

POLICY ISSUE

Vulnerable Children and Youth

DATE: October 23, 2002

GROUP:

Child and Family Steering Committee on Community Governance

NOTE:

The Steering Committee's mandate does not include advice about the governance of services to Aboriginal children and families. A separate consultation process is underway with Aboriginal communities. Recommendations and other material developed by the committee are available for use in discussions with Aboriginal communities.

ISSUE:

To provide a conceptual approach to identify vulnerability and resilience in children, youth, families, and communities.

LEGISLATIVE AUTHORITY:

- Under development

PURPOSE OF ISSUE PAPER:

To facilitate and support a recommendation on a conceptual approach for vulnerability-resilience.

POLICY DISCUSSION:

Introduction

What makes children, youth, families, and communities vulnerable? What are the conditions, circumstances, and characteristics that build resilience in children, youth, families, and communities? Before we can design effective interventions and a service delivery system to improve the developmental outcomes of our most vulnerable children, youth, and families it is important to have an understanding of how high-risk children and youth overcome adversity.

The study of resilience offers insight into identifying factors associated with vulnerability (age, poor parenting skills, poverty) and resiliency (good coping skills, caring communities). It further provides information into the complex ways in which these factors interact at each stage of development and within each ecological level (individual, parent-family, and community level).

Fundamental to this discussion is recognition that all children, youth, families, and communities are vulnerable and need support at different times in their lives. We must find ways of supporting and protecting the *most* vulnerable children and youth, when

natural supports are not adequate. The process of identifying a vulnerable child or youth is a complex, assessment driven process.

Appendix A contains available information about the profile of vulnerable children and youth served by child protection, youth justice, and child and youth mental health programs in British Columbia.

Background

It is easy to understand how most children and youth from caring and nurturing homes living in safe and healthy communities are able to succeed. But how is it that children and youth living in apparently adverse circumstances find ways both inside and outside their families to meet their developmental needs and develop healthy ways of coping?

A longitudinal study of children and youth conducted in 1992 by psychologists Werner and Smith illustrates this issue. The study followed children born in Kauai, Hawaii from troubled and impoverished families since 1955. Despite the fact these children were exceptionally vulnerable one third of them became successful in school and later at work. The remaining two thirds developed emotional and behavioural problems, including teen pregnancy, mental health problems, and delinquency as teenagers. However, even in this latter group of troubled youth a portion went on to become what the researchers called “competent, confident, caring adults.” The resilient group of children shared a number of characteristics, including an active approach to problem solving, a tendency to see experiences constructively, and optimism for the future. Another factor that contributed to resilience was a positive connection with a caring adult, inside or outside the family.

Description

Research on resilience and vulnerability assists in our understanding of why some children and youth are able to become competent adults when their development is threatened by adverse circumstances. For a period of time, researchers focused on single risk factors within individuals; however no one factor was identified as sufficient to cause maltreatment, mental illness, or delinquency. Nor was there a single factor found that would guarantee wellness. Research in mental health, child welfare, and youth justice has moved beyond looking at the deficits of individuals and families to finding the strengths and competencies within individuals, families, and communities.

The vulnerability-resilience literature describes adaptive behaviour as emerging from the interplay of: (a) combinations of factors predictive of negative developmental outcomes (risk factors); and (b) combinations of counteracting factors (protective factors) that buffer, moderate, and protect against those vulnerabilities or risks (Richman & Fraser, 2001, chap.1).

Risk or protective factors are the conditions, circumstances, or characteristics of the child, the family and community they live in, that either reduce or enhance the likelihood of problems (Prilleltensky, Nelson, & Perison, 2001, p.20). These factors can fall into three categories: individual factors, parent-family factors, and community level factors. Some examples of vulnerabilities from research include: poor physical health, low birth

weight, domestic violence, stressful life events, and dangerous communities. (see Table 1.1 to 3.2). Examples of protective factors include: effective problem-solving skills, average or above average intelligence, having a positive outlook, positive caring relationships, ability to distinguish between life experiences and self, effective social skills, positive family relationships, social supports, and safe communities (see Table 1.1 to 3.2)

Resilience can be best understood as a dynamic process, in which children, youth, families, and communities are able to successfully recover, adapt, or bounce back in the face of significant challenges. Resilience is not determined by a simple additive formula in which protective factors counterbalance risk factors. Vulnerability or resiliency emerges from the *interaction* of protective and risk factors; the protective factors offer some protection in the presence of risk. The literature (Prilleltensky et al., 2001; Masten, 1997; Richman & Fraser, 2001) suggests that it is the presence of these protective factors that account for more successful coping and adaptation. Providing individuals, families, and communities with opportunities to develop strengths improves problem solving and interpersonal skills, and increases their capacity to overcome or adapt to adversity.

A number of aspects including: context, an individual's susceptibility to risk, and the length of time that children, youth, families, and communities are exposed to challenging circumstances also influences resiliency.

Understanding the context in which a child, youth, or family is exposed to adversity is important. Although the resilience literature has been applied to a variety of culturally different situations, there is no doubt the concept has some cultural overlay in that, behavior considered adaptive in one culture may not be seen in the same way in another culture.

The interaction of risk and protective factors occurs at each stage of a child's or youth's development and the family life cycle. What may pose a risk for a young child may be less of a risk as the child progresses through developmental stages. Coping with life crises and transitions can have an impact on all family members.

Implications

Child, youth, and family wellness is determined by multiple factors that are within individuals, families, and their environment. The challenge is to foster resiliency (strengthen protective factors and reduce risk factors) and build adaptive capacities within individuals, families, and the community to overcome adversity. This requires a multifaceted approach and a response that is sensitive to the developmental levels and the particular circumstances of children, youth, families and communities. Developing accurate strengths-based assessments and designing flexible, evidence-based services which focus not only on individuals are beyond the scope of this paper, but are critical next steps.

REQUEST FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

- ❑ Request for recommendations to adopt a vulnerability-resilience approach to understand vulnerability in children, youth, families, and communities.

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