

Resiliency in Youth and Alumni of Foster Care

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## **Introduction**

There were over 400,000 children and youth in foster care in the United States in 2015 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016). Alumni of care are much more likely to have mental health problems and low academic achievement; live at or below the poverty line; and experience homelessness (Pecora et al., 2005). Even as the statistics show a dreary outlook for alumni of care, there are young people who have achieved success against the odds. These people are considered resilient. Resilience can be understood as the ability to positively adapt in the face of adversity (Hass, Allen, & Amoah, 2014). Resiliency is thought to be developed through a combination of personal strengths and environmental protective factors (Hass et al., 2014). As an employee of an organization that works with youth and alumni of the foster care system, I want to understand more about the process of resiliency. Specifically, I desire to learn what role youth-serving professionals can play in assisting the young people we work with in developing their resiliency.

## **Child and Adolescent Development Theory**

In general, theories pertaining to psychosocial, cognitive, and physical development are all important and relevant to the discussion of resiliency in youth and alumni of care. Each area of development interacts with the others and affects the general pathway of an individual's development. As such, to understand resiliency in youth and alumni of foster care, it is appropriate to take a system's level approach to child and adolescent development.

Developmental Systems Theories provide a good basis for understanding the multiple levels of influences on the developing individual (Hauser-Cram, Nugent, Thies, & Travers, 2014). These theories recognize the importance of the many different contexts including genetic, neural, behavioral and environmental, that affect an individual's development (Hauser-Cram et al.,

2014). The theory posits that each of these contexts interact with each other in a bi-directional way in the developing person (Hauser-Cram et al., 2014). As an example, Hauser-Cram et al. (2014) discuss how maltreated children and adolescents are at a higher risk for physiological effects of allostatic load from chronic stress. This is a gene-environment interaction.

Another important theory to consider when discussing youth in care is Bowlby's Attachment Theory, which places an importance on strong attachments between the child and their primary caregiver for psychosocial development (Hauser-Cram et al., 2014). Hauser-Cram et al. (2014) discuss how children who experience abuse and neglect often have poor attachment which can cause life-long implications. In addition, the attachment styles that are developed in infancy often stay consistent into adulthood and can be associated with relationship satisfaction as adults (Hauser-Cram et al., 2014). This is an important theory to understand in connection to the high rates of mental health issues experienced by foster youth and alumni. In terms of resiliency, a common avenue for building resiliency has been the connection and positive relationship with a caring adult (Drapeau, Saint-Jacques, Lépine, Bégin, & Bernard, 2007; Hass & Graydon, 2009; Legault, Anawati, & Flynn, 2006).

### **Literature Review**

To better understand resilience as it relates to youth and alumni of foster care, a literature review of the processes, turning-points, and characteristics of resilience was conducted. Studies were included that aimed to identify these specific aspects of resiliency in youth and alumni of care. The end goal was to identify the role youth-serving professionals can play in encouraging the growth of resiliency in youth who have experienced out-of-home placement.

### **Turning Points and Processes in Developing Resiliency**

Drapeau, Saint-Jacques, Lépine, Bégin, and Bernard (2007) used a small qualitative study to begin to investigate the processes that can lead youth in care on a path towards resiliency (Drapeau et al., 2007). In the study, Drapeau and colleagues (2007) interviewed youth in care between the ages of 14-17 who were considered resilient. To be considered for the study, youth who had been in a stable placement for three months were assessed by their case workers on their competency in 5 resiliency domains (Drapeau et al., 2007). Youth who were considered competent in 3 of the 5 domains were included in the study (Drapeau et al., 2007). Drapeau et al. (2007) evaluated 66 youth, only 18 were considered resilient and 12 were included in the study. For the youth included in the study, Drapeau and colleagues (2007) completed a review of their case files and conducted two separate interviews with each participant. The first interview focused on autobiographical information, while the second interview focused more on the processes, events and environments that played a role in the development of resilience (Drapeau et al., 2007). To analyze the data, thematic content analysis was completed using NUD\*IST software (Drapeau et al., 2007).

The results of the study identified three types of turning points and four general processes involved in the development of resiliency (Drapeau et al., 2007). Drapeau and colleagues (2007) defined turning points for the youth in care as events “where their paths turn in the direction of resilience” (p. 978). The turning point categories identified were those related to action, relation with an adult, and reflection (Drapeau et al., 2007). In action turning points, youth achieved something, like a new job and gained a new sense of accomplishment (Drapeau et al., 2007). Turning points that were categorized as relation with an adult included meeting a new person and building a positive relationship with that person (Drapeau et al., 2007). Finally, Drapeau et al. (2007) classified most of the turning points under the reflection category. Reflection turning

points were based on the respondent realizing they needed to change their own trajectory and often coincided with a new placement (Drapeau et al., 2007). Drapeau and colleagues (2007) also categorized four processes of resiliency or the chain of events that happen because of a turning point. The processes that were identified included an increase in perceived self-efficacy, distancing oneself from the risks, new opportunities and the multiplication of benefits in different areas (Drapeau et al., 2007).

### **Resiliency in Academically Successful Alumni of Care**

**Characteristics.** Hines, Merdinger, and Wyatt (2005) conducted a small qualitative study to better understand factors that assisted foster youth's successful transition out of care, focusing on alumni who were enrolled in post-secondary education. Participants in the study were interviewed and completed a written survey about their life experiences (Hines, Merdinger, & Wyatt, 2005). Study participants were identified through financial aid records and were a subsample from a larger study on supports needed for foster alumni in college (Hines et al., 2005). Hines and colleagues (2005) identified 123 participants and 49 completed the self-administered surveys. Out of the 49 that completed the surveys, 25 agreed to be interviewed (Hines et al., 2005). In the end, Hines et al. (2005) interviewed 15 respondents, who were given \$20 as compensation for their participation. Only 14 respondents were included in the study, as one respondent did not spend a substantial time in formal foster care (Hines et al., 2005). The study population age ranged from 19 to 35 with a mean of 23.4 (Hines et al., 2005). The mean age of entrance into foster care was 9.5 and the average time spent in foster care was 8 years for the study participants (Hines et al., 2005). The survey data was analyzed using SPSS software (Hines et al., 2005). The authors used grounded theory and the extended case method to analyze the qualitative data from the interviews.

Hines and colleagues (2005) identified several common features in the study participants. Individual attributes that were identified as critical factors by Hines et al. (2005) included “assertiveness, independence, goal orientation, persistence, the determination to be different from abusive adults, the ability to accept help, a flexible and adaptable self-image, and the ability to make conscious changes” (p. 391). Furthermore, a key trait in the respondents was the ability for the participants to establish positive relationship with non-abusive adults (Hines et al., 2005). The respondents also self-reported that they were able to take advantage of the opportunities provided by both the education and the foster care systems (Hines et al., 2005). Finally, Hines et al. (2005) noted that while the respondents were resilient in the realm of education, the respondents were not as resilient, or adjusted in other areas including psychologically.

**Internal Assets and Environmental Supports.** Hass and Graydon (2009) surveyed academically successful alumni of foster care to gain a better understanding of the internal assets and environmental supports that contributed to their resiliency. The study population were clients of the Orangewood Children’s Foundation, a non-profit community organization that assists youth transitioning out of care, and identified as academically successful (Hass & Graydon, 2009). Haas and Graydon (2009) considered the participants as academically successful if they had completed post-secondary or vocational school or had at least junior standing at a 4-year post-secondary institution. There were 157 academically successful foster alumni identified, 44 individuals completed and returned the 83-question survey (Hass & Graydon, 2009). Hass and Graydon (2009) used questions from the Gratitude Questionnaire-Six Item Form (McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002), the Sense of Coherence Scale (Antonovsky, 1979) and the California Healthy Kids Survey (Constantine & Bernard, 2001) to create the survey for their study. There were both Likert scale and open-ended questions included in the

survey (Hass & Graydon, 2009). Those that completed and returned the survey received a \$5 Starbucks gift card (Hass & Graydon, 2009).

The study analysis showed trends in the personal characteristics and environmental supports present in the participants (Hass & Graydon, 2009). While the participant demographics were consistent with other foster care alumni studies, Hass and Graydon (2009) noted that the study population had much lower rates of criminal justice involvement, special education needs and rates of mental health services compared to other studies of alumni of care. The results showed that a majority of respondents identified social supports as the key item that helped them succeed (Hass & Graydon, 2009). Hass and Graydon (2009) also found that most respondents had support on campus, had a caring adult outside of the home and had positive relationships with peers. In addition, the authors found that the respondents had similar gratitude levels to other non-foster care alumni as measured by the Gratitude Questionnaire-Six Item Form (Hass & Graydon, 2009). In contrast, Hass and Graydon (2009) found that the participants scored lower on the Sense of Coherence Scale than other U.S. undergraduates. According to Antonovsky, the Sense of Coherence Scale measures a person's perception that their environment is predictable and their confidence that things will end positively (as cited in, Hass & Graydon, 2009). Hass & Graydon (2009) proposed that the lower Sense of Coherence Scale may be an indicator of less positive adaptation psychologically. The respondents also had a high rate of self-confidence and belief that their life had purpose and that they could reach their goals (Hass & Graydon, 2009). Finally, the majority of respondents had a strong dedication to help others and were involved in community activities including church, school clubs and other volunteer activities (Hass & Graydon, 2009).

### **Findings**

There are several themes that can be found in the studies that were reviewed. First, the studies all noted how social supports and positive relationships with adults can be an important factor in promoting resiliency in foster youth and alumni. Drapeau et al. (2007) even identified the positive relationship with an adult as a turning point towards resiliency. Another theme that emerged from the literature review was that resiliency was often accompanied by new opportunities and specifically opportunities to be successful and to give back to the community. The studies also showed that resiliency was related to the perception of self-efficacy and self-confidence. The self-efficacy and confidence could come from the opportunities provided to them. Hines et al. (2005) reported that a characteristic of academically resilient young people was the ability to take advantage of the opportunities and services available to them. Finally, all three studies noted that while the respondents were considered resilient in one or more domains, it did not necessarily mean that the respondents were entirely resilient. Both Hass & Graydon (2009) and Hines et al. (2005) studied academically successful alumni of care and observed that the respondents were not as resilient psychologically.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

The studies reviewed provided some insight into the factors that contribute to the development of resiliency. However, these studies have several limitations. First, each of the studies consisted of a relatively small sample size, each having under 50 participants. Another limitation is that each of the studies included only youth and young adults who were considered resilient. The studies conducted on academically successful alumni of care by Hines et al. (2005) and Hass and Graydon (2009) may not be applicable to many youth in care as according to Pecora et al. (2005) only 1.8% of foster alumni have their bachelor's degree by age 25



compared to 24% of the general population. Many of these factors combine to make the findings of these investigations non-generalizable to the larger population of youth and alumni of care.

There are several suggestions for future research based on the current literature review. First, to understand resiliency as it relates to the general population of youth and alumni of care, a larger quantitative study should be conducted. This study should include participants that are considered resilient and non-resilient in different domains. In comparing characteristics and environments between resilient and non-resilient individuals in each domain, new insights might be as to methods to increase opportunities to develop overall resiliency. Additionally, research should be conducted with study populations from different areas to understand the effects of system policies and procedures on the development of resiliency. It would also be interesting to investigate if there are different processes and factors related to different domains of resiliency. Finally, as resilience is a dynamic process, a longitudinal study would be helpful in understanding how resilience can develop and change over time.

### **Applications for Youth-Serving Professionals**

The current literature review can provide recommendations for youth-serving professionals in areas of programming and policy. In terms of programming, the studies reviewed show the importance of social supports. Youth-serving professionals should provide opportunities for the youth and young adults they work with to develop supportive and positive relationships. These relationships should be not only with other adults, but with peers. In addition, programming should include opportunities for young people to learn new skills and be successful. Drapeau and colleagues (2007) found that the action of achievement served as a common turning point towards resiliency. In providing these opportunities, youth workers can utilize Vygotsky's theory of the Zone of Proximal Development, to provide the proper supports

for participants to be successful (Hauser-Cram et al., 2014). Finally, programming should include opportunities to give back to the community. These items are all consistent with positive youth development settings (Eccles & Gootman, 2002).

In terms of policy, youth-serving professionals need to advocate for policies that will increase the opportunities for youth and alumni of care to develop resiliency. As an example, advocacy efforts to allow youth in care to remain in the same area would bolster the youth's ability to build consistent social supports. Furthermore, advocating for policy solutions that allow youth and alumni of care to increase their access to new and different opportunities is important. This advocacy could occur within a single organization, between service-providers, or as a state level policy effort.

A last recommendation for youth-serving professionals would be to educate those they work with about resiliency. In my experience, service providers often focus on the potential negative outcomes for youth and alumni of care. The service providers think of resilient young people as the exception to the rule. The current review showed that there are ways that youth-serving professionals can assist the youth and young adults they work with in developing resiliency and changing their trajectory towards more positive outcomes. The goal would be that as more youth-serving professionals are educated about the factors that influence resiliency, an increase in practices that support resiliency building would be implemented. Ultimately, this would lead to more resilient and successful alumni of care.

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### Abstracts

#### *Processes that contribute to resilience among youth in foster care*

Sylvie Drapeau, Marie-Christine Saint-Jacques, Rachel Le'pine, Gilles Be'gin,  
Martine Bernard

Abstract: The objective of this qualitative research is to better understand the processes that contribute to resilience among adolescents in foster care. Twelve boys and girls ( $X \bar{M} = 15.9$  years), identified as resilient, participated in this study. The mean duration of the teenagers' placement is 7.3 years. The results point to three types of turning points: action, relation and reflection. Four processes, directly or indirectly linked to the turning point, have also been identified: increase in perceived self-efficacy, distancing oneself from the risks, new opportunities, and the multiplication of benefits.

#### *Former Foster Youth Attending College: Resilience and the Transition to Young Adulthood*

Alice M. Hines, Joan Merdinger, Paige Wyatt

Abstract: The primary purpose of this study was to further research and theory development in the area of risk and resilience by exploring factors associated with academic success among former foster youth—a group at high risk for developmental failure. Using data obtained from in-depth qualitative interviews with 14 former foster youth currently attending a 4-year university, the study described in this article explored factors related to their academic success. Results indicated that factors at the individual, family, and community levels and encompassing more than 1 system at a time were integral in understanding developmental pathways of these youth. Results further suggested that resilience in 1 developmental or functional domain was not necessarily reflected in others. Findings are discussed in terms of conceptual and theoretical directions for further research in the area of resilience and the transition to young adulthood, with a particular emphasis on former foster youth.

#### *Sources of resiliency among successful foster youth*

Michael Hass, Kelly Graydon

Abstract: In this study, 44 young adults who were removed from their biological parents as children responded to survey questions about the internal and external resources that helped them to “beat the odds” and, unlike most foster youth, complete a post-secondary educational program or achieve at least junior standing in a four-year institution. The results indicated that the majority of these youth acknowledge the presence of a variety of protective factors, including a sense of competence, goals for the future, social support, and involvement in community service activities. Implications for the improvement of foster youth services include the enhancement of programs that nourish supportive relationships with caring adults and enable youth to positively contribute by helping others.

## Recommendations for Youth-Serving Professionals

- Provide opportunities for youth and alumni of care to develop supportive and positive relationships.
- Provide new opportunities to participants and support them to succeed in those opportunities.
- Include opportunities to give back, or contribute, to the community in programming.
- Advocate for policies at the individual organization, community and state-wide levels that will encourage environments that promote the development of resiliency.
- Educate others about resiliency in youth and alumni of foster care.

Developing Resiliency in Youth and Alumni of Foster Care



**Developing Resiliency in Youth and Alumni of Foster Care**

## Importance of Resiliency

Alumni of care are much more likely to have mental health problems; low academic achievement; live at or below the poverty line; and experience homelessness. Even as the statistics show a dreary outlook for alumni of care, there are young people who have achieved success against the odds. These people are considered resilient.

Resilience can be understood as the ability to positively adapt in the face of adversity. Resiliency is thought to be developed through a combination of personal strengths and environmental protective factors.



## Research on Resiliency in Youth and Alumni of Care

- Research shows the importance of **social supports** in developing resiliency for youth and alumni of care. A significant positive relationship can support a young person in moving towards a more resilient and positive trajectory. Alumni who were considered academically successful were shown to have the **ability to form positive relationships with others**.
- Another factor that has been shown to contribute to an individual's development of resiliency is **access to new opportunities** that will **allow them to succeed**. In being successful, youth and young adults can increase their sense of **self-efficacy** and **confidence** which is a characteristic of resiliency.



- Resilient individuals take **advantage of services and opportunities** available to them and have the **ability to ask for and accept help**.
- Resilient individuals also tend to be **goal-oriented**, have a **positive outlook on their future** and are **assertive** and **persistent**. They are also **highly committed to helping and serving others**.
- Resiliency in one domain (ex. Academics), does not mean that an individual is resilient in all areas of their life.