Resilience in Deaf Children?

A review of

Resilience in Deaf Children: Adaptation Through Emerging Adulthood
by Debra H. Zand and Katherine J. Pierce (Eds.)

Reviewed by
Ros Hunt

Why deaf children? Why resilience? Applying the increasingly popular resilience-based frameworks (e.g., Walsh, 2003) to a specific group of children, those who are deaf, would appear at first glance to be both obvious and useful. If resilience is important for children who have suffered adverse circumstances, then surely interventions that promote resilience must be important for deaf children with limited or no access to the world of sound around them. Resilience in Deaf Children: Adaptation Through Emerging Adulthood, edited by Debra Zand and Katherine Pierce, shows that it is not that simple.

As the contributors point out, there is almost nothing prior to this collection that considers the concept of resilience with this group, making this a groundbreaking work. The book is arranged to follow the life course of deaf children and young people through infancy to emerging adulthood. The contributors, both Deaf and hearing, are leading researchers and professionals in the world of deafness.
For readers who themselves know little about childhood deafness, this collection may involve a steep learning curve in the specific issues that arise for the families of the 90 percent of deaf children who are born into hearing families with no previous experience of childhood deafness. Nevertheless, this book is worth the effort. The detailed discussions of deaf children and areas of general interest such as understanding of self, social competence, attachment, and the benefits of cultural capital raise ideas that are transferable across the boundaries of this specialty.

The editors bravely and wisely open the collection with a section of one chapter that highlights the limitations of the concept of resilience. The chapters that follow are then divided into sections tracking the life course of children and young people: Infancy and Toddlerhood, Childhood, Adolescence, and Emerging Adulthood.

The first chapter, by Young, Rogers, Green, and Daniels (colleagues at the University of Manchester) is based on a previously published literature review (Young, Green, & Rogers, 2008). This has clearly had a strong influence on the rest of the contributions, being cited by 11 of the other 14 authors. It is this chapter that sets the tone for the rest of the collection, and the challenges raised are frequently taken up by other authors.

So what are these challenges? Among other questions the authors ask the following:

- What do we mean by resilience? Is it inherent traits or acquired skills? Is it adaptability to disadvantageous circumstances or challenges? Is it synonymous with achieving desired outcomes?

- If resilience is a response to risk, how is risk assessed? For example, is being deaf a risk factor, or is it the results of being deaf that create the risk?

- If resilience is achieving successful outcomes in the face of adversity, do we not have first to acknowledge that successful outcomes are socially constructed? Positive outcomes might be entirely different when they are seen from the culturally different perspectives of Deaf and hearing.

- If we accept that the ability to overcome adversity is to be found in the individual, then have we not located the responsibility for adapting with the individual rather than with a disabling and excluding society?

Many of the contributors rise to these and other challenges. Some follow the traditional notion of resilience as overcoming adversity and ask us to consider the specific context of deaf children, most of whom are raised within an entirely hearing, phonocentric world. Thus our attention is drawn to the importance of context and whether the concept of
resilience can be transferred unquestioningly, in this instance, from a hearing to a deaf context.

Of particular interest is the idea that adversity is not something to be overcome by the individual but rather is the problem of a society that fails to value diversity, that does not succeed in enabling access for all to the mainstream, and that, by individualizing the problem, prioritizes a medical rather than a social model of what it means to be deaf.

The obvious risk/adversity for deaf children is the lack of access to age-appropriate communication. Understanding and being understood are the cornerstones of much of human development, particularly developing a concept of self, self mastery, and theory of mind. Thus several contributors address the importance of communication—in particular, how positive interventions might be undertaken to strengthen and enhance two-way communication.

There is a subtle difference here between identifying deafness as adversity/risk and the results of deafness in a hearing world, that is, lack of access to communication as the adversity/risk. Deliberate intervention that facilitates communication and ensures access to language, signed or spoken, ameliorates potential problems.

Several contributors begin from a strengths-based rather than a deficit-based perspective. For example, Deaf parents are considered as a resource, although deaf parenting does not guarantee successful outcomes for the child (however successful outcomes are defined). Nevertheless, the skills and ways of being deaf modeled by Deaf parents may offer insights for hearing parents in honing their own parenting skills.

This collection as a whole also highlights an additional problem with seeking to understand resilience. As soon as we start to focus on one aspect of interest, for example, strategies for promoting individual success, we are in danger of losing sight of other important aspects of resilience, such as the responsibilities of society to enable resilience. One chapter can cause us to lose sight of the important insights contained in another. If the book teaches us one thing, it is the importance of not losing sight of the bigger picture and not implicitly adopting uncritically one particular understanding of resilience.

All in all, this is an intriguing and enlightening collection, inviting us to reconsider the concept of resilience. For professionals in the field of childhood deafness, this is obviously an invaluable book. However, there is plenty here that will challenge professionals in other fields to reconsider the basic concepts of risk and resilience in their own contexts and the ease with which all too often resilience becomes a property solely of the child.

Although at times a challenging read for parents and caregivers, Resilience in Deaf Children offers plenty of useful and practical thoughts and suggestions. A stimulating read, in the end, this volume raises more questions than it answers and highlights the need for more critical analysis and further research.


* Throughout this review the custom has been adopted of using *deaf* with a lowercase *d* to refer to those with any sort of hearing loss and *Deaf* with an uppercase *D* to refer to those who see themselves as a cultural and linguistic group.

Vetta Sanders Thompson served as the action editor for the selection and processing of this review.