Developing children’s resilience

University of Brighton research is helping children, young people and their families who are facing challenges or adversity to build resilience and to create better outcomes in all aspects of their lives.

Why do some children and young people facing similar difficulties do better than others? And what can we do to help those who struggle? These questions led Professor Angie Hart to consider what resilience means and how it affects each of us. “Our primary interest is in helping children and young people who are facing challenges or adversity because of mental health issues, deprivation, social inequalities or a range of other causes,” said Professor Hart. “Our goal is to help them build resilience to these challenges and to create better outcomes in all aspects of their lives.”

Resilience research has a long history, but by the mid-1990s there had been no systematic, yet easy to apply, synthesis of this work in relation to disadvantaged children and families. Professor Hart and colleagues reviewed more than 1,000 publications on resilience, challenging the view that resilience resides solely in individuals, rather than arising from person-environment interactions. Insights from this work and the activities of an inclusive partnership that involved academics, practitioners, parents and young people as part of their work with young people were used to develop a new approach to resilience building, known as Resilient Therapy, which has improved attainment, led to better life outcomes in all aspects of their lives.

In Malaysia an orphanage supporting 150 children have adopted Resilient Therapy in partnership with their local university. An approach for schools called Academic Resilience has been devised by Lisa Williams and Professor Hart, and adopted by YoungMinds. Partnership work to develop the approach is ongoing.

In the UK boingboing has helped deliver work to schools, increasing opportunities to 10 local authorities, including Brighton, West Sussex, the London Borough of Havering and Hampshire. Resilience-based practice is now a central aspect of their work with young people and families. In Sweden, 500 professionals have been trained in Brighton’s resilience approaches and a resilience-based approach has been adopted in over 30 schools and preschools and as part of healthcare services for the 10,000 children and young people living in the local area. The Brighton approach to resilience has also been used to guide the delivery of children and family services in Greece and Germany.

Brighton’s resilience approach has impacted public policy, and the Chief Medical Officer for the UK included details of Resilient Therapy in the 2012 annual report. The Big Lottery Fund invited Professor Hart to join a panel of five decision makers advising a £75 million fund to boost resilience in schools and local service systems. As Lynda Cole, Deputy Director, England for the Big Lottery Fund described: “We’ve drawn on Angie Hart’s extensive research in emotional resilience theory and practice, combined with her own experience of working in child and adolescent mental health services. Angie is one of the major driving forces behind Resilience.” She is a key member of our expert panel and sat as a member of our HeadStart Committee, which recently saw grants awarded to HeadStart projects across England to run test and learn projects over the next 18 months.”

Discussion from the University of Brighton workshop formed the basis of Mind’s national briefing to the network of 150 local Minds as to our overall approach to resilience.

Dave Lowson, Local Services Strategy Manager, Mind, the UK mental health charity.