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Resilience in young children involved with child protective services

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ABSTRACT

Child maltreatment increases the risk of poor developmental outcomes. However, some children display resilience, meaning they are high-functioning despite their adverse experiences. To date, few research studies have examined protective factors among very young maltreated children. Yet, levels of resilience, and the protective factors that promote resilience among maltreated children, are likely to differ by developmental stage. Drawing on ecological systems theory and life course theory, we examined how protective factors at multiple ecological levels across early childhood were related to social and cognitive resilience among very young children involved with child protective services. The results demonstrated that the buffering effects of protective factors varied by social or cognitive resilience and the cumulative effects of protective factors were more consistently related to later resilience than protective factors at specific time points. In addition, the influence of specific protective factors on resilience slightly varied by initial in-home or out-of-home placement. These findings have important policy and research implications for promoting optimal development among children involved in child protective services.

1. Introduction

In 2015, child protective services (CPS) investigated allegations of maltreatment involving over 3 million children (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2017). CPS-involved children are at significant risk of adverse developmental outcomes, irrespective of whether there was sufficient evidence to substantiate them as victims of child maltreatment (Hussey et al., 2005). Young children are particularly vulnerable: 6.8% of U.S. children under 1 year of age were the subject of a CPS investigation in 2014, compared with 4.3% of U.S. children overall (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016). Although recognition of these negative impacts has rightfully made child maltreatment prevention a top priority among researchers and governmental and advocacy groups (Zimmerman & Mercy 2010), we must also identify factors that promote resilience among children who have already been victimized or exposed to serious risk.

Resilience, which refers to positive adaptation to adverse circumstances, is understudied among children at risk of or exposed to maltreatment. Despite that the first few years of life are when children are at the highest risk of maltreatment (Wildeman et al., 2014), factors promoting resilience among very young maltreated children are not well-identified (Cicchetti, 2013; Klika & Herrenkohl, 2013). Resilience during early childhood is likely to promote continued positive development. Indeed, children's school readiness and performance during their early years of schooling are predictive of later academic achievement (Duncan & Magnuson, 2011). In this study, we used ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1994) and life course theory (Elder, 1998) to investigate whether children's emotional regulation abilities (self-regulation and easy temperament), parenting behavior (cognitive stimulation and emotional support), and neighborhood cohesion operate as protective factors for CPS-involved children.

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Specifically, we examined how early temperament and regulation abilities, parenting behavior, and neighborhood quality across early childhood, were associated with cognitive, social, and multi-domain resilience at school entry among children involved with CPS prior to age 1. Using a nationally representative sample of CPS investigations, we address three research questions: (1) What protective factors across early childhood promote resilience at school entry among CPS-involved children?; (2) Does the timing, accumulation, and inconsistency of parenting and neighborhood protective factors matter for resilience?; and (3) Are the benefits of parenting and neighborhood protective factors equivalent for children who remained in the home as compared with children initially placed outside the home?

2. Identifying resilience

Generally defined, resilience is a dynamic process of positive adaptation following the presence of a significant risk (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000). Positive adaptation is generally defined in one of three ways: (1) avoiding psychopathology (Tiet et al., 1998), (2) outperforming peers in similar risky environments (Rutter, 2006), or (3) displaying competence in normative developmental tasks (meaning performing better than peers in non-risky environments; Masten, 2001). In studies of maltreatment, it is common to measure resilience as being at or above normative developmental standards (Jaffee and Gallop, 2007). By this standard, it was estimated that anywhere from 37% to 49% of children, aged 8–16 years, displayed resilience in either social skills or school achievement (Jaffee and Gallop, 2007). In this study, we focused on normative development as a marker of resilience.

Children may perform differently across developmental domains (e.g., social, emotional, academic, health), and studies vary as to whether, to be identified as resilient, a child must show positive adaptation in a single domain or multiple domains (Luthar et al., 2000). Among maltreated children ages 8–10, the rate of resilience was found to vary from 63% to 88% depending on whether the focus was academic, behavior, or social competence (Walsh, Dawson, & Mattingly, 2010). Children were found to be less resilient when using multiple domains than any single domain (27% versus 45%; Walsh et al., 2010). Although these studies demonstrate that resilience varies based on developmental domains, there is still little research on resilience among young children who experience maltreatment. Thus, we examined cognitive and social resilience separately, as well as, displaying resilience in both domains (hereafter referred to as “multi-domain resilience”) in a sample of children observed prior to one year of age through school entry.

3. Protective factors

To improve the prospects of children exposed to maltreatment, it is important to identify factors associated with healthy development among high-risk children. Protective factors can moderate the effects of different risks and are positively associated with better developmental outcomes among children exposed to various risk environments (Luthar, Crossman, & Small, 2015). Protective factors can be found at the individual, family, and community levels (Luthar et al., 2015). Bronfenbrenner’s (1994) ecological systems theory posits that a person develops within a set of nested environments and multiple ecological levels influence an individual’s development both directly and through interactions among ecological levels. By using an ecological systems framework to study resilience, it can be expected that protective factors at multiple ecological levels might promote resilience.

3.1. Individual-level protective factors

Several individual-level protective factors have been shown to promote positive development following maltreatment, such as ego resiliency or self-efficacy (Afifi & MacMillan, 2011; Cicchetti, 2013). However, a much larger body of research has focused on protective factors for older children, rather than younger children, who have experienced maltreatment. An extensive body of research has identified easy temperament and self-regulation as protective factors for maltreated children (Afifi & MacMillan, 2011; Werner, 1992; Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012). Easy temperament might contribute to positive development by eliciting positive attention from family and others (Werner, 1992), thereby increasing the likelihood of receiving help following maltreatment or receiving positive support from non-offending caretakers concurrent with the maltreatment exposure. Children with easy temperament also tend to be less reactive to stressors and to use more flexible coping strategies (Compas, Connor-Smith, & Jaser, 2004). Self-regulation is the ability to control, or regulate, one’s emotional and behavioral responses following a stressor (Eisenberg, Valiente, & Eggum, 2010). Self-regulation, such as self-soothing behaviors in infants, could help children navigate stressful situations (Eisenberg et al., 2010). Higher self-regulation was shown to be a protective factor among children, aged 8–18 years, living in low-income households and was associated with better social and academic outcomes (Buckner et al., 2009). Effortful control, a voluntary aspect of self-regulation, has also been cited as being protective among homeless children (Obrovčić, 2010). Although self-regulation is often considered a malleable skill, aspects of self-regulatory ability are static; for example, behavioral inhibition is stabilized by 1 year of age (Hoyle, 2006). Thus, we focused on early self-regulation (prior to 1 year of age) as a potential protective factor.

3.2. Family-level protective factors

Children who receive nurturing and cognitively stimulating parenting are better positioned for normative development (Afifi & MacMillan, 2011). Receiving nurturance from a caregiver has been found to be beneficial for children’s development regardless of risk; however, maltreated children may benefit from high-quality parenting differently. Prior research has shown that children who received inadequate nurturing exhibit weakened responses to familiar persons and pleasant experiences (Fries, Ziegler, Kurian, Jacoris, & Pollak, 2005). Thus, maltreated children may require higher levels of, or more consistent, parenting than children

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