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# Resilient Rangatahi



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Sooner or later everyone will have to face difficulties during their life.<sup>1</sup> Being able to cope with, and even benefit from, these times is important for development. The ability to do this is often called 'resilience'. But, what do we mean by 'resilience'? And how can parents, whānau, teachers or others working with rangatahi (young people) support them to develop it?

## What is resilience?

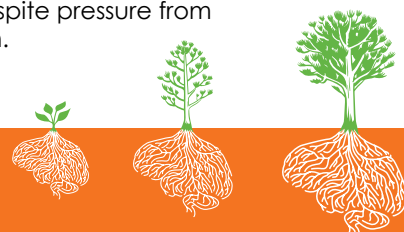
Resilience is a popular term<sup>2</sup> for a quality that has been studied for decades, and its definition has changed over that time. In fact, there are multiple definitions. However, "the essence of resilience is a positive, adaptive response in the face of significant adversity."<sup>3</sup> It's often referred to as the ability to 'bounce back' from a difficult situation. It includes being able to cope with stressful situations and still develop well.

While we might hear people talk about resilience as if it were something that a person either has, or does not have, in fact resilience is a shared process between the person and their environment.<sup>4</sup> It's a "quality of both individuals and their environments."<sup>5</sup> Individual resilience depends on the ability of those around a young person, including family, schools, and community, to meet their needs,<sup>6</sup> as well as the qualities and skills of the young person themselves. And resilience can come and go in different situations as well.

## Ingredients of resilience – the 7 Cs

Seven components have been identified as the key ingredients of resilience. Known as the 7 Cs of resilience these are; competence, confidence, connection, character, contribution, coping and control.<sup>7</sup>

- **Competence** is knowing that you can handle situations well. It comes about through a young person's actual experiences and the skills they develop along the way. These skills may be gained through many different activities, meeting deadlines, giving a speech, participating in sport or performance activities.
- **Confidence** is the belief that one is competent. All rangatahi have strengths and abilities, sometimes called 'islands of competence'. Adults have an important role in supporting rangatahi to recognise where their strengths lie, and encourage them to develop. Focussing on rangatahi strengths, is more effective in building confidence than pointing out weakness.<sup>8</sup>
- **Connection** to their family, whānau, and the wider community helps young people have a strong sense of security. As well as building their confidence and competence, these positive connections with adults provide someone for rangatahi to turn to when they face difficulties.
- Having **character** means rangatahi have a strong sense of right and wrong, enabling them to make wise choices and showing care for others. An example of what this looks like is when they choose to follow the conditions of their Restricted Driver's license, despite pressure from those around them.





- Through making their own personal **contribution**, young people gain a sense of purpose and motivation. This might be taking responsibility for household tasks such as mowing the lawns or doing the washing. Or it could be helping in their school, church, cultural or community groups.
- When young people have a range of positive **coping** strategies, they are less likely to develop unsafe or concerning behaviours when faced with stress. Coping strategies might include knowing who and when to ask for help, or having regular exercise to reduce their stress.
- Rangatahi who realise that they can **control** the outcomes of their actions are more likely to have confidence in their ability to bounce back from difficulties. They are more likely to work to find solutions to problems they face.

These ingredients are all related to each other, and interwoven into what has sometimes been described as a web.<sup>9</sup>

Both individuals and groups, such as whānau and communities, may have strengths in some of these areas, while other aspects may not be as well developed. It can be helpful for parents and other adults to consider how they are supporting and encouraging rangatahi to develop and strengthen their 7Cs.<sup>10</sup>

### Important things to know about resilience

Resilience is not a fixed trait i.e. it's not a case of once you have it, it's yours for life. Rangatahi (and adults too) may demonstrate resilience in one situation, but not in others.<sup>11</sup>

Sometimes people expect resilience to look like some kind of staunch independence. It's not like that at all. "The healthiest adults remain interdependent on family, friends and community."<sup>12</sup> This interdependence means that while rangatahi will reach out to others at times when they need support, they will also be offering support to others in their whānau and community.

Resilience is common, not an extraordinary quality. It's been described as "ordinary magic."<sup>13</sup>

Simply adapting to a stressful or traumatic situation is not the same as resilience. Some behaviours might enable a person to cope in the short-term, but create difficulty later in life. For example, a child who has been physically abused who withdraws from people.<sup>14</sup> This withdrawal may help them cope and survive in the short term, but it's likely to get in the way of their positive development if it continues.

<sup>1</sup> Lyons et al., 2009

<sup>2</sup> Schultze-Lutter et al., 2016

<sup>3</sup> National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2015, p.1

<sup>4</sup> Schultze-Lutter et al., 2016

<sup>5</sup> Ungar et al., 2013, p. 361

<sup>6</sup> Ungar, 2008

<sup>7</sup> Ginsburg & Jablow, 2011

<sup>8</sup> Best Start Resource Centre, 2017

<sup>9</sup> Ginsburg & Jablow, 2011

<sup>10</sup> Ginsburg & Jablow, 2011

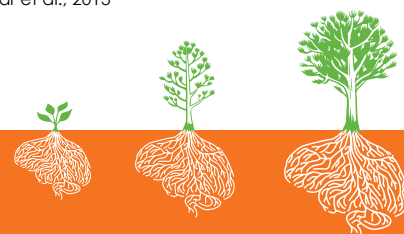
<sup>11</sup> National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2015

<sup>12</sup> Ginsburg & Jablow, 2011, p.131

<sup>13</sup> Masten, 2014, p.7

<sup>14</sup> Wyman, 2003, cited by Ungar et al., 2013

<sup>15</sup> Masten, 2014





Simply adapting to a stressful or traumatic situation is not the same as resilience.

Resilient people are still affected by, and may feel strongly about, difficult or stressful situations. It is natural and healthy to experience strong emotions in response to life events such as the death of a loved one, serious illness, or the end of a relationship, for example. But the skills and supports that contribute to resilience enable rangatahi to come through periods of difficulty in a positive way. However, this doesn't mean all the steps along the way will be positive.

### Growing resilience

There are many ways that resilience can develop, and the process will differ for different people.<sup>15</sup> However, there are things that many studies have found help resilience to develop.

### Relationships really matter

Strong and positive relationships, with parents or other adult whānau, teachers, and other adults in the community support rangatahi to develop in positive ways, protecting them from a range of poor outcomes.<sup>16</sup> The more connected rangatahi are to individual adults or social institutions such as schools, the better adjusted they are.<sup>17</sup>

Relationships have been described as the roots of resilience.<sup>18</sup> Peer relationships become more important during adolescence, but when it comes to developing resilience it's clear that adult relationships and support are incredibly important. It's a mistake to think that teens just need their friends.

Many, many studies show the importance of young people being connected to competent and caring adults in their whānau and community.<sup>19</sup> Parents have an important role to play. When they provide consistent, warm, loving support, clear boundaries, and respect for the growing independence of their rangatahi,<sup>20</sup> they are supporting their growing resilience. Sometimes, for a variety of reasons, rangatahi may have parents who are unable to provide the type of support they need. For these young people it's particularly important that they have other adults in their lives who provide this support.<sup>21</sup>

Those who are working with rangatahi can foster resilience by encouraging healthy whānau and community environments, thereby supporting the naturally available protective systems around individual rangatahi to work well.<sup>22</sup>

While some think that what helps people deal with tragedy are amazing inner qualities of the individual, research has found that "the reliable presence of at least one supportive relationship" is what really makes the difference.<sup>23</sup> The more young people have been exposed to adversity, the more reliant they are on resources and supports around them to foster their resilience and well-being.<sup>24</sup>



### Skill Building

It is important for rangatahi to increasingly build the skills they need, both now and for their futures. These skills include being able to set goals, solve problems, resist impulsive behaviour and cognitive flexibility. These skills fall under the umbrella term of executive function and self-regulation skills.<sup>25</sup> Being with supportive adults provides opportunities for rangatahi to develop these skills.

Resilient people are still affected by, and may feel strongly about, difficult or stressful situations.

<sup>16</sup> Sieving et al., 2017

<sup>17</sup> Foster et al., 2017

<sup>18</sup> Luthar & Brown, 2007

<sup>19</sup> Masten, 2001

<sup>20</sup> Barber & Schluterman, 2008

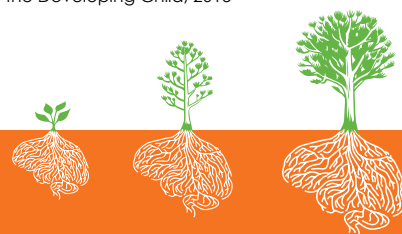
<sup>21</sup> Bowers et al., 2014

<sup>22</sup> Southwick et al., 2014

<sup>23</sup> National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2015, p.7

<sup>24</sup> Ungar et al., 2013

<sup>25</sup> National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2015





### Faith and cultural traditions

Rangatahi who feel connected to their faith or cultural traditions are likely to be better placed to deal with life's challenges effectively.<sup>26</sup> Research indicates that for indigenous people having a positive view of their own culture, or ethnic identity, is linked with many positive outcomes, including greater resilience.<sup>27</sup> This is also the case for young people from immigrant families.<sup>28</sup>

NZ researchers have studied the importance of cultural connection. For Māori, for example, greater access to, and involvement with, Māori cultural traditions is protective against many poor outcomes.<sup>29</sup>

Language is another way in which young people can engage with their culture. This has many benefits, including being linked with greater mental well-being among Pacific peoples.<sup>30</sup>

### The impact of the early years

Although the focus of this article is on rangatahi, it's important to realise that the relationships and experiences children have in their very early years, help lay the foundations for their later development in many areas, including that of resilience.

Ideally, a young person's early years will have included opportunities to support their development of resilience. Having some exposure to manageable stressors (in other words, not being protected from all stress), protection from major stressors where possible, and when unavoidable, having close loving emotionally supportive relationships, particularly with whānau, will lay a stronger foundation for resilience to continue to develop through adolescence. Where this isn't the case, resilience is still possible, but such rangatahi are likely to need more support.

### Conclusion

Understanding resilience and behaviours that support it is important for those parenting and working with rangatahi. Rangatahi are in an important stage of their development; enhancing their resilience now will benefit their future immeasurably.

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### Glossary of Māori terms:

**Rangatahi** – youth, younger generation

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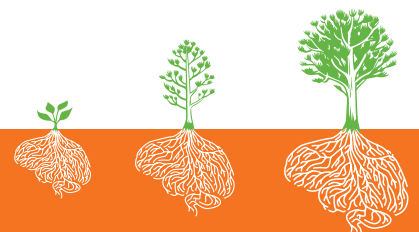
<sup>26</sup> National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2015

<sup>27</sup> Houkamau & Sibley, 2011

<sup>28</sup> Hoff & Core, 2015

<sup>29</sup> Muriwai et al., 2015

<sup>30</sup> Taua'i et al., 2018



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