

Resilience in Children: Within a Spiritual, Social, and Neurobiological Framework

Hoda Mahmoudi and Nasim Ahmadiyeh

Abstract

This paper explores the spiritual, psychological, and biological aspects of children and resilience. It analyzes the positive role of early exposure to hardship and argues that the benefits stem from exposure to events requiring adaptation to change. This adaptation occurs at the level of the brain as well as at the level of the soul and spirit, and is mediated by neuroendocrine and molecular events as well as by forces acting upon the soul. Exposure to hardship thus allows the child to learn flexibility and to find his or her sphere of useful service in a constantly changing world.

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From a Bahá'í perspective, spiritual education is the most important aspect of a child's training, yet it is the one that receives the least attention today. It is a process that begins at an early age and which aims to infuse in the hearts of children "the love of God," as stated by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, "so they may manifest in their lives the fear of God and have confidence in the bestowals of God. Teach them to free themselves from human imperfections and to acquire the divine perfections latent in the heart of man" (*Promulgation* 53). Spiritual education, as elaborated by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, gives priority to "character and conduct above the sciences and arts." This does not imply that the sciences and arts are unimportant but that provision of a moral and ethical foundation is the prerequisite for the exercise of the power that accompanies knowledge. "Good behavior," He explains "and high moral character must come first, for unless the character be trained, acquiring knowledge will only prove injurious. Knowledge is praiseworthy when it is coupled with ethical conduct and a virtuous character; otherwise it is a deadly poison, a frightful danger" (in *Bahá'í Education* no. 74).¹

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Comment [4]: Using more than one publication by the same author? Cite title and page.

Comment [5]: Pronouns referring to the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá must be capitalized.

Comment [6]: It is preferable for footnotes to be few and very concise. The Journal uses footnotes, not endnotes.

According to the Bahá'í writings, the refinement of character which is at the heart of a spiritual education includes the acquisition of such qualities as selflessness and detachment, service to others, perseverance, patience,

¹ Julio Savi defines the concept of Bahá'í spiritual education as "that kind of education which, on the one hand, enables man to understand his own spiritual nature and to learn the dynamics of its development so that once maturity has been attained he may automatically foster his own spiritual growth, and, on the other hand, which trains him from his early childhood so that he may manifest in his life the qualities of the world of the Kingdom and not the traits of the world of creation" (188). For further reading on the concept of spiritual education see Hatcher 38, 40.

contentment and “radiant acquiescence” with the will of God. In a letter concerning the education of children in the context of the advancement of society, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá articulates a most interesting principle: “Bring them up to work and strive,” He writes, “and accustom them to hardship. Teach them to dedicate their lives to matters of great import, and inspire them to undertake studies that will benefit mankind” (*Selections* 102). In discussing this principle and exploring the meaning of “hardship” in such passages, it should be noted at the outset that the Bahá’í writings unequivocally reject subjecting children to any form of abuse or harsh discipline. For example: “It is not, however, permissible to strike a child, or vilify him, for the child’s character will be totally perverted if he be subjected to blows or verbal abuse” (*Selections* 95).³ Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to explore the application of the principle of spiritual education in practice, the purpose of this principle is clearly to build strength of character, including confidence, courage, endurance, and resilience.

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RESILIENT CHILDREN

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How does exposure to difficulties and hardship affect the character of a child? It is important to understand the

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factors to overcome those risks and avoid negative outcomes such as delinquency and behavioral problems, psychological maladjustment, academic difficulties and physical complications (Rak and Patterson 368). An important longitudinal study conducted by the social psychologist Werner (“High-Risk Children”) examined 698 infants born in 1955 on the island of Kauai, Hawaii, and followed them from prenatal development to young adulthood, over a span of thirty years. A third of the infants were found to be at risk, meaning that by age two they had four or more high-risk conditions. These high-risk conditions which make a child susceptible to negative developmental outcomes include factors such as (1) being born into poverty, (2) experiencing moderate to severe prenatal stress, (3) being reared by a mother with little formal education, and (4) living in a family environment characterized by (a) discord, (b) desertion, (c) divorce, (d) parental alcoholism, or (e) mental illness.

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CHARACTERISTICS OF RESILIENT CHILDREN

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Smith and Prior, in one of the few studies that obtained standardized measures of child temperament by both parents

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was not independent of temperament. The exact nature of the association between the temperament of the child and mother-child warmth is not clear, that is, whether it was the mother's **behavior** that influenced the child's temperament or primarily the child's temperament that determined the mother's behavior.

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Werner's 1989 study breaks down the characteristics of resilient individuals and their environment at different critical ages in their development. Resilient adults were *infants* who by age one were able to elicit positive attention from family members as well as from strangers, and exhibited fewer eating and sleeping problems. These resilient individuals, in contrast to their nonresilient peers, were *toddlers* who met the world on their own terms and were described by pediatricians and psychologists as alert, autonomous, and tending to seek out novel experiences. Resilient girls, in particular, were more advanced than nonresilient girls in communication, locomotion, and self-help skills. By *elementary school age*, these were children who got along well with classmates, used skills effectively (though were not especially gifted), maintained many interests, and engaged in activities that were not narrowly sex typed. By *high school* they had developed a positive self-concept, had an internal locus of control, scored on tests of personality assessment as more nurturant, responsible, and as having an achievement-oriented attitude toward life. By ages eighteen through thirty-two, resilient individuals engaged in far more extracurricular activities that were cooperative and enterprising. Resilient females in particular were more assertive, independent, and achievement oriented than their nonresilient counterparts.

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Werner found that as adults most resilient individuals had moved away from the island of Kauai, while most of those with coping problems still lived on the island. She also found that resilient high-risk individuals significantly more often reported faith and prayer as sources of support than did their low-risk resilient peers of the same age (**33 percent** resilient high-risk versus 15 percent low-risk peers). A significantly higher proportion of the high-risk resilient individuals than their low-risk peers rated themselves as "happy" and "delighted" with their current life circumstances (44 percent resilient high-risk versus 10 percent low-risk peers). Furthermore, Werner found that resilient adults had grown up in families with four or fewer children spaced at least two years apart; few had experienced prolonged separation from the primary caregiver during the first year of life; and all had the

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reaching influences. One important distinction Rutter makes is that there is a difference between protective factors and positive experiences. Importantly, a protective factor may not constitute a pleasurable happening at all. The Bahá'í writings discuss how pain and suffering can be considered protective factors. Shoghi Effendi observed that

suffering, although an inescapable reality, can nevertheless be utilised as a means for the attainment of happiness.... Suffering is both a reminder and a guide. It stimulates us better to adapt ourselves to our environmental conditions, and thus leads the way to self improvement. In every suffering one can find a meaning and a wisdom.... It is sometimes only when all our suffering has passed that we become aware of its usefulness. (*Unfolding Destiny* 434)

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Rutter further clarifies that protective factors may have no detectable effect in the absence of a stressor, but rather, their role is to modify the response to a later stressor which may be encountered. Protective factors do not play a role in normal development per se but become critical in times of adversity as it is then that one sees their protective effects.

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By realizing that our reaction to the test we are facing is within our control, we are better able to achieve our full potential. Bahá'u'lláh reassures us thus: "He will never deal unjustly with any one, neither will He task a soul beyond its power" (*Gleanings* 106). 'Abdu'l-Bahá further elucidates the concept that striving for perfection and cultivating our nascent talents is a source of happiness: "When a man sees his work perfected and this perfection is the result of incessant labour and application he is the happiest man in the world. Work is the source of human happiness" (qtd. in Kurzius 147). Thus, we must instill in our children the desire and discipline to strive for ever greater degrees of refinement, and the idea that hard work and perseverance is not something to shy away from but rather, the desired state. 'Abdu'l-Bahá states:

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Biological Correlates

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The effects of stress—as well as the effects of efforts to cope with stress—leave traces upon the human brain. The

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functioning in this physical realm, its sole purpose being the life of the flesh. The purpose of human life, in contrast, is beyond the physical world. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá writes that the soul is “the medium of the spiritual life” and the soul is “the conscious reality” and “the heavenly gift of consciousness” (qtd. in Savi 147). According to the Bahá’í texts, animals have no “powers of ideation and conscious reflection” (*Promulgation* 172–73), nor do they have the power of abstract reasoning and intellectual ideals, for they are captives of the senses. Animals are further deprived of the

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“handling” paradigm. Here, pups are removed from their mothers and left alone in a separate cage for fifteen minutes a day during the nursing period (day 1–21) or some part thereof (Meaney, Aitkens, and Sapolsky). In general, adult rats that were post-natally handled as compared to non-handled rats exhibited reduced fearfulness in novel environments and increased exploratory behavior (Vallée et al., “Prenatal Stress”), reduced anxiety in stressful situations (Meerlo et al.), decreased depressive behavior and decreased propensity for addictive behaviors (Hilakivi-Clarke et al.), as well as an increased threshold for pain (Pieretti, d’Amore, and Loizzo). In response to a variety of stressors, handled rats as compared to non-handled rats show a less pronounced increase in the secretion of several stress hormones (Meerlo et al.). Most significant is the fact that handled rats exhibit a swifter and more efficient return to baseline values of adrenal glucocorticoids (stress hormones) after their encounter with a stressor (Vallée et al., “Prenatal Stress”). It is also interesting to note that postnatal handling and exposure to mild *postnatal* stress

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grace of God, that “inaction or the movement of man depend upon the assistance of God. If he is not aided, he is not able to do either good or evil.... in all the action or inaction of man he receives power from the help of God; but the choice of good or evil belongs to the man himself.... if the help is cut off, he remains absolutely helpless” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, in *Life, Death, Immortality* 166, 167).

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In parallel, if we approached life with the attitude—and truly believed—that our response to no test is ever beyond our control, we would never perceive a test as “uncontrollable” and would thereby limit maladaptive responses.

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