

# Building resilience in young people who have witnessed intimate partner violence

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The impact of witnessing intimate partner violence on young people and the need for services to meet the needs of this population group was highlighted in a recent article in *Te Awatea Review* (Rathgen, 2008). In this article, we continue this theme and, taking a strengths approach, attend to the body of literature that is bringing an understanding of the coping and protective factors that assist young people to build resilience in the face of difficulty.

This article reviews literature that identifies factors in the use of coping strategies and the building of resilience and considers how services may tap into and enhance these qualities in young people. Important angles of approach include ensuring the accessibility of pro-social activities attractive to youth, and community-wide education in violence prevention.

The period of adolescence and early adulthood is marked as a time of renewed opportunity for prevention and intervention initiatives. The cognitive and physical development that occurs at this time allows young people to consider current and past events from different viewpoints. They are also able to access a greater range of coping strategies and resources (Goldblatt, 2003). The current focus on the importance of intervention in early childhood, however, may lead to the belief that it is too late to provide interventions for young people who have witnessed intimate partner violence in their homes. By contrast, it is evident that adolescence is a time when young people are seeking resources beyond

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those available within their families and their immediate contexts in order to optimise their own and their peers' future opportunities. Researchers are now concerned to engage young people as active participants in the research process and to draw on the expert knowledge they have to contribute.

Not all young people exposed to intimate partner violence develop the negative outcomes in relation to mental health, education, and future intimate or parenting relationships that are so readily cited in the literature. The focus on negative outcomes supports a pathologising or deficit approach and overlooks the creativity, courage, initiative, and ingenuity children and young people exposed to intimate partner violence often display (Laing, 2000a). As researchers are noting, "by far the majority" of children and young people exposed to violence "do not grow up to be either perpetrators or victims of violence" (Humphreys as cited in Laing, 2000b, p. 22).

Other research also reveals that young people exposed to intimate partner violence can achieve positive outcomes, some even exceeding their peers in the development of social competence and adjustment (Jaffe, Wilson, & Wolfe, 1990; Kitzmann, Gaylord, Holt, & Kenny, 2003), factors which contribute to resilience building.

## Help-seeking and coping strategies

Surveys indicate that informal social support is the preferred means by which young people seek help (Mullender et al., 2002; Seith & Bockman, 2008). Informal sources of support include a family member or neighbour, sports coach, teacher, or group of friends. Formal supports may also be sought in terms of police notification, or individual counselling, with the latter more likely to take place in young adulthood (Humphreys, 2001).

Attempts at seeking help differ across ethnic groups, as mistrust of people outside the family or obligations to keep family affairs private are stronger in some cultures than others (Mullender et al., 2002); for example, African Americans have been shown to more commonly utilise spirituality, as well as extended family and community support (Bryant-Davis, 2005). This raises questions regarding cultural variations in help-seeking and coping strategies within New Zealand and how services might respond to these. Another promising area for further inquiry is that of gender, given that gender differences in help-seeking attitudes and behaviour have already been uncovered, but differences in other coping strategies have yet to be explored (Fleming et al., 2007; Goldblatt, 2003; Mullender et al., 2002; Seith

& Bockman, 2008). Through such research, we will be able to determine the different needs of young people, and the strengths that can be built upon.

Adaptive coping strategies that young people across diverse populations may utilise include being involved in activities outside of the home and having supportive relationships with people who may or may not know about the violence at home, as well as actively intervening and seeking help in violent situations (Anderson & Danis, 2006; Aymer, 2008; Humphreys, 2001; Mullender et al., 2002; Rhinas, 2006; Seith & Bockman, 2008).

To adopt these coping strategies, young people need access to a wide range of community resources. Such resources include youth-friendly, low, or no cost recreation and sports activities (Action for Children & Youth Aotearoa, 2003). In addition, certain individual characteristics have been identified as increasing the likelihood of supportive resources being utilised, and are thus seen as playing an important role in the building of resilience. These include self-acceptance and self-confidence, coping skills, and academic performance. The tendency to seek resources can be linked to a sense of hope and optimism for the future, which, in turn, may be associated with higher levels of self-confidence, perseverance, as well as goal setting and planning skills (Humphreys, 2001; Ostaszewski & Zimmerman, 2006).

Whilst the above discussion considers coping positively, some negative outcomes of witnessing intimate partner violence arise from particular coping strategies that are employed by young people exposed to intimate partner violence. Examples are escape and avoidance type behaviours, such as early engagement into intimate relationships, sexual risk taking, running away, mental blocking, and emotional numbing. Overcompensating, by taking care of siblings and/or parents, is also common (Cunningham & Baker, 2004; Goldblatt & Eisikovits, 2005). Some apparently self-destructive activities, such as addictive behaviours, may also be instigated with a coping intent (Aymer, 2008; Humphreys, 2001). These strategies become maladaptive leading either to immediate problems, or they develop over time when young people are no longer in a violent domestic environment (Aymer, 2008; Humphreys, 2001; Joest, 2005). Although some of these behaviours may offer youth immediate respite, they can also trap them into unhelpful trajectories that may result in mental illness or involvement with the justice system (Margolin & Gordis, 2000). Nevertheless, from generic research into resilience building, we can extrapolate that it may be most helpful to encourage, facilitate, and expand positive alternative coping strategies, or

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consider harm reduction, rather than applying excessive criticism to adult-identified "problem behaviours".

One of the most important findings of the research that has been undertaken in the field so far is that throughout his or her youth, any one young person can use both negative and positive coping strategies in responding to the intimate partner violence they may have witnessed (Aymer, 2008; Humphreys, 2001). Moreover, researchers have concluded that young people can still be "struggling" even if they are coping successfully in a way that leads us to categorise them as resilient (Goldblatt, 2003, p. 548; Humphreys, 2001). This suggests that all young people who are exposed to intimate partner violence need support, whether this is formal or informal in nature.

### **Outcomes: Building resilience**

Research shows that it is difficult to predict outcomes for young people exposed to intimate partner violence. There is a lack of knowledge on how potential risk and protective factors interact to produce what the literature shows to be diverse outcomes for young people. As noted earlier, however, what is known, is that many but not all emerge as psychologically and socially robust adults who do not repeat "cycles of violence" (Margolin & Gordis, 2000; Szilom, 2000). It also appears that we have difficulty isolating exposure to intimate partner violence as a subject of study when there are multiple risk factors, such as poverty, parental substance abuse or mental illness, family restructuring, or entering foster care or a women's shelter (Fergusson, Boden, & Horwood, 2006; Herrenkohl, Sousa, Tajima, Herrenkohl, & Moylan, 2008; Margolin & Gordis, 2000). Exposure to intimate partner violence in the home often co-occurs with experiences of other forms of violence or other stressors, and it is these circumstances that appear to overwhelm coping resources and lead to more evident negative effects that are more difficult to overcome (Fergusson et al., 2006; Margolin & Gordis, 2000).

Researchers need to ask questions that attempt to isolate the different impacts of different types of violence, even if they find this goal difficult to achieve. However, it may be less helpful for service providers to take such an approach. Whilst trauma-specific information can be useful background knowledge, service providers must generally respond more holistically to the range of issues encountered by youth who seek or are referred for assistance.

What is clear, however, is that exposure to family violence is "a risk factor that may limit the capacity to develop effective protective factors

and/or resilience" (Partnerships Against Domestic Violence, 2006, p. 5). Resilience is described as the process of overcoming a risk or adversity in ways that will lead to healthy development and good outcomes (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). Researchers are now asking questions regarding different pathways to resilience as these may be assisted or hindered by a number of factors that vary across individual, social, and cultural contexts.

Identifying factors that enable young people to cope with adversity and develop resilience may offer some indication of how and why some achieve good outcomes and others do not. From their review of the literature, Humphreys and Houghton (2008) note studies that suggest the severity of the violence and direct abuse and neglect may be implicated; on the other hand, resilience is associated with the wider family and community support, as well as mothers who provide positive support and "model assertive and non-violent responses" (Peled as cited in Humphreys & Houghton, 2008, p. 5). Expanding our knowledge and understanding of these factors will contribute to the development of effective intervention and prevention services (Laing, 2000b).

### **Intervention and prevention programmes**

Whether all young people who have witnessed or been exposed to intimate partner violence should be deemed in need of intervention programmes is contested. Research shows that, in contrast to popular professional opinion, the relationship between exposure to domestic violence (in isolation from other variables) and later mental illness, or such issues as perpetration of intimate partner violence, is statistically weak (Ernst et al., 2007; Fergusson et al., 2006).

Evidence suggests that prevention should be directed at the population of young people more broadly, in addition to perhaps focussing on strengthening resilience-building qualities in troubled youth requiring intervention (Gilligan, 2006; Partnerships Against Domestic Violence, 2003; Wolfe et al., 1996). This being the case, the question arises as to whether all young people might benefit from pro-social and anti-violence education. Such programmes will recognise the overwhelming prevalence of witnessing violence in the general population of young people, and that affected youth seek informal and anonymous support rather than willingly identifying their personal needs.

Furthermore, overseas surveys continue to reveal a belief among young people that intimate partner violence, such as forced sex, throwing

objects, slapping or punching, may be part of "normal conflict" (Burton, Kitzinger, Kelly, & Regan, 1998; Jackson, 1998a; Mulroney, 2003). There is nothing to suggest that views of New Zealand young people would be substantially different from these (National Network of Stopping Violence Services, 2006). This indicates that more intensive work is needed if underlying attitudes and assumptions are to be changed.

Prevention initiatives introduced overseas may take the form of education, web-based support, social action, community arts, and community development programmes. These programmes are sometimes targeted at youth deemed at risk, but are often universal in nature (Mulroney, 2003). Although many such programmes have been developed overseas, few have undergone formal evaluation (Indermaur, Atkinson, & Blagg, 1998; Mulroney, 2003). The most common prevention initiatives that have been evaluated are educational group programmes, based in schools or the community.

The evaluations conducted so far indicate that New Zealand could benefit by further strengthening these initiatives (Fanslow, 2005), particularly programmes that are based around teaching knowledge and skills required to change attitudes and behaviours that lead to the abuse of intimate partners (Jackson, 1998b; Partnerships Against Domestic Violence, 2000; Wekerle & Wolfe, 1999). Most programmes also address a variety of structural and cultural factors, such as definitions of violence and its acceptance, and issues around gender and power. Some include "conflict resolution and communication skills, and social action activities" (Wolfe, et al., 2003, p. 279), and information on community services (Foshee et al., 2005). Recently, more attention is also being paid to addressing men (including male youth) as bystanders with the potential to become active helpers rather than potential abusers (Katz, n.d.).

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This positive approach is showing promise and is being adopted in New Zealand, for example, the Family Violence – It's not OK campaign.

### **Peer-group programmes**

Programmes need to reflect young people's preference for turning to their peers for help and support. Engaging communities of peers in violence prevention programmes would also enhance their capacity as youth-friendly support systems (Jackson, 1998b). While such programmes may be available through schools, some consideration also needs to be given to youth who may no longer be within the school system (Szirom, 2000).

Peer-group programmes have the potential to reach not only young people who may be considered vulnerable, but, more broadly, the community of informal supporters they tend to draw on (Indermaur et al., 1998). Better informed supporters are more likely to provide helpful resilience-enhancing assistance to youth, without either minimising or catastrophising their experiences.

Evaluations of peer-group programmes have shown predominantly positive results with regard to changes in attitudes, skills, and knowledge (Indermaur et al., 1998; Partnerships Against Domestic Violence, 2000; Weisz & Black, 2001; Wekerle & Wolfe, 1999; Wolfe, 2006); and used self-reporting measures to show decreases in dating violence perpetration and victimisation (Foshee et al., 2005; Wekerle & Wolfe, 1999; Wolfe et al., 2003; Wolfe, 2006). However, as the majority of these evaluations have not tracked changes in observed behaviour over time, questions remain as to the effectiveness of this type of programme (Partnerships Against Domestic Violence, 2000).

Among evaluations of programmes that offer group work approaches and are directed at children and youth in general (Mullender, 2004; Shepherd & Maxwell, 1999; Vickerman & Margolin, 2008), group discussion has been noted as the most effective and preferred means of intervention for affected youth (Jackson, 1998a). This proactive approach can also enhance resilience-building factors, such as self-confidence and competence, and focus on coping and problem-solving strategies that can be utilised by other young people. Laing (2000b), for example, cites the success of McDonald's work where a peer-group offered young women (14-18 years) the opportunity to address personal trauma and locate this within a wider social context. Building on their own experiences, the young women then developed a resource for their peers on safe and unsafe relationships and ran peer education programmes within the community.

### **Integrated approaches: Overcoming limitations**

Increased levels of awareness will also enable service providers to develop a more contextualised understanding of their clients, and assist in the reframing of what may otherwise be considered “pathological” problem behaviours as coping mechanisms (Margolin & Gordis, 2000; Partnerships Against Domestic Violence, 2003). In order to support the resilience building that can lead to positive outcomes, service providers may also need “to focus attention on those assets and resources that have been found to promote healthy outcomes in their particular populations” (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005, p. 411). Overseas initiatives in these spheres are educating professionals in assessment and disclosure processes, as well as providing links to group programmes and individual interventions that focus on the impact of exposure to intimate partner violence (Baker & Jaffe, 2003, 2007; Buel, 2002; Kimball, 1999).

To address the complex needs of this client group, the need for collaboration and integration of the diverse agencies and social service fields is now well recognised: “You may meet teenagers who are victims of child abuse, witnesses to domestic violence, perpetrators of abuse in the home, or who are in abusive dating relationships. Some are all four” (Cunningham & Baker, 2007, p. 22). Given that many young people who have witnessed intimate partner violence may be both perpetrators and victims of multiple forms of violence, practitioners may need to consider how to assess and respond to their multiple needs.

How best to provide formal help services to young people is further complicated by questions over the manner in which youth prefer to seek help. Research findings appear to point to a propensity for youth to seek assistance via electronic resources (National Network of Stopping Violence Services, 2006) and texting. Since December 2007, Youth Helpline (2008) has responded to this preference with a free texting service. It is only then if young people come into contact due to other issues that they may be identifiable to service providers. This preferential approach to help-seeking relates not only to young people's

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greater confidence in informal supports, and their comfort with electronic communication, but probably also to continuing stigma associated with family violence and the use of formal supports (Gilligan, 2000; Laing, 2000a).

Short-term intervention or prevention initiatives, however, will be limited in effect if they are not accompanied by changes in the structural, economic, and cultural factors that perpetuate violence (Boshier, 2006; Hassall & Fanslow, 2006; Indermaur et al., 1998). Kingi (1999) comments similarly with respect to Māori. Given the overlap in social and economic risk factors for youth violence, child abuse, and domestic violence, holistic approaches that are collaborative and community based are being called for to reduce the social isolation of at-risk families, and to change cultural norms of violence (Carter, n.d.).

Taking a more holistic approach will both strengthen “the resilience of children and young people experiencing family and domestic violence” and lead to “strategies to address the social and emotional wellbeing of families [that] may reduce the likelihood of violent family relationships” (Department of Communities, 2007, p. 5).

### **Conclusion**

This article has put forward the case for viewing adolescence and young adulthood as a time of opportunity and emergent capacity for strengthening resilience and dealing with difficult life situations, such as exposure to intimate partner violence. This increased capacity includes the ability to consider issues from multiple perspectives and to reach out for support beyond the context of the immediate family. Furthermore, young people are not only potential support seekers but they are potential support providers for their peers. A responsive, whole of community approach to education offers a positive means of fostering their nascent abilities.

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**You know sometimes after reading the paper or watching TV you can get the idea that young people do little more than cause trouble. From my point of view things are different. From what I can see, young people in New Zealand are generally doing well: they are vibrant, optimistic and energetic. We just need to find ways to unlock their talent and inspire their motivation.**

**Hon Nanaia Mahuta,  
Minister of Youth Affairs,  
2 July 2008**

