How Children's Programs at Churches Promote Resilience and How They Can be Enhanced

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How Children’s Programs at Churches Promote Resilience and How they can be Enhanced

An Honor’s Thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Departmental Honors in
Psychology
Department of Psychology

College of Arts & Sciences
Eastern Michigan University

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Dawn Blanton
Abstract

Sunday School teachers, their students, administrators and clergy in three Protestant churches were interviewed to discover the degree to which the cognitive, emotional, and material aspects which promote resilience in youths (Laursen & Birmingham, 2003) were incorporated into their programs. The results suggested that churches do possess attributes that promote healthy cognitive and emotional development in children. In addition, every church provided for the material needs of the children in their church and community. Thus, churches are important community resources for at-risk children that can help promote resiliency. Recommendations are made for improvement of the programs. More generally, a model to assess and improve programs is proposed.
How Children's Programs at Churches Promote Resilience and
How They Can Be Enhanced

There is no question that many children face difficulties that challenge their ability to
grow and develop in a manner that promotes emotional and cognitive well-being. For
example, the National Data Analysis Service (2003), the data-gathering agency for the Child
Welfare League of America, reported that there were 661,210 verified incidences of child
abuse and neglect in 2003. The 2004 poverty rate for children under age 18, which was 17.8
percent, was higher than the poverty rate of any other age group in the United States (U.S.
Census Bureau, 2005). According to a U.S. Census Bureau report (Fields, 2003), roughly 20
million of the 72 million children in America in 2002 lived in single parent homes and
another 2.88 million children with neither parent. Children in these types of living
arrangements had less access to economic resources and parental attention and progressed
less steadily in school than children living in two parent homes. In 1999 approximately 1.5
million children had a parent who was incarcerated (Sherman, 2005), and this can cause
emotional distress and negative behaviors, such as skipping school, or leaving home. In
addition, maternal incarceration greatly affects younger children who need nurturing social
interactions during the formative years to develop normally.

Although the statistics paint a grim picture, some of these vulnerable children rise out
of their negative circumstances and thrive. Much research has been devoted to identifying
these resilient children and the attributes that enable them to develop normally.

This study is meant to assess whether children's programs at three evangelical
Protestant churches possess the qualities that have been identified as promoting resilience in
children. If they already do, then it would be helpful to churches to know in what ways their
programs help children. If specific recommendations can be made which would help them make children more resilient, then this is likely to be appreciated. These three churches try hard to serve families and children, some of whom are very poor.

The Definition of Resiliency

The meaning of resilience has been interpreted in the psychological literature in many ways. In a review of the existing literature on resiliency, Harvey and Delfabbro (2004) observed that it has been difficult to develop a functional definition. For example, cultural differences result in diverse ideas of what resilience is. The general definition is the ability to function in a way that is socially and culturally defined as normal or within the permitted range as measured behaviorally, socially or intellectually. All research on resilience operates on the basic premise that most people experience negative life events and that resilience is the result of several positive factors which interact to promote healthy development in an individual despite stressful and/or negative events.

According to Rutter (1985), resilience is developed not by avoiding a stressor, but by dealing with negative circumstances in a positive way. Accordingly, the focus in resilience research should not be on the factors themselves, but on the process of successfully adapting to a negative life event. Rutter (1987) recommends that in resiliency research, attention should be given to the investigation of factors (which he calls “mechanisms”) which intervene during crucial moments in an individual’s life that change the direction of the life course from a negative to a positive one.

The Connection between Resiliency and Religion

In a study of impoverished black children that included exploring whether the degree of religious involvement of parents affected the behaviors of children, regular church
attendance was related to a decreased number of parental reports of oppositional behavior and conflict with peers. (It should be noted that levels of defiance and oppositional behavior in this group of children were also related to the attribution style of their parents with regard to race. Specifically, of the parents who attributed their problems to others’ prejudices, those who did not attend church regularly reported more behavioral problems, while those who attended regularly reported fewer behavioral problems.) In addition, parents who regularly attended church also reported fewer problems with depression and immature behavior of their children. The authors offered several hypotheses for the positive effects of regular church attendance: (1) It is a method of coping that promotes a decrease in parental stress; (2) It provides social support for both parents and children; and (3) religious values may be transmitted to children serving to increase levels of self-control by encouraging “obedience, patience, delay of gratification and control of anger.” They also postulated that the level of “spirituality” of the parents, rather than church attendance itself, was the main factor in reducing stress and promoting positive behavior among their children. Regardless, Christian and Barbarin (2001) advised strengthening the religious organizations existing within African American communities because of the evidence of a relationship between attending religious services and a reduced number of problem behaviors of children as reported by their parents.

In Werner and Smith’s (1982) study of the high-risk children on Kauai, they investigated the sources of support that were available to resilient youths. In this resilient group, 11.5% of the children cited that ministers had provided social support. Several of the resilient individuals also reported having “strong faith.” This was especially interesting, because the children of this group belonged to various religions and Christian denominations, suggesting that religious involvement of any kind is resilience-promoting. They asserted that
religion had provided a stable place for them when other situations in their lives were in turmoil. In addition, "religious mentors, ministers, and members of church youth organizations" provided an important source of support in times of trouble.

These findings are not unique. In fact, religion and belonging to a religious community were also found to have a mediating effect on stress in Klingman's (2000) study of children facing possible expulsion from their homes in the Golan Heights.

The Relationship between Social Support and Resiliency

In a literature review of the existing studies on resilience, Wolkow and Ferguson (2001) found evidence that relationships with caring adults promote resiliency among at-risk youth. The evidence was considerable enough for them to conclude that instituting community programs to cultivate positive relationships between adults and vulnerable children is important for improving the lives of at-risk children. Rutter (1987) also confirmed that the impact of risk factors can be reduced through elements that encourage the development of confidence and self-worth through close relationships with others.

Masten and Coatsworth (1998) reviewed the existing research regarding at-risk children and youths who developed resiliency and competency despite their circumstances in order to determine how best to foster these attributes in programs for vulnerable children. The three attributes they found to be most strongly linked with development of resiliency and competence in children were positive parent-child relationships, proper cognitive development and "self-regulation." They confirmed that the formation of bonds between caregivers and children are of utmost importance to the development of competency. These bonds promote the development of self-regulation in children, a necessary attribute for social and academic success. Furthermore, self-regulation and cognitive development were found
to be interrelated, with high cognitive functioning being a predictor for prosocial behavior. This interrelation is, therefore, crucial for proper social and behavioral development. The authors asserted that when a child does not have a warm, caring parent with whom to bond, it is important that he or she has access to at least one caring adult with whom to bond.

In a study of 23 vulnerable youths, Laursen and Birmingham (2003) found that, in addition to positive relationships with adults, “high expectations,” availability of social and educational opportunities, and encouragement of youths to participate in them provided protection against stressors. The adult mentors also modeled appropriate behaviors and discouraged negative behaviors of the youths. As the study progressed, seven attributes of the adults in positive relationships with these at-risk youth were identified: “trust, attention, empathy, availability, affirmation, respect and virtue.” Laursen and Birmingham elaborated upon each quality, as follows:

1. Trust: Follow-through, confidentiality.
2. Attention: Focuses on child, listens.
3. Empathy: Tries to understand child’s point of view.
4. Availability: Makes time to spend with child, unconditional availability (e.g., doesn’t withdraw support if child misbehaves)
5. Affirmation: Adult makes positive comments regarding child and child’s abilities, regardless of the current situation. The adult believes that the child is able to “make it” and also helps the child through difficulties.
6. Respect: Values and seeks the opinion of child; trusts ability of child to make decisions.
7. Virtue: Adult sets clear boundaries and models the expected behavior
himself/herself.

Werner and Smith (1982) found that 11.5% of the vulnerable youth who exhibited resiliency listed teachers as a source of support; 35% of the youths said “peer friends” were a source of support; 30% said friends who were older (i.e., relatives and parents of friends) were supportive; and 25% listed parents as a resource for support. Moreover, 80% of this group said these social supports helped a great deal during difficult times (namely, “friends” and “parent figures”). The authors also discovered that the resilient children listed more sources of support than the non-resilient children, indicating that quantity, as well as quality, of social support is relevant for promoting resilience.

Klingman (2000) found that social support made a difference in anxiety levels and coping skills of children living with the threat of displacement. Specifically, the perception of having less social support was related to higher levels of anxiety, and the perception of having more social support was correlated with better coping methods.

*Connection between Activities that Stimulate Cognitive Development and Resilience*

In a study of twin pairs (both monozygotic and dizygotic) at age five who belonged to “high-risk” families in England and Wales, 11% of “cognitive resilience” (measured by IQ) was attributed to participation in “stimulating activities” with their mother (e.g., church attendance, visiting the zoo, going to the park, etc.). Thus, twins who participated in these types of activities with their mother exhibited better cognitive development. The authors of this study suggested that these experiences can decrease the negative effects of SES deprivation on cognitive development in children (Kim-Cohen, Moffitt, Caspi & Taylor, 2004).

Rutter (1987) also asserted that opportunities for developing skills and accomplishing
tasks promote self-efficacy and self-esteem, thereby decreasing the affects of risk factors on vulnerable children.

Resiliency and Self-Regulation

Internalization of appropriate rules of conduct is crucial to future success in school and in social relationships. Although antisocial behavior tends to remain constant over time, research indicates that if a child’s behavior changes from antisocial to prosocial during childhood, the consequences of antisocial behaviors can be mitigated. The likelihood of this change has been strongly linked to high cognitive functioning, suggesting that aiding the development of academic skills in children may prevent antisocial behavior (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998).

Other Factors that Promote Resiliency

Masten and Coatsworth (1998) suggested that the focus of programs that endeavor to promote resiliency in children concentrate on:

- a) Factors that reduce risk (e.g., mitigating existing risk factors);
- b) Provision of resources; and
- c) Development of attributes known to promote competence, such as positive relationships with adults, skills, self-control, self-confidence and the availability of opportunities for growth.

Hypothesis

Prior research has established that religiosity and affiliation with a church can provide important elements that promote resiliency. Some important components include social support, religious coping (e.g., prayer and faith), and cognitive and behavioral development.

My hypothesis is that many churches possess characteristics which promote
resilience, and, therefore, are important community resources for at-risk children. Churches encourage religiousness for both parents and children, which has been associated with the development of resilience. Church programs are also instrumental in: (1) reducing risk factors by providing social support via counseling, support groups (e.g., groups for the bereaved) and the like; (2) providing for the material needs of families through the donation of money, food and clothing; and (3) promoting competency in children through positive adult mentors, values that encourage self-regulation and opportunities for skill development (e.g., participation in children’s musicals, memorization of verses, etc.). Because churches are designated as non-profit, charitable organizations, their services are accessible to people of every economic stratum. Some churches even go so far as to actively promote participation of impoverished families by providing transportation to services and activities.

It would be advantageous to assess existing programs, especially those in impoverished communities, to ascertain what resilience-promoting qualities churches already possess, and how these programs can be altered to better meet the needs of vulnerable children. As Masten and Coatsworth (1998) stated:

Experimental evaluations of interventions designed on the basis of theory and research represent a powerful strategy for testing causal hypotheses, which will serve to improve our theories and also to fine-tune preventive intervention programs.

Churches vary in their level of investment in programs for children, as well as in the quality and quantity of resources available. Therefore, providing information that may perpetuate and enhance the positive impact of these programs on at-risk youth is relevant and valuable.

Method

With regard to the assessment of children’s church programs, this study focused on
the following factors:

1. Material needs, especially food and clothing
2. Social support
3. Relationships with caring adults
4. Religious coping
5. Development of cognitive, behavioral and social skills

I assessed the children's programs in grades Kindergarten through Sixth of three evangelical Protestant churches in southeast Michigan. Methods I utilized to evaluate each program were: observation, surveys and interviews.

Participants

The participants at Church A were 14 children (8 male, 6 female), 5 teachers (all female), an administrator (male), and the Senior Pastor (male). At Church B, 12 children (2 male, 10 female), 3 teachers (all female), an administrator (female), and the Senior Pastor (male) participated. Participants at Church C were 15 children (9 male, 6 female), 8 teachers (3 male, 5 female), an administrator (male), and the Senior Pastor (male).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age in Years</th>
<th>Number of Children from All Three Churches</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total = 41

The teachers had an average of 11.6 years (range: 2.5-29 years) experience working with children. They had volunteered an average of 5.7 years (range: .3-24 years) at their particular church. The administrators had worked with children an average of 23 years
range: 9-45 years). They had served in an administrative capacity at their particular church for an average of 3 years (range: 1-4 years).

Materials

The administrators of children’s programs and teachers were interviewed, and they answered a survey. The pastors and children were interviewed, but they did not answer a survey; see the Appendix for the surveys and the interview questions. Although a few individuals filled out the surveys and returned them at a later date, most of the teachers and administrators completed the surveys immediately following the interview. The surveys that were completed immediately after the interview were given directly to me by the participant. To preserve the anonymity of the teachers, I placed the surveys into a file folder in random order. Surveys completed at a later date were given to me or to the children’s program administrator, who then gave the surveys to me.

The interviews and surveys that were administered to the administrators and caregivers in the children’s programs focused on dimensions identified as qualities of influential adult mentors as reported by the group of at-risk youth interviewed by Laursen and Birmingham (2003). These attributes were: trust, attention, empathy, availability, affirmation, respect and virtue. I also included in these measures the characteristics of approachability, helpfulness and responsiveness. During my observations of each program, I inquired of the administrators regarding the constancy of care (e.g., caregiver turnover).

The school-aged children were interviewed regarding their evaluation of the children’s program. For example, I inquired as to whether or not they enjoy the program, find the program interesting, and trust the caregivers. I also explored whether they use religious coping in their daily lives (e.g., prayer, faith, God as substitute parent), and whether
the activities at church help them develop values, self-control, self-esteem and self-efficacy.

I also interviewed the senior pastor of each church to ascertain whether or not the children’s program was viewed as an important outreach of the church, as well as the church's intended future development of the children’s ministry.

Procedure

I obtained consent from Eastern Michigan University’s Research Review Committee, the teachers, the administrators of children’s programs, pastors, parents of the children to be interviewed, and the children to be interviewed.

I investigated whether or not the church developed social programs that provide for the material needs of impoverished families during the interviews of the senior pastors and administrators.

I observed the activities of each classroom and/or group activities before performing any research-oriented interactions with the teachers or children. My intention was to gain an overall impression of the quality of the interactions between the children and caregivers. Although this method is intrinsically biased, I hoped to glean important insights to enable me to more effectively complete the interview process (e.g., by making slight alterations or additions to my interview questions to increase relevancy and usefulness in a particular context).

Then I interviewed and gave the questionnaires to the administrators of children’s programs and the teachers in the program, and I interviewed the pastors and the children.

Results

The study tested the hypothesis that churches promote resilience in children by providing for material needs, especially food and clothing, offering relationships with caring
adults, promoting religious coping, and developing cognitive, behavioral, and social skills.

*Providing for material needs, such as food and clothing*

According to the administrators and pastors, every church has ministries that give material goods to needy families in their church and community. Material items provided were: clothing, money and/or payment of bills, tuition for youth retreats for children whose parents can’t afford it, food, toys, Christmas gifts, and backpacks with school supplies. These churches also make efforts to reach out to community members in ways such as hosting free events (e.g., family events with games, prizes, etc.) and working with community mental health agencies to provide counseling.

*Promoting Resilience through Positive Adult Mentors*

All 41 of the children answered the question “Do you like coming to church?” in the affirmative. Thirty-four of the children indicated that they would turn to the teacher for help when they had problems at church, and all except nine indicated that they would turn to someone at church if they were worried about something; see the table below. The children indicated that when worried, they would turn to their parents or a relative at church, or the pastor, a friend or God. Two children said they confided in someone at church, but did not name whom. For a number of children, their Sunday School teachers were their mothers or another female relative. Some of the children named more than one person.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Frequency of Affirmative Answers by 41 Children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>When you have trouble at church, do you ask the teacher for help?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher or administrator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 Some children named more than one person.
Frequency of Concerns Mentioned by Children about which They would Confide to Administrators or Teachers at Church

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concern</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Someone else has a problem, request prayer for person</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problems at school</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Would turn to someone, but have no current concern</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Needs advice</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questions about Jesus and the Bible</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Another child is doing something “wrong”</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shares everyday experiences</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pet died</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prayer so child won’t get into fights</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help with a project</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thus, most of the children do turn to someone at church for help or know they can do so. When they turn to a person, they do so with many different concerns. However, in only 13 instances did children report they would confide in a teacher or an administrator and in several of these cases, the teacher was a parent or relative. These results were contrary to my personal expectations. While the church environment provides social opportunities for contact with people the children trust, the children’s program itself does not seem to promote adult mentorship as much as it could. However, the percent of children in this group (32%) who would turn to a teacher or administrator is higher than the percent (11.5%) of students found by Werner and Smith (1982) to turn to a school teacher, and like their students, the children in the current study also turned to peers for support.

Religious Coping through Prayer and by turning to God

The majority of children (39) believed that God helps them and other people. This corresponded to the favorable attributes children listed when asked, “What is God like?” All of the children also reported that they pray and that prayer makes them feel happier. The most frequent request of the children was not for something for themselves, but a prayer for someone else.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Do you believe God helps people?</th>
<th>Does God help you?</th>
<th>Do you pray?</th>
<th>Do you feel happier when you pray?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>39</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These questions were used as prompts; 3 children were not asked this question, because they replied to the original question, “What do you think God is like?”

**Frequency Table of Attributes of God as Reported by the Children When Asked:**
“*What do you think God is like?”*

- Adjectives suggesting pleasantness and benevolence: 17
- Adjectives indicating greatness: 7
- Adjectives suggesting strength and power: 4

Deity: 3
Helpful: 4
Confidante: 1
Comforting: 1
Beautiful: 1
Perfect: 1
A Father: 1
A Vision: 1
No Answer: 9

*Resilience through Encouraging Self-regulation and the Opportunity for Skill Development*

When asked if church helps the child behave better, 88% of the children gave an affirmative answer. The child was asked to give an example of the ways in which church helps them to behave better. The answer with the highest frequency was “learning about God.” This answer corresponds to the church activity the majority of children listed as their favorite, “learning about God/Jesus.” Being nicer to others was listed at the second highest frequency.
**Frequency Table of Ways Church Positively Affects Behavior as Reported by Children**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behavior</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learns about God</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicer to Others</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develops Self Control</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listens</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feels Better</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learns how to Behave</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helps School Performance</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obey Parents</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is a Better Person</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prays</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isn’t Angry at Others</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is a Good Influence</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Follows Jesus</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doesn’t Abuse Substances</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doesn’t get into Trouble</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>God Forgives</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respects Others</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Answer</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Promotion of Skill Development*

The churches promoted skill development in the following ways: having children read aloud or to self; having children complete Sunday School worksheets; tying biblical accounts to history; having children memorize lines for plays, songs and Bible scriptures; and having children complete craft projects. One church provided opportunities for physical activity by having children participate in group games.

*Teachers’ Evaluations of Attributes Important for Promoting Resilience in Children*

The teachers endorsed the attributes which Laursen & Birmingham (2003) indicate are important for resilience in children. All attributes were said to be important or very important for a teacher to have.
Results of Teacher Questionnaires
(15 questionnaires were completed)

All 15 said that the following are Very Important
   Impartiality
   Being virtuous

14 said Very Important and 1 said Important to
   Being trustworthy
   Being attentive
   Provide affirmation
   Being approachable

13 said Very Important and 2 said Important to
   Being respectful

12 said Very Important and 3 said Important to
   Having empathy
   Being available
   Being responsive

Future Plans for Church Children’s Programs

The senior pastors reported that plans are being made to develop the children’s programs. The specific proposals differed from church to church in accordance with the needs and priorities of each church. Some of the proposals will help all children, whereas others, such as a day care program which will charge tuition will help the families which can afford the tuition more than those who cannot. The plans mentioned included the following:

1. To start a day care program and then expand it into a kindergarten through twelfth grade school;

2. To expand the existing physical space and/or construct new buildings;

3. Enhance the delivery system by installing up-to-date audio-visual equipment;

4. Employ a full-time children’s pastor (rather than part-time or volunteer);

5. Augment the program by adding special features such as a puppet ministry;

6. Provide children’s programs within a community (e.g., backyard Sunday School
program) to reach children who cannot or do not attend the church. One church plans
to involve their child members by having them assist with the on-site Sunday School
program.

Discussion

This study explored ways that children’s church programs can and do promote resilience,
with emphases on material needs, social support, religious coping, relationships with caring
adults and development of cognitive, behavioral and social skills. The results indicated that the
children’s programs at the churches that participated in this study do possess these qualities;
however, fewer caring adults which were not already family members or relatives were available
to children through the church than I had expected.

All of the children indicated that they like coming to church. I do not know whether
there was response bias on the part of the children when they gave these responses. When
asked whom they confide in, a teacher or administrator was listed only 13 times. This
suggests that many children were not experiencing attachment to these individuals.
However, 22 times children listed someone else at church they would confide in. This
indicates that church may provide an environment in which children have contact with other
people they trust, suggesting a sense of community. This supports Christian and Barbarin’s
(2001) hypothesis that regular church attendance provides social support for children. This is
important, because resilient children list more sources of social support than non-resilient
children (Werner and Smith, 1982). Further, they also reported that resilient children relied
more on peers than on teachers. Specifically, peer friends were listed as sources of support
by about 35% of the vulnerable youths and teachers by 11.5% of them.

The results also suggest that the children in this study utilize religious coping through
prayer and a positive image of God. The majority of children also indicated that church helps them behave better. This implies that church and/or religiosity helps children develop values and self-control. This supports the hypothesis of Christian and Barbarin (2001) that religious values are transferred to children through regular church attendance. In addition, development of “self-regulation” was cited by Masten and Coatsworth (1998) as not only being an important attribute for children to develop resiliency and competency, but also linked to healthy cognitive development.

The majority of children also reported that they have participated in some activity at church or developed a quality through church attendance that makes them feel proud of themselves. This indicates that participation in the children’s program helps children cultivate self-efficacy and self-esteem. Rutter (1987) stated that opportunities for children to develop these qualities are important for decreasing the effects of negative factors in the lives of at-risk children. In addition, church attendance provides opportunities for cognitive development through memorization of Bible verses, memorizing lines for church plays, memorizing songs for performances and participating in Bible studies. Kim-Cohen, et al (2004) found that experiencing “stimulating activities” reduces the effects of socioeconomic stress on the cognitive development of children.

The majority of teachers reported that the qualities of caregivers listed on the surveys that were administered were either important or very important. While this study did not explore how often the teachers exhibited these behaviors, the results indicate that teachers at least recognized the importance of these qualities.

A few findings indicate problems for fostering resilience in children, and churches should address these in order to improve their service to at-risk children. For one, in order to nurture
positive relationships between Sunday School teachers and the children in their classes, churches need to focus on continuity of care. Many programs rotate teachers on a bi-weekly or monthly basis, meaning most children do not have enough contact with any one teacher to form a strong bond. This is something which the churches should consider, and, if at all possible, change.

There was no consensus among administrators and senior pastors as to whether developing the children's program is a primary goal of the church. Very frequently the administrator of the children's program or the teacher was doing the work as a goodwill effort, and there was little support for them. Resilience would be enhanced by acknowledging their efforts and improving their support system.

Every church studied provides for the physical needs of disadvantaged children in their church and community such as supplying food and clothing. Every senior pastor interviewed indicated a willingness to work with community health providers to better serve vulnerable children of their community (one church is already involved with community programs to provide counseling and material provisions to vulnerable community members). In addition, all of the senior pastors are planning to institute changes in the children's programs to enhance and expand the programs, as well as to provide more services to children in their community.

For future studies, it would be important to extend this study to other Protestant denominations as well as other religions in order to discover how prevalent these services for at-risk children are. In addition, it would be interesting to gather more demographic information about the children to determine who is being helped and whether these programs are reaching the most vulnerable children.

As Masten and Coatsworth (1998) suggested regarding the evaluation of interventions for at-risk children, I sought to develop a model of assessment of church programs to
determine in what ways churches are already meeting the needs of children and ways in
which programs can be enhanced to promote the development of resilience in children. I
believe this study indicates that church programs not only possess qualities that nurture
resiliency in children, but also mitigate the negative effects of SES deprivation and negative
life events. The assessment and recommendations can be of great benefit to churches as they
serve their child members.
References


Appendix

Children’s Interview Questions

1. Do you like coming to church?

Follow up questions:
If yes, what do you like most about church? If no, why don’t you like coming to church?

2. If you have trouble with something at church, do you go to the teacher for help?

3. When you are worried about something, do you talk to anyone at church about it?

Follow up Questions: Who do you talk to at church? What kinds of things do you talk about?

4. What do you think God is like? If the child does not answer, use prompts: Do you think that God helps people? Does God help you?

5. Do you pray?

When do you pray?

Do you feel happier when you pray?

6. Do you learn about things at church that help you to behave better?

Follow-up question: How?

7. Is there anything you’ve done at church that makes you feel proud of yourself (e.g. performance in plays, participation in Bible memory competitions)

Interview questions for the Teachers

1. Have you worked with children prior to working in this Children’s Department? If yes, how long and in what capacity?

2. How long have you been working in the Children’s Department at this church? How
long with this particular age group at this church?

3. As an adult who works with children, what types of roles do you think you fulfill for the children in addition to teaching them?

4. Do the children approach you if they are having difficulty with something in the classroom? If yes, please give an example and indicate how often this occurs.

5. Do the children tell you their personal problems or concerns? If yes, how often does this occur and what types of concerns do the children confide?

6. What values do you believe are most important to share with the children?

**Interview Questions for the Administrators of the Children's Department**

Title: ____________________________

Male    Female

1. What are your primary duties?

2. How long have you been working with children (the total time you have worked with children including here and elsewhere)?

3. How long have you been administrating the Children's Program at this church?

4. Is developing the Children's Program a primary goal of this church? Please explain.

5. Does the church provide for any of the physical needs of the children such as food, money or clothing?

6. What is your main goal for this children's program? For example, what are the most important things you hope the children learn or benefit from?

7. Do the church activities enhance the children's academic ability in any way?