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Brief on Resilience and Children's Rights The aftermath of Public Sector Workers Strikes in South Africa

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1. Helping children to 'bounce back' in present difficult times

Children in difficult circumstances have a right to *every appropriate measure to promote their psychological recovery and social reintegration* (Article 39 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child). All those concerned for children should take on this challenge!

Recent circumstances have been difficult for children in South Africa. Their educational rights have been adversely affected by the strikes and intimidation at their schools. They have been turned away from hospitals and clinics and their right to health care has been violated. Children who have been interviewed have expressed anxiety and even anger; they speak of a breakdown in trust. Children will be stressed over many months to come.

Are children naturally resilient and will they quickly recover?

2. What helps children to be resilient?

Resilience refers to the capacity to cope with stress, overcome adversity or adapt positively to change. It is not a single quality but rather a process that depends on individual temperament, modified by learning and experience. The support of family and community play a vital part in developing and enhancing resilience in any individual, including children.

Research shows that certain characteristics in children help them to bounce back in the face of stressful events and situations. This includes the following (with advice to parents and caregivers in red):

- **A loving relationship with at least one adult and therefore a belief that they are lovable**
So take time to build the relationship – play with your children!
- **A belief in one's own effectiveness and ability to make things better for oneself**
So offer information and provide opportunities to help them achieve!
- **Ability to assist the family or group/class**
So give them tasks and make sure their help is appreciated and praised!



- **Connections to adults outside the immediate family**
So help build links in your community for children!
- **Effective problem solving**
So discuss real-life problems with children and take their suggestions seriously!
- **Having spiritual resources or a vision of some greater good** beyond the individual or family
So try to share your deepest values and hopes with children!

Help children cope with stress – some suggestions:

- Help children talk about what is bothering them. Keep them informed and discuss the situation with them, taking their views seriously.
- Teach relaxation skills. Show children how to relax by remembering and imagining pleasant situations like a favourite place or happy experience.
- Promote play activities to help them feel relaxed and happy in a caring group environment.
- Encourage physical exercise to release emotions and feel connected and whole.
- Teach children that mistakes are alright. Let them know that all people, including you, make mistakes. Mistakes are for learning.
- Be clear about rules and consequences. When there is no choice, let children know specifically what is expected of them. When they have a choice, discuss outcomes and decide together what the rules should be. Decide together, also, on consequences for misbehaviour. Then follow through. Having boundaries reduces stress in children.
- Teach ways of handling difficult situations. Talk through and role-play with children different ways in which they can handle a stressful situation.
- Tell stories about survivors who dealt with stress and how they coped.
- Be a role model for children in handling your own stress in a healthy way.

If a child or adult shows signs of severe stress or depression such as not coping with everyday home and school routines, is nervous, jumpy or scared of loud noise or sudden movement, or has emotional outbursts, or is experiencing anxiety, nightmares, constant thoughts or memories of a trauma (and this lasts longer than a week or two, or if a person is self-medicating by drugs, alcohol, smoking), it is a sign that you should seek expert help from a counsellor or psychologist.

If you or someone you know needs help, contact:

Anytime: Hours 8am to 8pm, 365 days a year

South African Depression and Anxiety Group Helpline: 0800 20 50 26

Suicide Crisis Line: 0800 567 567 or 0800 567 567; SMS 31393

SADAG Mental Health Line: 011 262 6396 or 011 262 6396

During office hours for professional help or a Support Group in your area

SADAG: 011 262 6396 or 011 262 6396

To learn more from the internet, go to:

South African Depression and Anxiety Group: www.sadag.co.za

South African Federation for Mental Health: www.safmh.org.za

CHILD SPECIFIC SITES:

Empilweni : www.empilweni.org

Dlalanathi: www.dlalanathi.org.za



3. Building resilience in communities

Eleven factors play a role in building resilient individuals, groups and communities, according to D. Hegney and others in the booklet: *Building Resilience in Rural Communities Toolkit* (the University of Queensland and University of Southern Queensland, 2008):

1. **Social Networks and Support:** Social networks build a sense of community that contributes to the resilience of individuals and groups by providing strong bonds within a group; a sense of belonging, identity and social support; and strong linkages to other outside groups that can bring in additional social, financial or political resources
2. **Positive Outlook:** Having a positive outlook involves being confident and optimistic about the future, persevering, being determined, keeping a sense of humour, and having a willingness to change. Individuals and groups with a positive outlook tend to view adversity or hardship as a challenge to be overcome rather than an insurmountable problem.
3. **Learning and Reflecting:** Resilience can be built through learning to cope with life's challenges. We learn from experiences and from role models as well as in more formal educational situations. The ability to reflect can be a powerful learning tool especially when lessons can be drawn from previous experiences. Communities can learn from collective experiences such as a natural disaster, and develop their resilience when faced with future adversity. A positive strategy is to learn from the experiences of others who have confronted significant challenges yet lived to tell the tale. Such a focus fosters optimism, an essential tool in the healing process. Storytelling is a process that has been used by Indigenous peoples for thousands of years to enhance the process of reflection and enable meaningful learning.
4. **Early Experiences:** The experiences that people have during their childhood and teenage years can have an enormous impact upon their later wellbeing. Early childhood experiences that are influential in building resilience include the degree to which carers meet emotional and physiological needs, the consistency and appropriateness of discipline, the opportunities for learning and growth provided, and the values transmitted by important role models. Instilling pride in a child's cultural or ethnic heritage is also an important source of self esteem and identity in later life.
5. **Environment and Lifestyle:** Many aspects of the natural and built environment have an important influence on psychological wellbeing and impact upon individual and community resilience. Environments that are noisy and dilapidated are associated with social withdrawal, and have been shown to discourage the establishment of social relations with neighbours and the elderly. Satisfaction with different features of a neighbourhood (social, economic, and physical) leads to overall satisfaction with quality of life.
6. **Infrastructure and Support Services:** Infrastructure such as water supplies, public transport, recreational services, health services, schools and telecommunications are important tools which enable people to carry out their daily activities. These facilities and services allow individuals and communities to function well and recover from adversity. The absence of important facilities and support services within a community is detrimental to the quality of life of its members and makes them vulnerable and less resilient.



7. **Sense of Purpose:** Having a sense of purpose or meaning in life is an important component of resilience because it provides motivation, focus, and a future, as well as present orientation. Having a sense of purpose enables individual people to work towards important goals and see the 'bigger picture' in times of hardship or stress. At the community level, a shared sense of purpose enhances community resilience by creating common objectives and encouraging community members to work together for the 'greater good'.
8. **Diverse and Innovative Economy - quality of life:** There is a need, especially in rural communities, to work towards the community's benefit, revitalise the local community and improve its quality of life.
9. **Embracing Differences:** By embracing the individual differences within a community, unique qualities and differences between people are accepted and valued, allowing diverse groups to thrive together. It prevents rifts and the targeting of 'scapegoats' in difficult times.
10. **Leadership:** Leadership can build resilience at the individual, group and community level if it acts with integrity, decisiveness, competence and vision. Leaders can set up helpful structures and processes to allow individuals, groups and communities to achieve their goals and work toward their full potential. A transformational leader helps their followers to achieve heights by addressing higher needs and aspirations, and by sharing and engaging them in a mission or vision that transforms their perspective or outlook.
11. **Beliefs:** The concept of beliefs incorporates spirituality, a connection with nature, and all types of religious beliefs that enhance the life of individuals and groups. Belief systems have been shown to enhance personal and community resilience, often by providing people with an additional sense of meaning and purpose in their everyday lives. As well as the many forms of organised religion, practices such as 'rites of passage' and 'coming of age rituals' may contribute to the resilience process. Faith-based groups also contribute to social networks and support and provide individuals with a sense of belonging.

