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HOW TO FOSTER RESILIENCE IN AN OSHC SETTING

Background

With the increasing number of children accessing Outside School Hours Care as well as the significant amount of time children are spending in OSHC, there is a growing responsibility for OSHC centres and OSHC staff to provide a safe and secure environment, and an environment that stimulates the growth of a child's inner capabilities. Resilience is often seen as one of the most important characteristics that children need to develop to live a mentally healthy, productive and positive life. Research suggests that resilience is also one of the major attributes that seems to have declined in both children and adults over the past two decades.

For the purpose of this research project, resilience is defined as "the ability to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change" (Macquarie Dictionary). With this definition in mind we can see again how important it is for children to develop resilience. Change and misfortune are a big part of life for anyone, but especially for young children who may not have developed deep understanding behind big changes or misfortunes that show themselves in their lives.

"Resilience is important mostly for our mental health. It's a life skill we take with us into adulthood. It is thought that the more resilient a person is, the less they experience stress as they are equipped to deal with life's pressures. Building resilience in children helps them to overcome obstacles more easily and reduces the chances of them suffering from anxiety or other stress-related disorders."

Research Questions

The following research questions were provided to educators involved in making observations of children during OSHC sessions:

- What impact does time have on the children's capacity to experience resilience in their play?

- What is the key motivation that encourages children to show resilience?

- How does the physical environment effect the amount of engagement the children have in their play?

- How do the playworkers reactions and dialogue effect how a child perceives an event? Do their strategies or ways of talking/acting aid or hinder the amount of resilience shown by the children?

- How does adulteration (adding adult agendas or ideas to play) effect the play? How does adulteration effect resilience?

Research Method and Data Collection

The specific aim of this research was to analyse how children authentically and intrinsically develop strategies which build resilience, as well as the types of experiences that foster the development of resilience. The study was conducted over a seven month period, and took place at two OSHC services; Camp Hill Outside Hours School Care (CHOSHC) and Mooloolaba Outside School Hours Care (MOSHC). As a qualitative ethnographic study we used case study and observations to gather our data. A case study design is important for several reasons. First, it is an effective method to investigate, explore, understand and describe individuals' social behaviour or complex issues within a specific context or real world settings which may not be obtained through survey research (Harrison, Birks, Franklin & Mills, 2017). Second, it can help to understand the behavioural conditions through the participants' perspective, complex interventions, relationships, communities, or programs (Yin, 2014). In addition, it is a valuable method for OSHC research to develop theory, evaluate programs, and develop interventions because of its flexibility and rigor (Baxter & Jack, 2008). According to Yin (2003, as cited in Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 545) a case study design should be considered when: (a) the focus of the study is to answer "how" and "why" questions; (b) the behaviour of those involved in the study cannot be manipulated; (c) contextual conditions need to be considered due to their relevance to the phenomenon under study; or (d) when the boundaries are not clear between the phenomenon and context.

For this action research, a qualitative ethnographic study was considered appropriate enabling the researchers to observe how children build and grow their resilience in an authentic, "real-life" setting. In this case the two OSHC services provided the authentic, real-life setting for this study. The researchers gathered over one hundred and fifty observations of children as they navigated their environment. It is noted that some of the children being observed may have spent close to, or more than, 20 hours of their waking week at the service. Both OSHC services chose to employ an unobtrusive approach to supervision when collecting observations, allowing the researchers to ensure the environment and play frames created by children could remain as natural and as unadulterated as possible. This enabled the researchers to observe and consider how children naturally deal with change and adversity. It was intended to identify the factors that lead to resilience in children so that a strategy could be devised that would authentically enhance the intrinsic nature of children in this regard.

Theoretical Framework

Two predominant theories were used to analyse the data. These were 'flow theory' and 'the zone of proximal development (ZPD)'. The work Csikszentmihalyi on flow theory identifies three primary areas of orientation which are comfort zone, flow or growth zone, and the panic or fear zone. Children experience optimised growth and development and therefore build resilience when in the 'flow state'. Vygotsky's zone of proximal development refers to the difference between what a learner can do without help and what he or she can achieve with guidance and encouragement from a skilled partner such as another child during play. Children develop skills and mastering through scaffolding in the ZPD.

The researchers also considered the work of Carol Dweck on 'Growth Mindsets' which promotes that an individual's basic qualities can be cultivated through efforts and that the development of a growth mindset naturally enhances resilience.

Findings

Observations were classified according to two themes, those actions and environments that build resilience and those that hinder resilience. The data sets from each site were compared, matched and grouped into the relevant themes.

The actions and environments that built resilience included:

- Intrinsically motivated play

- Taking on responsibility

- Allowing/encouraging controlled risks (or challenge)

- Allowing children to deal with social problems independently (time and tools to self assess when facing adversity)

- Manipulable (loose parts) environments allowing for problem creation and problem solving

- Engaging play frames ad peer pressure to continue when adversity arises

- Employing positive and encouraging dialogue and body language when dealing with adversity, either in individual or group settings

- Larger chunks of uninterrupted time

The actions and environments that hindered resilience included:

- Rushing to check or offering medical assistance as a first resort of minor injury

- Approaching children in times of adversity

- Adulterating play frames , play and rules

- The presence of adults

- Solving verbal disputes for children

- Adults modelling and demonstrating unresilient behaviour. eg. Complaining about the work or weather around children as well as displaying apathy in the face of challenges.

One of the most significant findings from this project was the impact of the physical environment. It was identified that in less manipulable environments, where the physical elements are unmovable, or the physical elements have a very fixed affordance, children displayed far less resilient behaviours. The opposite was also true, children in highly manipulable environments, where the physical elements are movable and the physical elements offer a wide range of affordance, show far more resilience building behaviours.

The mental and emotional impact of a play space or an OSHC setting should never be under estimated. The rules, how the adults interacted with children, and how much freedom the children felt they had played a huge role in their ability to express resilience building behaviour. When adults create an environment that has the 'minimal amount of rules necessary' (it is not possible to have an environment with no rules, however the rules put in place were very critically thought out and only the rules deemed necessary for safety were maintained). It was found that children engaged in far more creative and stimulating play. The children also approached adults significantly less to deal with their problems.

Affordance

Affordance is what the environment offers the individual. That is perceiving the environment or objects within it in terms of possibilities for action (affordances).

Recommendations and Future Directions

- Create a physical environment that can be easily manipulated. Loose Parts play theory is a great way to encourage 'problem creation' and 'problem solving' that is relatable to children of all ages, genders and skill levels.

- Introduce controllable risk elements to the play space – trees to climb, rope swings, fire, heavy materials, tools (hammers, nails etc..), and real life objects such as scissors and screwdrivers. This promotes trust and competence, which in turn ,results in children having faith and confidence in themselves. This contributes to more resilient behaviour.

- Allow for large chunks of time when scheduling and programming. Avoiding adulteration allows a child to enter a flow state more readily. Solving problems and challenges takes time, sometimes minute, sometimes weeks. By allowing a child to take the time needed to complete the task, they are afforded the opportunity to experience what it feels like to overcome challenges. This builds confidence in their own abilities and leads to a growth mindset.

- Apply the least amount of rules possible to the play area and the way children play and interact with each other (this does not mean no rules, it means critically re-thinking all the rules you have in place and removing the ones that aren't needed) thus showing respect and confidence in the children's ability to create their own rules and structure around their play.

- During times of adversity/challenge, allow the children time to self asses and recover by themselves. Offer support but only if it is evident that the child cannot overcome the situation on their own.

- As a service, develop specific dialogue that encourages and instils confidence, enabling children to overcome adverse situations independently.

- Allow free, unadulterated play.

- Allow multi aged play to stimulate the ZPD

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