metal detectors in schools, policemen in hallways, and the building of more jails. We are reminded of this axiom from a snippet from Joseph Malin's (1936) poem, *A Fence or an Ambulance*:

... Better guide well the young  
than reclaim them when they are old,  
For the voice of true wisdom is calling,  
"To rescue the fallen is good, but 'tis best  
To prevent other people from falling."  
Better close up the source of  
temptation and crime  
Than deliver from dungeon or galley;  
Better put a strong fence 'round  
the top of the cliff  
Than an ambulance down in the valley. (pp. 273-274)

Malin's fence undoubtedly becomes the metaphor for resiliency and hope for youngsters facing an uncertain future. For the youngsters at Jackson and others who live at the edge of the cliff, it is more reasonable to build fences than have ambulances at the bottom awaiting their fall.

### What Does It Mean to Be Resilient?

Bonnie Benard (1993) defines a resilient child as one who has the ability to bounce back successfully despite exposure to severe risks (p. 44). Gordon and Song (1994) refer to these individuals as "risk defiers," "abuse survivors," or "super kids." In other words, they have beaten the odds against good development and have demonstrated the self-righting nature of the human condition. In all likelihood, they have used protective factors in themselves, their family, school, and community to rebuff life stressors.

Several studies have repeatedly documented "resiliency" in numerous populations. For example, Michael Rutter's research (Rutter, 1985) with disadvantaged children from inner cities found that half of the children growing up in adverse conditions did not repeat that pattern in later adult life. Emma Werner's longitudinal investigations (Werner, 1989; Werner & Smith, 1992) with Kauai children found that one-third of the children having four or more risk factors during childhood were doing well during adolescence. During adulthood, she found that two-thirds of the children who were having problems during adolescence were experiencing successful adult lives.

Another population that has been studied is teenage mothers. The Baltimore Study by Furstenberg and his colleagues (1987) was one of the first attempts to look at the longitudinal impact of early pregnancy on the mothers' life styles and the lives of their children. After following a cohort group of 300 mothers older than 17 for 12 years, they found varied results. Mothers whose parents were on welfare and had not completed the 10th grade were found to be more likely to be on welfare. Educational attainment (how far the parent went in school) seemed to be a main predictor of educational advancement. The children of parents who completed high school did better in school than those whose parents dropped out at an early age. The children also were less likely to become pregnant during their school years.

Probably one of the most significant contributions to the understanding of resilience came from Elder and his associates (Elder, 1974, 1979; Elder, Caspi, & van Nguyen, 1986; Elder, van Nguyen, & Caspi, 1985). Their findings reinforced the importance of families in combating the hardships of poverty. They found that both the mother and father each played differential roles. Vulnerable fathers, who were more affected by economic loss, were found to be more harsh in their approach to parenting. Mothers also were shown to be a significant buffer for the children exposed to the harsh parenting of their fathers. In addition, adolescents who were prone to temper outbursts and other behavioral problems also were more vulnerable to harsh parenting.

The constructs of resiliency and vulnerability have their roots in the field of developmental psychopathology (Cicchetti, 1990). From this perspective, resiliency and vulnerability are thought to be socially and psychologically determined. Bernard (1993) suggests that resilient youth usually possess three main attributes: social competence, autonomy, and optimism and hope.

#### *Social Competence*

The ability to interact socially with others appears to be a very strong trait characterizing resilient children. Responsiveness to others by being flexible, empathetic, caring, communicative, and possessing a sense of humor are examples

## Be Resilient?

child as one who has the ability to overcome severe risks (p. 44). Gordon and Rutter (1990) define "abuse survivors," "successors," "abuse survivors," or "successors" as individuals who have overcome the odds against good development and the human condition. In all likelihood, their family, school, and

community. Resilient youth are characterized by "resiliency" in numerous populations (Rutter, 1985) with disadvantaged children growing up in adverse cultural life. Emma Werner's longitudinal study (1992) with Kauai children found more risk factors during childhood and adolescence, she found that two-thirds of adolescents were experiencing

problems with teenage mothers. The Baltimore study was one of the first attempts to look at the mothers' life styles and the lives of 300 mothers older than 17 for 12 years. The parents were on welfare and had more children, more likely to be on welfare. Education (school) seemed to be a main predictor of parents who completed high school. Parents who dropped out at an early age were more likely to be pregnant during their school years. Researcher's contributions to the understanding of the role of the father (Elder, 1974, 1979; Elder, Caspi, & Rutter, 1985). Their findings reinforced the importance of relationships of poverty. They found that the role of the father is significant. Vulnerable fathers, who tend to be more harsh in their approach to discipline, are more likely to be a significant buffer for the child. In addition, adolescents with behavioral problems also were more

likely to have their roots in the field of psychology (Rutter, 1990). From this perspective, resilience is biologically and psychologically determined. Resilient youth possess three main attributes: hope, self-efficacy, and optimism.

Hope appears to be a very strong trait. Resilient youth possess the ability to connect to others by being flexible, and a sense of humor are examples

of these social qualities. Having these also ensures positive responses from others. Studies by Rutter (1990) and Chess and Thomas (1990) have shown that from early childhood on, resilient children tend to establish positive relationships with adults and peers. This helps to bond them to family members, classmates and teachers, and community leaders. This creates a strong social support system for dealing with adversity.

A major social quality distinguishing resilient from vulnerable youth is the ability to negotiate confrontation and challenge from others. In our past work with underserved children and youth, we have found, for example, that many of them are more inclined to settle disputes through verbal and physical confrontation. Ronald Taylor's (1994) comprehensive literature review of resiliency in African American youth link this type of behavior to the actions of family members. He has found that children and adolescents of parents experiencing economic hardship are more likely to be exposed to power-assertive and punitive discipline practices. Parents using these practices more than likely learned them from their parents. These practices are quickly learned by children, affecting how they interact with classmates. Such behavior is unpopular and results in rejection and isolation by their classmates.

The importance for underserved youth to acquire positive social skills is underscored by Albert Bandura (1990). His research on self-efficacy suggests that developing a positive social network can become cyclical. He believes that individuals who can begin to engender trust from others will create a valuable resource for nurturing self-respect. This will help to establish and perpetuate future social ties.

### Autonomy

Resilient children also are autonomous. That is, they have a clear sense of who they are and can act independently (Bernard, 1993). Most importantly, they have the ability to exert some control over their environment.

Yale University researchers Gordon and Song (1994) found the "maverick" type is more likely to overcome at-risk conditions than more conservative and conforming personalities. According to the researchers, they are particularly able to swim upstream. One interesting aspect of their findings was that some individuals were able to reject the peer pressure of gangs. For example, some members were able to withdraw from gang activity at appropriate times to attend more healthy activities, such as visiting museums, going to baseball games, and joining friends at a local swimming pool. They concluded that being goal-directed helped the "autonomous loner" separate him or herself to pursue personal achievement. This capacity to "march to a different drummer" appears to be a main component of those who defy negative patterns of behavior (Witkin, Moore, Goodenough, & Cox, 1977).

Gordon and Song (1994) temper this conclusion somewhat by emphasizing the importance of having a meaningful relationship with some significant other. They underscore the important role that the significant other plays in modeling, guiding, providing, and mentoring those who try to defy the odds against them. We also believe that while being autonomous is helpful, it may not be enough to inoculate oneself against the enormity of problems; support from others is needed. Gordon and Song are right in stating, "The experience of accountability to, or identification with, another person is viewed as a universal factor in human development" (p. 36). This, we have found, is no less true for youth who are underserved and at risk of failure.

Autonomy also is helpful in dealing with stressful events. Chess (1989) has referred to this process as "adaptive distancing," whereby children can separate themselves from dysfunctional family life. Berlin and Davis' (1989) investigation on families with alcoholism and mental illness found that resilient children were capable of detaching themselves enough to maintain outside pursuits and challenges. Such distancing set them apart from those children who had difficulty in maintaining positive relationships with peers and other adults.

*A Word of Caution About Autonomy.* Thus far, we have argued that if underserved youth are to acquire some degree of resiliency, a sense of autonomy must be enhanced. However, we have found that for some children and youth, gaining a sense of autonomy (control) can lead to undesirable behaviors. Strategies such as intimidation and abusive behavior, confrontations with authority figures, and selling drugs are a few examples of the ways children and youth have tried to gain mastery over their environment. We believe that urban and rural poverty represents a culture separate from the outside world with its own a set of values, language, and rituals. For most individuals living in poverty, being autonomous and in control have a much different meaning.

John Ogbu (Solomon, 1992) expands this thinking to the school setting. He contends that while most underserved children, especially African American, affirm the importance of schooling, they behave in a way that gets them into trouble. Their cultural values lead them to buck the system. Understanding the values of the underserved has important implication for those attempting to deliver programs for enhancing resiliency. We feel that this is a *requirement* for teaching mastery skills, such as goal-setting and decision-making, to children and youth who don't fit.

For example, one of the middle school students that we worked with from the Coaching Club felt that he was quite in control of things. Skipping classes, being disruptive, ignoring homework, and not paying attention were daily occurrences for him. He felt that simply getting to school, playing basketball, and just "doing his thing" were critical autonomous behaviors that legitimized his status in school and the neighborhood. In his mind, he had "mastered" the appropriate strategies of his culture. Peer pressure and gang values prevailed in his life. Consequently, getting him to set goals for better behavior and academic work was an impossible task. We found that it was important to teach him ways to accommodate (getting to class on time or not sleeping in class) without disconnecting him from his culture.

### *Optimism and Hope*

Another critical feature of resiliency is a sense of optimism and hope. These qualities enable the individual to set goals, persist, and believe that a bright future lies ahead. To understand the importance of optimism and hope, we refer to Martin Seligman's work on the concept of *learned helplessness*. Learned helpless children feel they have little, or no control over social and academic outcomes (Seligman, 1990). They will quickly give up when faced with a challenge or temporary setback.

Many of the studies on learned helplessness have compared learned helpless individuals to those who possess a strong sense of optimism (Dweck, 1975; Dweck

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& Licht, 1980; Finchum, Hakoda, & Sanders, 1989; Martinek & Griffith, 1993, 1994; Martinek & Williams, in press; Stipek & Kowalski, 1989). Unlike their learned helpless counterparts, hopeful youth focus their energies on figuring out ways of overcoming challenges. For them, setbacks are only temporary—they see effort and success inextricably tied together. According to Bernard (1991), resilient children possess this optimism and seldom demonstrate the passive behaviors associated with learned helplessness. They are able to apply alternative solutions to social and cognitive problems. Tied to this problem-solving ability is their knack for using outside resources for help. The Boys and Girls Clubs, community recreation centers, churches, community colleges, nonprofit outreach groups, Big Brother/Sisters organizations, and alternative school programs are but a few of the sources that have been accessed by young people seeking assistance.

### Sources of Vulnerability and Hopelessness

We have described how social competence, autonomy, and optimism and hope characterize resilient children and youth. Bernard (1991) believes that of these three factors, it is the lack of hope that has the greatest impact on an individual's vulnerability to at-risk conditions. Without hope, she says, the drive to change one's circumstance is diluted. It is important, therefore, to look at the causes of hopelessness and its link to vulnerability in underserved youth. Hopelessness has been found to be related to two main factors: *influence of significant others* and *environmental conditions*. Both of these have a profound impact on their perceptions of control and resiliency (Martinek, 1996).

#### *Influence of Significant Others*

Children raised in impoverished conditions are exposed to a multitude of behaviors that reflect hopelessness and indifference. One major source of these behaviors is parents or caregivers. Children are adept at observing how they respond to their own life circumstances (Masten, Best, & Garnezy, 1990). All children, served or underserved, look to adults for guidance. They will frequently ask "why?" in order to understand their world around them. Interacting with adults allows children to mature intellectually and to develop problem-solving capacity. For underserved children, where parents or caregivers struggle with their own problems, this question is seldom answered.

Seligman (1990) believes that when this happens, children will observe and listen. They use what they see and hear from adults to assess ways in which they should respond to similar situations. For children in poverty, the response of adults to impossible living conditions is viewed daily. We only have to travel through the neighborhoods of our cities and depressed rural pockets to see the devastating impact of poverty on adult life. In Chicago, for example, a trip down West Roosevelt Road along the Hawthorne<sup>2</sup> housing projects portrays human misery and hopelessness. Scores of African American adults, mostly male, roam back and forth along the street. Some seek order to their day by conferring with friends while others duck into adjacent vacated buildings, trying to buy or sell drugs. Others mostly look aimlessly among the broken bottles, garbage, and boarded buildings.

Amid all of this, youngsters stroll, sometimes with a mother or brother or sister, either going to school or trying to get to a nearby bus stop. For these young-

