

# Original Research Article Supporting preschool children's resilience at basic daily context: Parents' and kindergarten teachers' views

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## ABSTRACT

**Aims:** This paper aimed to shed light on the understanding of the concept of 'risk and resilience' by young children's main caregivers (parents and kindergarten teachers), as well as to explore and compare their perspectives on the daily applied strategies to develop and promote children's resilience at home and school respectively.

**Study design:** A qualitative approach was chosen in order to evaluate parents' and kindergarten teachers' beliefs, experiences and attitudes towards 'resilience' through semi-structured interviews.

**Place and Duration of Study:** The study conducted in Greece and the whole procedure from design to data analysis and report writing lasted eight months (from January to August 2023).

**Methodology:** 17 mothers of preschool children (3.5 to 5.5 years old) and 16 kindergarten teachers who worked in public kindergartens from different regions in Greece participated in the study, selected by a convenience sampling. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the qualitative data from the participants' responses to the interviews.

**Results:** Mothers and kindergarten teachers recognized risk and stressors in children development. Their discrepancy was that teachers emphasized the importance of risk factors in the family such as neglect, abuse, divorce, financial problems etc., while mothers referred more to child individual (e.g. disease, cognitive disability) or socio-cultural factors (e.g. crisis, bullying, internet addiction). They both seemed adequate enough to capture the essential features of the concept 'resilience' such as "positive adaptation after a threat or adversity". As concerned the strategies to support children's resilience both kindergarten teachers and mothers considered that they could serve as positive role models for promoting resilience. They put first their relationship/ bonding with the child as well as the interactions between the two contexts (family-school). They adopted appropriate practices (e.g. discussion, story reading, social scenarios, expression support) to achieve their goals mainly related to socio-emotional learning/development.

**Conclusion:** The conclusions were hoped to have major implications for parents and teachers, suggesting that they can be used for the design of training or intervention programs focusing in enhancing children's resilience and to guide principles and policy decisions that influence the field of early education.

*Keywords: resilience, promotion strategies, preschool children, basic social context, parents' perspective, teachers' perspective*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

A widely approved definition of resilience refers to a positive adaptation of a dynamic system during or following significant disturbances (e.g. risks, adversities, trauma, threats to well-being) [1]. Recently a multisystemic approach of resilience has attracted researchers' interest, considering it as an adaptive, multisystemic process that supports positive outcomes [2]. Children's development is embedded within a complex context of many systems including family, school, peers' group, neighborhood, community [3], therefore it is suggested that when studying young child's resilience each of these microsystems should be considered [4].

Children's resilience is recognized as depending on both individual and systemic strengths and is highly influenced by supportive elements in the wider environment [5]. According to Masten "resilience does not come from rare special qualities, but from the everyday magic of ordinary, normative human resources in the minds, brains, and bodies of children, in their families and relationships, and in their communities (p. 235)" [6]. The positive reinforcements in children's lives are characterized as "protective factors" or "protective processes". Beyond individual qualities related to resilience (e.g. socio-emotional skills, giftedness or talents, openness to new experiences, problem solving, satisfying relationships, self-regulation, humor, empowerment, self-control, self-efficacy) [7] literature have recognized protective factors within the child's primary daily caring contexts including family and school.

## 2. PROTECTIVE FACTORS IN FAMILY AND SCHOOL SETTING

Parents, caregivers or significant others (e.g. teachers, grandpas) could promote children's resilience through their own behaviors, acting as role-models, and by the cognitive-emotional environment they develop. Based on Alvord and Grados [8] they can encourage children to become increasingly autonomous, independent, responsible, to develop empathy and altruism and to approach people and situations with hope, faith and trust. They can teach them how to communicate with others, solve problems and successfully handle negative thoughts, feelings and behaviors [8]. With this means, children themselves become increasingly active and capable in developing their own resilience.

### 2.1. Family protective factors

Specifically, proactive and authoritative parenting is considered crucial for the development of young children's resilience. Researchers have agreed that children with at least one warm, loving, trustworthy, supportive relationship with a parent or caregiver who provides comfort but also firm rules and boundaries, forms a cognitively stimulating environment and sets high expectations on them are more likely to become resilient [8, 9]. It is also critical to understand and respond properly to toddler's signals or emotional reactions, to use play situations to facilitate learning, to reward their achievements and to share pleasure [10]. Parental expression of positive emotion is also found to be related to children's social competence and adjustment [11], while providing feedback about emotions influences children's self-regulation and guides them to find positive solutions at any problem with peers [12].

Adopting positive parenting practices has been significantly associated with beneficial social, emotional and behavioral outcomes in children [13]. Such practices include reading to children, participating in stories or songs, cooking family meals, engaging in school activities, sharing relaxing or recreative moments, as well as preparing them for unpleasant or stressful situations by gradual exposure, discussions, play, reading books etc. [13, 14]. Through these, parents can demonstrate resilient behaviors against challenges and adversities by advising them on appropriate behaviors in different situations and fostering courage, confidence, optimism and positive self-esteem [8].

In addition, children seemed to benefit from a sense of order in their lives. Therefore, building a certain routine in the home, where they have obligations but also are able to take responsibilities (tidying their bedrooms or contributing to housework etc.), is considered equally important for the development of autonomy and initiative taking [15]. It was also suggested that parents can support children's resilience, self-sufficiency, independence and sense of accomplishment by providing experiences through which they can feel success and worth, allowing them to complete developmentally appropriate tasks (e.g., autonomy in self-care, putting toys away, choosing a desired activity, helping other children or elders) and praising their abilities or talents [8, 14, 16].

### 2.2. School protective factors

Research has also highlighted the important role of high-quality childcare settings, beyond family, in reducing the negative effects of risks/ threats and promoting resilience [17]. Theron [18] has reviewed the major protective factors in schools that can promote children resilience, suggesting both formal (e.g. via prevention or interventions programs, resilience-focused

and health- promoting school projects) and informal (e.g. via supportive teacher-student relationships or awarmly inclusive school climate)processes.

Firstly, the role of teacher and their relationship with student have been mostly studied as concerned the development of children’s resilience. Researchers’ findings have revealed that the development of warm, respectful, reliable interactions between teachers and students as well between teachers and students’ family seemed to play a significant role in children’sresilience [19, 20, 21]. Others protective factors in which teachers could have an impact referred to enhancing communication and having consistent expectations for respectful classroom interaction, engaging students as active, capable agents in classroom projects/ tasks and promoting their success/competence, responding to diverse students’ needs, enabling achievable goals and fostering a creative,effective and safe learning environmentthrough playful/games-basedapproaches, collaborative peer work etc. [18].

It has also been suggested that schools promoting resilienceutilize meaningful and developmentally appropriate curricula, encourage success and facilitate engagement, provide opportunities for safe and caring relationship with peers and adults, impose consistent rules/ boundaries, promote an ethos of trust, respect, equalityand mutual support and are open to school- community partnershipsand extracurricular activities (such as sports, culture, arts)[14, 22, 23]. According to Masten and colleagues [24] effective teachers and schools supply daily children with mastery experiences, opportunities to experience success and enjoyable achievement that also serve resilience by fostering intrinsic motivation, self-efficacy and persistence in the face of failure.Lastly, there is an increasing interest in “green schoolyards” and opportunities to work out-doors, as they are related to the development of motor and spatial skills, socialization with peers and nutrition of positive adaptation to stress[15, 25]

Concluding, Esquivel andcolleagues [26]underlined that school could promote children resilience in cooperation with other ecological contexts of child development including children’s families.

### 3. AIM OF THIS STUDY

This study agreed with the notion that risk and resilience both have their genesis in everyday life rather than in exceptional circumstances,considering the major implications for parents, teachers and schools [27]. Thus, the study aimed, based on parents’ and teacher’s lived experiences, to shed light on their understanding of the concept of ‘risk and resilience’, as well as to explore the main caregivers’ views of the daily practices/ strategies they use in order to develop and promote children’s resilience at home and school respectively.

### 4. METHODOLOGY

#### 4.1.Research design, participants and procedure

The study was conducted in Greece and lasted eight months (from January to August 2023).A qualitative research method was chosen in order to gather participants' (namely parents of preschool age children and kindergarten teachers) experiences, perceptions, and behavior referring mostly to the promotion of children’s “resilience” in daily contexts[28].

A convenience non probability sampling technique was used to recruit the participants which happened to be easily accessible to the researcher. It was chosen because it was simplistic, less costly and not as time consuming as other sampling strategies [29]. The total number were 17 mothers of preschool children (3<sup>1/2</sup> - 5<sup>1/2</sup> years old), aged from 28 to 40 years old, and 16 experienced kindergarten teachers, aged from 35 to 56 years old, who worked in public kindergarten. They came from different regions in Greece territory (e.g. Athens, Patras, Northen Greece). Their individual characteristics are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1. Participants’ characteristics**

<b>Mothers</b>		<b>Kindergartenteacher</b>	
Age	M= 34.2, SD= 3.14	Age	M=46,9, SD= 4.28
Number of children	50% had one child, 37.5% had two children and 12.5% had three or more children	Working experience	5 to 20 years
Educational level	university degree, 50% master degree	Educational level	university degree, 60% master degree

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews to parents-mothers and kindergarten teachers with open-ended questions on three basic topics: (a) their understanding of risks (e.g. *“What do you think are the possible challenges, threats or risks a young child may encounter during his or her development?”* and (b) resilience (e.g. *“Have you heard the term “resilience”? What do you think it refers to?”* and (c) the practices/ strategies they used to foster children’s resilience (e.g. *“In what ways, can you as a parent, promote resilience in your children and (re)empower them socio- emotionally or cognitively?”* / *“In your experience, do you think you can promote children's resilience and (re)empower them socio-emotionally or cognitively? If so, in what ways, if not, why?”*).

Half of the interviews were conducted one by one either in parents’ place or at school classroom with kindergarten teachers. For the others a videocall through Viber application or Webex software was used, depending on researcher’s geographical proximity with the participants. The duration of each interview did not exceed the 20 minutes to avoid any fatigue. Before the interview, a first telephone or personal contact was made with the participants in order to inform them about the purpose of the research and the ethical rules of the interviews (e.g. consent to participate and to be recorded, anonymity). During the interview a comfort, secure and emotional sensitive environment was under attention to be kept, where confidentiality and privacy were firstly protected. Informed consent was obtained both for the voluntary participation in the study and for the data recording in a smart phone device [30].

#### 4.2. Data analysis

The method through which the data were analyzed was thematic analysis. The recorded data of individual responses were collated, transcribed and entered into a Microsoft Word document for further analysis. Afterwards the thematic analysis was conducted following the 6-phase guide presented by Braun and Clarke [31] (e.g. repeated reading of the data in an active way, producing initial codes from the data, searching for themes by sorting the different codes into them, reviewing and refining themes, defining and naming themes, presenting the report). Quantitative data -referring to frequency of responses corresponding to the themes- were also presented in tables as mothers’ and kindergarten teachers’ responses were evaluated comparatively.

### 5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the thematic analysis were presented in this section by first briefly referring to mothers and kindergarten teachers understanding of “risk” and “resilience” and then proceeded to commenting the practices they use to promote children’s resilience in home and school.

#### 5.1. Understanding of risk and resilience

Both mothers and kindergarten teachers recognized significant risks and adversities in children’s lives, as presented in Table 2.

**Table 2. Mothers’ and kindergarten teachers’ perspective for risk factors**

Mothers’ responses	f (%) of responses contributing	kindergarten teachers’ responses	f (%) of responses contributing
Adversities within the family	66.7%	Psychical or psychological aggression	81.2%
Serious illness of a child or parent- death	53.3%	Developmental risks (e.g. poor health, mental or developmental deficits, low performance)	37.5%
Problems with peers- bullying	33.3%	Stressful changes (e.g. arrival of a sibling, changing school context, moving house)	18.75%
Crisis (natural disasters, pandemic)	20%	Death of a loved one	18.75%

Risks in internet use	20%	Risks in internet use	12.5%
		Crisis (natural disasters)	12.5%

According to mothers' responses they are mostly concerned about socio- cultural risk factors such as aggressive behavior towards children (e.g. abuse, bullying, peer rejection), environmental crisis as well as individual stresses (e.g. developmental problems, low school performance). On the other hand, the majority of kindergarten teachers referred mostly to risk factors within the family (e.g. financial hardship, neglect, parental separation, illness) and secondly to relational risks (e.g. problems with peers) or crisis (financial, environmental). As more children access digital technologies sooner both the caregivers mentioned the risks of internet use.

As concerned the understanding of resilience by the caregivers, 62.5% of the mothers defined it as: "overcoming challenges and risky changes", "coping with difficulties/ adversities in a positive way", "facing up stress and adapting to new conditions", while the 37.5% of their responses did not meet the criteria for resilience's definition, including "managing emotions in difficult family situations", "self-esteem/ self-confidence", "the degree of parents' compliance to the child's personality", "the child's strength to integrate into social groups". On the other hand, most kindergarten teachers considered resilience either as "resistance to difficulties/ adversities", "coping with difficulties or stressful situations" (46.7%) or as "survival from risks", "adaptation to environmental demands", "recovery and maintenance of well- being" (33.3%). One participant corresponded with precision to the concept of resilience, referring to "the children's ability to recover from, overcome or/ and adapt to difficult or challenging life experiences in order to further grow and succeed", while only a few kindergarten teachers (12.5%), comparing to mothers, did not respond effectively (e.g. "child's defenses", "positive attitude to disagreements").

## 5.2. Strategies/ practices to promote resilience in home

The analysis resulted in five themes that answered the question about mothers' practices/ strategies to promote and enhance children's resilience in home, as presented in Table 3.

**Table 3. Mothers' views of practices/ strategies promoting resilience at home**

Themes	f (%) of responses contributing	Sample quote
Theme 1. Positive parental practices, e.g.: reward daily discussions joint activities responsibilities	52.9%	M2// M9 "Providing opportunities and stimuli to discover the world and themselves..."// "Encourage children to try new things". M4// M10 "I don't try to make my child avoid its mistakes (as long as it's harmless of course) but we discuss and analyze the situation so that she can find ways to deal with it next time."// "So what we do is sit down and talk to him about consequences and other things... "Dude, that probably wasn't the best thing you could have done." M8 "...preparation (e.g. through discussion or books) for major changes such as when a new sibling is coming or when starting at nursery". M12 "Giving him responsibilities, according to his age". For example, we ask him to pick up the toys in the basket, help at the table and such..." M5 "I try as often as I can to engage in role-playing. Through these they learn manners of behaviors and we also have fun".
Theme 2. Bonding, e.g.: unconditional love responding to its needs active listening	41.17%	M11// M6 "Always giving her a hug and supporting her in everything she does"// "Giving her lots of love so she feels accepted and by treating her with respect." M3 "...being able to listen to them when they want to share some of their experience". M7 "the most important thing is to create a healthy environment that supports the child and

<p>Theme 3. Nurturing 29.4% skills and values, e.g.: expression of emotions self- regulation positive values</p>	<p><i>makes it feel safe, confident, capable and not afraid of adversity... That even if they don't achieve what they want, we continue to love them unconditionally".</i></p> <p>M9 <i>"It is important to foster values such as compassion, gratitude, cooperation and caring for others. At the same time, they need to learn to cope with stress, have self-esteem and resolve their differences in a creative way."</i></p> <p>M2 <i>"Helping children to recognize, name and manage their feelings.... e.g. reminding them to calmly and think what is happening and how they would feel better so that they can assert what is right for themselves."</i></p> <p>M13 <i>"I'm not entirely sure, but as parents in order to promote resilience in our child perhaps we could expose them to controllably different difficult situations. An example that comes to my mind is when I asked my daughter (4.5 years old) to go to the cafeteria to buy a cookie on her own. At first she didn't want to, we rehearsed the dialogue and steps, and when she finally did it she felt very strong, I think!"</i></p>
<p>Theme4. Boundaries 29.4%</p>	<p>M1// M7 <i>"We as parents must provide children with safe and stable boundaries within which they can explore the world around them" // "...by setting stable boundaries and keeping them consistently".</i></p>
<p>Theme 5. Support 13.5% from school and experts</p>	<p>M13 <i>"First I discuss with school staff and then I refer to specialists for counseling if needed".</i></p> <p>M8 <i>"... seeking and receiving information from specialists and open communication with the child".</i></p>

It seemed that mothers were aware of a wide range of strategies to promote their children's resilience at home. Some of the most frequently reported strategies were building a strong and warm relationship with children and adopting positive parenting practices. Among them the more often proposed were: love, care and respond to children's needs, establishing a daily routine at home, fostering self- esteem through reasonable responsibilities, supporting independence and opportunities for the child to participate in family matters, rewarding, keeping consistent boundaries, acknowledging child's feeling and encouraging their expression, teaching problem- solving and optimistic thinking, warm, un-limited listening and consistency and lastly sharing family values either directly from interaction with parents or indirectly from family activities and routines.

Likewise, positive parenting, parent- child relationship, effective supervision/ discipline and parent's degree of involvement in the child's life have been recognized in the relevant literature as the most important protective factor for the development of resilience [32, 33, 34, 35]. Characteristics such as parental warmth, involvement, acceptance and positive relationships in the family have been positively associated with the development of resilience [15, 36]. Open communication, love, acceptance and high expectations help children to taste success and accept their mistakes [14]. In addition, a secure, stable and organized family environment with positive parental role models [37] provides support and plenty of cognitive stimuli [23, 38], offers opportunities to new experience and skills development and enhances children's pro-social behavior [39, 40].

In many of the mothers' responses attention had also been paid on promoting the socio- emotional learning of the child. Specifically, mothers were worried to support children social and emotional developing skills, such as maintaining positive peer relationships, responding to hurtful events, regulating their feelings and behaviors. Important strategies discussed by mothers were consulting children by talking openly, allowing the expression of feelings (both positive and negative), performing/ role- modelling, reading books, engagement in play, practicing social problem- solving etc.

Similar findings reveal that families with parents who create conditions for emotional expression, acceptance and constructive management of their children's emotions or behaviors act often as role models of emotional self-regulation,

high empathy and prosocial behavior [11], teaching children to develop resilience. In addition to providing a protective environment, creating warm/ supportive relationships, teaching or training social- emotional skills, parents are suggested to focus on empowering children, so that they can themselves overcome any risk factors. Parents who provide their children the opportunities to make their own personal decisions about their problems and to encourage their autonomy, lay the foundations for the promotion of resilience [35].

Lastly, some mothers mentioned their cooperation with school staff to support children's resilience as well as their need for counselling by experts (e.g. psychologist). This finding is consistent with Taket and colleagues' study [15] which underlined the active role of home- school communication and the benefits of the relationships both themselves and the children had developed especially with preschool teachers and other community resources.

### 5.3. Strategies/ practices to promote resilience in school setting

Subsequently, the analysis resulted in four themes that answered the question about kindergarten teachers' practices/ strategies to promote and enhance children's resilience in school setting, as presented in Table 4.

**Table 4. kindergarten teachers' views of practices/ strategies promoting resilience at school**

Themes	f (%) of responses contributing	Sample quote
Theme 1. Quality of relationship with students & families, e.g.: love, affection, acceptance, trust, support positive role modeling cooperation with family	80%	T15 "...I believe that the love you can give to children, the close and stable relationship you develop with them, the acceptance of their differences, play a dominant role in this". T9 "... children see the teacher as a role model. She listens to their thoughts and feelings and encourages them to express them appropriately". T3 "... there should always be cooperation and common ground with the family, common boundaries and teamwork to cultivate fundamental principles".
Theme 2. Social-emotional learning, e.g.: expression of emotions self-control social behaviors conflict resolution empathy	46.7%%	T5 "...With the right guidance you can teach a child to accept your help, to feel safe and confident, to discuss and solve his/her problems and not to get angry, not to shout and not to give up but to calmly try to find solutions and other ways of action, not to get frustrated but to feel that someday and somehow he/she will succeed". T13 "Children's empowerment can be achieved through contact with art and culture, spontaneous expression, promoting the value of diversity, dynamic group interaction, positive thinking".
Theme 3. Positive classroom climate, e.g.: reward respecting diversity encouraging competition involvement in activities	46.7 %	T7 "...to encourage children to take initiative and when they do something good to applaud them,... not to encourage competition between them,... to give the necessary attention they need and to respect all children, not to leave any child out".
Theme 4. Appropriate teaching techniques, e.g.:	33.3%	T2 "... Following a student-oriented teaching model ("what do you want to learn?", "how could we learn it?"). ... Helping children to work

learner-centered approach  
group cooperative teaching  
use of arts and projects

*together in groups and identifying that everyone can contribute to group work".*  
T8 *"Promoting resilience can also occur e.g. through educational programs, careful selection of stories and films/animation, through workshops and experiential activities".*

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Respectively, kindergarten teachers recognized that they could function as promotive and protective factors for developing children's resilience through appropriate daily practices/ applied strategies. Specifically, they linked positive development to a combination of warm relationships with children and their parents, a supportive climate, appropriate child-centered learning approaches, high expectations and an orderly structured classroom with consistent rules and discipline. They felt that they could nurture learning skills, knowledge, self-regulation skills, and self-protective skills that children need to achieve resilience. Some of the most reported strategies were: maintaining warm, respectful and trustworthy connections with students and their families, enhancing positive goals, providing children on a daily basis with mastery experiences, opportunities to experience success and enjoy achievement that also served to foster self-efficacy and persistence in the face of failure. Clearly, by their answers it was important that they listened to their students, engaged them as active fellows, recognized and understood their perspectives or world views and attended to their relational needs.

Other strategies which have been found in the relevant literature referred to: teachers' availability and accessibility, willingly listening to their concerns and worries, actively teaching, empathy and understanding of their students' 'tough' circumstances and providing with positive strategies to deal with adversity [27].

Most of the kindergarten teachers also underlined the necessity for a curriculum content that supported optimal socio-emotional development. It is suggested that it should capacitate children to develop the skills and knowledge needed for them to function well, including life skills [22, 23, 41]. Among important strategies discussed were talking with children, creating a classroom environment of kindness and rewarding, encouraging emotional expression (e.g. through arts or play), analyzing what had happened or choices that had been made in certain social situations and teaching young children to work toward a common goal [42].

Lastly, regardless children's school grade (e.g., preschool setting or elementary school) investing in effective teaching, safe learning environments, and resilience-supporting classroom practices have emerged among the crucial factors for fostering resilience [18, 19, 21]. Important strategies recommended by kindergarten teachers in the present study included classroom-based, child-centered learning approaches, group work with preschool children, creative classroom environments, play in green yards etc.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Both the majority of mothers and kindergarten teachers seemed to have a fairly good understanding of the term "resilience", although there is an expressed need for further information, training and support from experts in this field. As far as risk factors were concerned, parents focused mainly on social or individual factors, while kindergarten teachers focused primarily on conditions within the family.

Regarding the practices they implemented in the home to enhance resilience, mothers were committed through appropriate parenting practices to empower children and co-construct resilience skills (expression and management of emotions, pro-social behaviors, etc.) and values. They recognized the creation of a bond of love, affection and security where there were firm boundaries, but also underlined their need for support from other sources. The kindergarten teachers, on the other hand, talked about the importance of all relationships (teacher-child, child-parent, teacher-parent) and the need to behave as a role model for their students and to provide them with sources of social-emotional learning. In addition, nearly half of them noted that it was crucial to ensure a positive and rewarding learning environment in the classroom where they could implement developmentally appropriate teaching practices.

To sum up, both kindergarten teachers and mothers felt that they can act as positive role models for promoting resilience. They prioritized their relationship with the child as well as the interactions between the two contexts (family-school). They adopted appropriate practices (e.g. discussion, story reading, social scenarios, expression support) to achieve their goals mainly related to socio-emotional learning/development.

Although the findings could be used for the design of education programs and the formulation of educational policy, on the other hand there were limitations. Some of them referred to methodological issues such as the small sample size, the

selection of non-probability sampling and the use of the interview as the only research tool which may be subject to interviewer's bias or to social/cultural desirability bias.

## CONSENT AND ETHICAL APPROVAL

The author declared that this study was strictly guided by the principles of qualitative research (informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality, researchers' potential impact on the participants and vice versa and safety from physical, emotional or other risk).

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