RESILIENT CHILDREN: WHAT THEY TELL US ABOUT COPING WITH MALTREATMENT

Introduction

The costs of child maltreatment to children, families, and society have been extensively documented for the past 30 years. In 1990, the magnitude of child maltreatment led the U.S. Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect to declare the existence of a "national emergency"(Cicchetti, 1994). Particularly for children and adolescents, the costs are great and complex. They include the loss of self-esteem, a sense of identity, lack of trust and social skills, and a wide range of social, developmental, emotional and intellectual problems (Farber and Egeland, 1987). These costs suggest the need for social policy and programs to deal with teen pregnancy, drug and alcohol abuse, mental illness, and more serious delinquent behaviors. Maltreated adolescents have been reported to have more attention problems, more stress, and lower family cohesion that younger maltreated children (Crittenden, Claussen, and Sugarman, 1994).

The effects of violence and inadequate child rearing on children's development and overall adjustment has been studied within the context of a broad theoretical framework that considers the significance of developmental stages and environmental requirements. Despite the expanding knowledge of the impact of maltreatment, however, these phenomena have seldom been studied comprehensively and interactively in relation to adolescent adjustment (Wolfe and McGee, 1994).

Many researchers have looked at risk factors as to why children fail, become ill, or engage in delinquent behaviors as a result of adverse parenting and caretaking circumstances (Anthony, 1987; Baldwin, Baldwin, Kasser, Zax, Sameroff, and Seifer, 1993; Cicchetti,

Rogosch, Lynch, and Holt, 1993; Conrad and Hammen, 1993; Egeland, Carlson, and Sroufe, 1993; Garmezy, Masten, and Tellegen, 1984; Stouthamer-Loeber, Loeber, Farrington, Zhang, vanKammen, and Maguin, 1993; Radke-Yarrow and Brown, 1993; Spencer, Cole, DuPree, Glymph, and Pierre, 1993; Werner and Smith, 1982).

Along with these researchers, others have also studied protective factors that buffer negative outcomes for maltreated children (Cicchetti and Toth, 1992; Compas, 1987; Manly, Cicchetti, and Barnett, 1994; Radke-Yarrow and Sherman, 1990; Werner and Smith, 1982; Wolin and Wolin, 1993). Both risk and protective factors are essential to understanding the concept of resilience.

Assessing and observing behavior from a resilience perspective is an alternative paradigm to the disease model of viewing behavior. Masten (1989) noted that successful adaptation had been ignored by students of psychopathology, dominated by the disease model, and was concerned with symptoms, classification, prognosis, treatments, and risk factors. The interest in resilience is a transformation in theoretical conceptualizations and approaches to understanding the development of psychopathology. It is a positive approach, identifying strengths in individuals, and providing a basis for collaborative problem solving and empowerment of the individual.

Despite the fact that maltreatment exerts a deleterious impact on the developmental process, not all children are equally affected by their experience of maltreatment. Indeed, it would be surprising if all maltreated children displayed the same developmental profile. Baldwin, Baldwin, Kasser, Zax, Sameroff, and Seifer (1993) recognized that children develop in a dialectical process of meeting challenges, resolving them, and then meeting new ones. If the challenge is too severe, the developmental process breaks down. Resilience is a name for the

capacity of the child to meet a challenge and use it for psychological growth.

Research Questions

The intent of this research was to explore how adolescents have adapted to adversity in the parent-child relationship and how they may have coped by perceiving either an external or internal locus of safety. If a perception of safety, either external (school, friend, relative), or internal (fantasy and/or creativity), has been achieved, then these individuals may have developed a useful coping strategy to the abuse. Would this sense of safety provide a protective factor to the maltreatment, resulting in less negative behaviors by the child, or would the resultant successful adaptation to the maltreatment encourage a more resilient developmental process?

Therefore, the questions of this research were: what are the perceptions of adolescents regarding safety in their home environment? what internal and external areas have these youth explored in response to the search for safety?; are there similarities and/or differences for these adolescents in terms of outcome?

Population

The context for this study was an independent living program, developed and serviced by a private child care residential facility, in south central Pennsylvania. Adolescents are referred to the program through the courts, juvenile probation offices and county child welfare agencies. Participants in the independent living program live in foster care placements and/or situations where they are involved in independent living activities. They might attend school, be employed full or part time, and are encouraged to volunteer at various community work sites. Teens participate in mandatory weekly meetings that include group activities, speakers, workshops, videos, and take home assignments. They are required to demonstrate the ability to survive on

their own to successfully complete program goals.

Professionals participating in the study were child welfare caseworkers, foster mothers and child care workers. Their years of experience in working with children and adolescents in the child care system ranged from four to 25 years.

Research Methodology

The qualitative grounded theory method (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) was chosen for this study because the research questions focused on the exploration and explanation of adolescent perspectives of their coping methods to maltreatment based on their perceived areas of safety. While the relationship between familial conflict and child problems has been established, there has been an increasing need for process-oriented studies that specify the nature of this relationship. Therefore, the development of methodologies and approaches that go beyond the correlational and questionnaire-based clinical field methods is required in describing the effects of adults' angry behavior on children. Conceivably, in angry home environments, one might find qualitatively different relations between variables than are found in typical community samples (Cummings, Hennessy, Radideau, and Cicchetti, 1994).

Discovering the processes by which maltreated children develop adaptive personality organizations, despite aversive family experiences has been a central challenge for understanding resilience in children's development. Exploring aspects of parent-child relationships and interactions may elucidate qualitative points of divergence in the experiences of maltreated children that may influence the course of their development (Cicchetti, Rogosch, Lynch, and Holt, 1993). Life stories inform about individual dispositions and protective mechanisms that transcend cultural boundaries and operate effectively in a variety of high-risk contexts (Werner, 1993).

Grounded theory research aims at understanding how a group of people interprets their reality. Theories are generated using the everyday behaviors and organizational patterns of group members employing an inductive, from-the-ground-up approach. It is predicated on the assumptions that people make order and sense out of their environment although their world may appear disordered or nonsensical to others.

Participants were selected on the basis of theoretical sampling and participation was voluntary. Two groups chosen for the study were childcare professionals who were experienced in the field of child abuse and, adolescents who had experienced childhood maltreatment. A total of thirteen participants (7 adolescents, 3 child welfare caseworkers, 1 residential caseworker [independent living coordinator], and 2 foster parents) were interviewed. Demographics included four females and three male adolescents, ranging in age from 13 to 20 and all were Caucasian. The twenty-year-old male was living independently and fully employed. The 13-year-old male lived in the home of one of the foster mothers being interviewed and demonstrated competency behaviors in coping with his earlier abusive experience.

Three of the adolescent females lived in foster homes and attended public school; one was a senior and would graduate. The others were sophomores. Each had part or full-time jobs. The fourth had recently left foster care upon turning 18 and was living with a boyfriend. She was employed and continued to participate in the independent living program. All adolescents had a history of physical, sexual or emotional abuse, documented by self report, and corroborated by the child care professionals, as well as the case record review by the researcher.

Data was collected through three interviews (the first two in person; the third by telephone) with both the adolescents and the professionals, a review of case records and attendance at meetings of the independent living program. Two formal, semi-structured, open-

ended interviews were conducted with each to gather data. The interviews consisted of both direct and indirect questions and averaged 45 to 90 minutes. During the first round of interviews, the professionals were asked their opinions of the adaptation and coping skills of the adolescents with which they have worked. Adolescents were asked to relate their experiences of maltreatment, their feelings to the abuse and the perpetrator, and their response to the abuse.

Interview questions moved from the general to the specific, during the second round of interviews, based on formulated hypotheses from the first round of interviews. The specific aim was to clarify commonalties and similarities, which emerged from the interviews with all groups. The third round interviews were conducted for the purpose of obtaining participant input as to clarification or challenge to the findings from the first two interviews.

Management of the data (words) was done through content analysis of the field notes, audio tapes of the interviews, and records. Responses were categorized according to adaptation, coping and competency patterns. These were then used in the final analysis to indicate the presence of resilience factors. These patterns were then categorized into working hypotheses and themes of the meaning of the results of this qualitative field study.

 Results

Five major themes creating meaning for this grounded theory on resilience were revealed. They showed a developmental progression of the adolescents' perceptions of their skills in coping with the abusive environment. Each theme built on the other towards children finding a means to make sense of the abuse. The themes are: loyalty to parents, norming of the abusing environment, invisibility from the abuser, self-value, and future view of life.

Loyalty: the child's view of and feelings towards the abusing parent and their perception of the intentions and behaviors of their parents. Both child care professionals and adolescents

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identified an ongoing loyalty of the adolescents for their parents. This occurred in the form of a

defensiveness of their parent's actions and acknowledgment of the belief that their parents still

loved them and that they loved their parents.

> I never got to understand why he did the things he did and I never
> really had a dad and I wanted to get to know him, in spite of
> everything he did, because he was still my father.
> I needed a gentle hand to guide me, and I mean, they were just showing
> their love in a different way I guess. That is all I wanted was to be
> loved and they just had a different way of showing it.

Professionals described this loyalty,
> ...this father or mother or stepfather does other things for them
> besides hitting them. I mean they once in a while bring home a
> new pair of shoes and that kind of thing so that they have a
> loyalty to that kind of person.

Adaptive coping skills were indicated by the ability to separate the abusive behaviors of

the parent from the good parent and eventually to see the abusive behaviors as unrelated to the

actions of the child. They had the ability to see the abusing parent as both good and bad

categorizing them as the one who is hurtful, and also the one who does fun and caring things

with them. They evidenced a balancing of the parent-child relationship that provided a way for

the children to maintain self without fear of annihilation.

> ...if he had a bad day or if she had a bad day, and that person
> was drunk or just the little things would set them off most of the
> time. He was very short-tempered.

Normalcy: the perception of the abusive home environment as "normal" family life. Six

of the seven adolescents agreed that the ability to tolerate frequent abuse was tied to acceptance

of the abuse as ordinary family living. While professionals tended to assume and expect that

reactions to abuse would be negative, the adolescents viewed it as a common way of life.

> Being hit was normal, a way of life.
> But since it happened to me practically every day and

I grew up with it, I thought it was just something normal
that happened.

Professionals supported the perception that,
this is how my family is. I think it is something that maybe
they get themselves into a routine.

While being abused was by no means accepted, the presence of and expectation of being abused resulted in a sense of normalcy--a way of life--about the abuse. The adaptiveness of this perception, based on an acceptance of the way things are, to cope with the abusive environment, may have provided a protectiveness of not feeling trapped in this very frightening world.   This theme of normalizing the environment appeared to be an adaptive use of denial, strengthening the child's sense of control in a maltreating environment. The perception that an abusive home environment was not out of the ordinary provided a protective factor for resilience.

Invisibility: Both child care professionals and adolescents described behaviors indicative of the ability of the child to become "invisible" to avoid being available to the abuser and to minimize the opportunities to be in harm's way. Invisibility was accomplished by not being present in the view of the abuser through either externalizing or internalizing actions. Externalizing actions included absenting the house, going to one's room, not talking to the abuser, or, just "staying out of their way".

I wouldn't go around them for a couple of days. I kept my
distance. I spent the majority of the time in my bedroom.
Whenever I was in my room and my dad didn't leave me
alone, I went underneath the bed. I would go to my closet.
I had to lie to stay out of trouble. ...when I was older, I ran
away.
I tried forgetting about thinks that happened at home when I
was in school. I liked going to school so I could interact with
people. ... I liked running, jogging, getting out and walking.
After seven, I kind of moved out. I just was never home. I
would always be out with my friends. I would stay at other
people's houses.

Internalizing actions included daydreaming, play with various toys, writing, reading and numerous artistic endeavors. They were described:

> ...I would draw, play with my sister or just read or something. Actually I couldn't read. I didn't know how. I would just look at the pictures. ... I had a make believe friend named, Fred. He talked to me and was somebody to play with, somebody to help me out.
> I would daydream that just me and my brother and my mom, just us three in the house away from every thing. We would just be us and safe. I would draw. I would play with my toys.
> I had a bear for a make believe friend. I would talk to him, that he was the only one that really cared about me, the only one who is there, and who understands. He would just listen.
> I made little worlds with my Barbie dolls and had little hide away places with them, castles and unicorns and horses and flying horses.
> I had this really huge bear ... I used to sit on it to laugh and tell it stories when I was little. ... I started writing in sixth grade when I got a diary from a friend. It helped me a little because to me, I didn't think that anybody would really listen and at least, I knew that I got it out of my system somehow.

The ability to avoid being in the presence of the abuser, or to stay out of view, a perception of invisibleness, became a means by which these children managed the ongoing possibility of being maltreated. From this data, it became apparent that the ability to avoid the abuse had become a skill. Each time abuse was avoided, the behavior was reinforced and became an action the child was able to use to attain a sense of control as to what might happen to them.

This sense of invisibility was also observed in those youth who by dissociation or dissociate-like behaviors took themselves elsewhere in thought, while the abuse might have been occurring. In children who have experienced sexual abuse, this has already been established as an etiology of dissociative behaviors. The adolescents in this study who had been physically abused also indicated it. Similarities were observed between the childcare professionals and

adolescents in styles of coping with the abuse. The professionals also believed that children

coped with abuse by engaging in distancing behaviors either by physical actions or mental

actions.

> She would lose parts of conversations. She would shut
> down and go somewhere else. She wasn't aware of where
> she went. It was almost like a daydream state.
> They tend to be creative. They like to draw, they like to
> write poetry. They like to tell their story in a story form.
> They like to play control games, where they are the person
> in charge of the game and make the rules.
> They make their own little world. And that is their protection
> all day long ...they close off and they think their own way. They
> make their own set of rules on how to do things. They seem
> to channel energy towards a safety zone and that could be just
> about anything--reading, drawing, playing sports, being out of
> the home. They pick a safe place. The real world as the want
> it to be...like a fantasy island.

This coping strategy of invisibility for children, when successful, provided a perception

of safety that enabled them to feel some sense of being able to control what happened to them.

The more successful, the more this sense of control was strengthened. By repeatedly creating a

world of safety for themselves, they had power and control and believed that they were capable

of protecting themselves from hurt.

From an adult perspective, the behaviors used by these children may appear maladaptive.

While avoidance, manipulation, withdrawal, and dishonesty are generally viewed as

inappropriate and maladaptive behaviors, for children, left to their own survival instincts or

skills, they become behaviors to cope with danger and may become adaptive actions. They are

protective factors because they are adaptive towards growth of the individual.

<u>Self value</u>: the perception of being cared for, being valued, being "someone" and a

positive attitude about self. This perception appeared to be predicated on the successful

accomplishment of the first three themes. This theme emerged as a protective factor of resilience

in how successful children were in establishing value about themselves. Being valued meant

being loved, respected and belonging. Six of the seven adolescents had religious beliefs about

God as a higher power who was loving and who watched over them.

> I still have lots of work to do, but now I am a loving,
> caring person. I feel better about myself because I know
> that all of the things that I have accomplished, things that
> have happened to me, and that I am not the only one that
> is out there who is like me.
> The abuse experience made me stronger...cause I have had
> to work for a lot of what I have. I am funny at times. I am
> loud, I can be obnoxious at times, but I do understand people.
> No matter whatever happens, I know God will always protect
> me from everything.

The ability to overcome negative thoughts about self was a contributory factor towards

resilience. Professionals saw a "toughness" in children who make it successfully after

experiencing an abusive home. By not showing weakness, children actually reinforced strengths

within themselves. Knowing in themselves that they can be strong, and withstand the abuse,

enhances the value placed on self and is a protective factor. The discussions by both

professionals and adolescents followed a developmental pattern in how abused children viewed

self-value over a period of time. What they may have believed as children, they no longer

thought about themselves as adolescents.

> ...I was five and I wasn't big enough to make decisions.
> I was just a little girl. I realized later on that that is not how
> it was. Because I was just a little kid. When I was 12, I started
> looking at things differently.
> But then at that time I didn't think about it that much, because
> I was a little kid. Now that I think about it and I know more,
> he shouldn't have done it.
> When I was little, I thought it was my fault. When I was older,
> I realized it was the drugs and alcohol that made my father do
> things he wouldn't normally do. I did not feel safe as a child. Now

I am not scared of him and have stood up to him.

One professional noted that:
> I am excited in seeing change to be able to see children grow into
> adolescence and to young adulthood. It is very gratifying for me
> to see children have come from an abusive situation and go through
> various different stages, trials and tribulations, growth experiences,
> try to find their potential, their successes.

The experience of these adolescents was that their parents did not listen to them, talk to them or inquire about their feelings. Home life involved very little verbal interaction or communication among parents or children. The words that were heard were those of anger, threats, intimidation and demeaning, accusatory phrases: "you're dumb, you're no good, you'll never amount to anything, you're so ugly, stupid." Children who achieve value about themselves have been able to confront these statements and acquire more positive descriptions about the value of self.

Future view of life: the ability to visualize how a future might be. The final theme predicting resilience emerged regarding adolescent awareness and actualization of future capabilities. A potential for success was evident in terms of the child care professionals hopeful but cautious projection of future capabilities and the adolescents' optimism that they would be okay. If youth had inner strengths and knew at some level that they were survivors, they had more optimism that they were going to achieve goals. Many maintained part-time jobs, planned graduation from high school and anticipated being parents themselves.

> I have been trying to be independent. Hope is for a
> better tomorrow. I have a job.
> Yes, I am going to graduate. No matter what, I am going
> to graduate and I am going to college if I can.
> I want my parents to know that I am happy with my life now.
> For one, I am going to show my dad that I am somebody.

Positive future expectations have been linked with resilient adaptation (Wyman, Cowen,

Work, and Kerley, 1993). When individuals believe events and outcomes can be controlled, learned helplessness is avoided (Luthar, 1993; Werner, 1993). Belief in the future also carries an attitude of hopefulness, a common theme of the adolescent group in this study and a concept found in the research of Werner (1982), Egeland, Carlson, and Sroufe (1993), and Baldwin, Baldwin, Kasser, Zax, Sameroff, and Seifer (1993).

The processes by which maltreated children develop adaptive personalities and self-esteem are a challenge for understanding resilience in development (Cicchetti, Rogosch, Lynch, and Holt, 1993). The five themes that emerged from this research show a progression of children's' skills in coping with an abusive caregiver. Each theme builds on the other towards children finding a means to adapt to the abuse or towards maladaptive behaviors. The successful progression through each of these themes results in a more resilient adolescent who demonstrates competency and mastery of adolescent tasks and is able to achieve independence.

Abuse and neglect literature has extensively discussed the impact of abuse on children. The betrayal of the parent-child relationship robs the child of the essential nurturing environment wherein safety is established for the child's optimum opportunity for growth. Deprived of this security, the child searches other sources to establish a support base for this basic need. If a trusting relationship with the parent is not accomplished, the child will go elsewhere for safety.

Several resilience clusters, identified by Wolin and Wolin (1993), corroborated the emerging themes of these findings. Insight, a sensing or intuition that family life is untrustworthy, provides the context of the abusive events as an ordinary way of life. Because the stressfulness of any life event depends on a child's appraisal of it (Luthar and Ziglar, 1991), the abilities of the child to adjust to an abusive environment may depend on their ability to distinguish the abusing parent from the good parent. Abuse may be tolerated when it is balanced

with times when the parent does caring and loving activities with a child.

In the resilient child, initiative occurs when the child turns away form the frustration of their troubled parents and follows the call of their curiosity to go exploring. Creativity is a safe harbor of the imagination for refuge and rearranging life to one's pleasing (Wolin and Wolin, 1993). Adolescents in this study identified ways in which they were able to avoid the abuser and create their own world of safety from the abuse. Through play, reading, writing, creative activities and involvement with other families, real or created, they established a world where they perceived that they could be safe and protected. As children, the qualities of needed nurturing were assigned to transitional objects (bears, dolls, trucks).

If being valued is not provided by parents, resilient individuals are capable of attaining it through a perceived valuing by others, whether they are real or imagined. In reading, children can escape into worlds that adults may see as doomed childhood fantasy, but that provide assurance, methodical thinking, and optimism for the child (Wolin and Wolin, 1993). In their own created worlds, children can be in control and be loved and valued by those they chose to identify with until there is opportunity to receive this from an outside source.

Werner and Smith (1982) discussed children who kept the memories of childhood adversities at bay by being in the world, but not of it. Though not always real, the perception of invisibility was, when repeatedly successful for the child in avoiding abuse, adaptive, reinforcing the continuation of these behaviors in the child. An internal locus of control, the belief that shaping one's life is within your control, was found in the protective processes (Luthar, 1993; Werner, 1993).

Implications for social work practice

There are several implications from this study in the areas of research, child welfare

practice, policy and treatment modalities. While the intent of this study was to "hear it in the words of the children themselves", the sample size was very small. Larger sampling, a more diverse population regarding age, ethnicity, and geographic location would provide additional data. Future studies might be conducted with maltreated adolescents who may be receiving child welfare services, but continue to live with an abusive caregiver. Additional research with children, by developmental age categories, could be conducted to compare the emerging themes of this study. At what ages do children begin to separate the good and hurtful parent, or to normalize the abusive family environment? Also, a non-resilient comparison group would provide additional data to confirm or refute these findings.

Similar studies might be conducted with other child care professionals to confirm the findings from this population of participants. Also, because this study population had only Caucasian adolescents, a similar study with children of minorities, African American and Hispanic, should be conducted to compare results.

The results of this study do, however, provide additional considerations to working with children who have been maltreated. The child protection field has not reached consensus on the most pertinent criteria for assessing the safety of children at risk of maltreatment and no studies have examined the safety of maltreated children from a family preservation framework (DePanfilis and Scannapieco, 1994). The coping skills identified in this study should be viewed as strengths and skills to be built upon to assist children and their parents in providing in-home services. The use of play therapy can encourage a child to develop adaptive skills through play activities. It enhances coping strategies for children within the family when external supports cannot be provided to them to assure their safety. Invisibility activities can be developed or reinforced so that the child will have an internal support for coping. Children who are most

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vulnerable are those not expressing either external or internal protective factors. These children

may benefit from short term out of home care to establish a knowledge base of safety for the

child so they might begin to build resilience skills. Safety must be in place before adaptation and

treatment can begin (James, 1994).

It is important to be cautious regarding the findings of this study in relation to policy

development. If the indication is that children are resilient and, therefore, possibly self-

correcting, some may advocate for fewer dollars and programs for the abused child.   Although

many children are resilient, we do not know the numbers. We do know, however, through

extensive research, than many children are and will continue to be seriously abused. They need

ongoing protection and advocacy for policies and programs that provide protection in terms of

community services and treatment programs for maltreating families.

Finally, children give us the clues, through their behaviors, activities and interests as to

how they may be coping with life events. We need to go there with them, in their play and

activities, and listen to them. They are forgiving and willing to give parents numerous

opportunities to "get it right". Treatment programs need to be family centered, with support

systems that understand and encourage the preservation of the parent-child relationship.

Treatment based on the strengths and coping behaviors of children is potentially more beneficial

for the growth of abused children.

There has been no intent to minimize the experience of abuse on individuals. There is

horror and fear of living with abuse; of being hit by someone who is out of control. Rather it is

to say that many children are able to find the ability within themselves to be in control when

another is out of control. These behaviors may look chaotic and nonsensical to others as they

attempt to make sense out of their experience. What may appear to be maladaptive defense

mechanisms for adults, may be in reality, very adaptive to children attempting to cope with an adult abuser. Because this defies logic, the child's solution may also appear illogical. It is the child's strength and creative problem solving that assures resilience.

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