

# ***Protective Factors and Improving Paths of Poor Children's Resilience***

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**Keywords:** protective factors, poor children, resilience.

**Abstract:** Improving the resilience of the children in poverty is an effective way to promote their mental health. This study pointed out that in the perspective of resilience, certain support for poor children can help them overcome the adversity brought by poverty, enhance their resilience, increase the protective factors, and finally promote the development of children's personality and sociality. Out of this perspective, this study summarized and integrated the protective factors from four dimensions of personality traits, family factors, school factors and social factors. Also, the study summarized the paths to improve resilience of poor children, and found the shortcomings and gaps of the existing research, in order to provide a direction for future research.

## **1. Introduction**

In the contemporary era, the problem of underprivileged children has gradually attracted wide attention in China. Children in poor families often suffer mental problems such as the developmental delay of cognitive abilities and learning disabilities. They may even experience social-affective problems such as social judgment and depression. Studies show that such group owns low cognitive ability, which is mainly manifested in academic achievement, reading ability, language ability, and other aspects of their psychological, emotional, and externalized behavior development [1]. It is also shown by research that children suffer from early poverty are less competitive in schools than those who experience poverty later [2]. Strengthening the mental health of poor children can avoid the intergenerational poverty to a certain extent. In the field of psychology, most of previous studies on the poor children mainly concentrates on the effects of poverty on children's cognition, emotion, and behavior [3]. In recent years, along with the rise of positive psychology, researchers are paying more attention to resilience. Resilience is an important part of positive psychology, and it is a hot topic among experts and scholars in this field [4]. It can not only provide effective support and reassurance for young children's mental health, but also promote their growth in life, so it is worth researching and discussing [5]. Most of previous articles about psychological resilience focus on groups of stay-at-home children or university students, but few articles pay attention to such group of underprivileged children. Based on this fact, this article focuses on the peer group, family, and kindergarten of such group, to explore the protecting path, and what's more, the improvement path of underprivileged children's resilience by analyzing parent-child interaction, peer interaction, and the interaction between kindergarten teachers and children. Thus, such children's adaptive state of

mind would be improved, and they would gradually adapt to their terrible social environment, and finally thrive in the predicament.

## **2. Protective factors**

Protective factors are opposed to risk factors, which could mitigate the negative effects of adverse situations on children. These protective factors can be either external factors (such as social support) or some characteristics of the individual himself (such as self-efficacy). At present, a considerable number of researchers tend to divide the protective factors affecting children's resilience into two categories - one is the child variable, the other is the environmental variable, whereas many researchers prefer to divide protective factors into individual factors, family factors, and factors outside the family. According to the theory of ecological systems, this paper divides protective factors into individual factors, family factors, and social factors.

### **2.1. Individual protective factors**

For individual protective factors, one of the basic categories is personal abilities and personality traits. Personal abilities include physique, intelligence, sociability, etc. Personality traits include self-esteem, self-efficacy, sense of control, sense of humor, etc. [6]. Another category is the biochemical factor whose evidence comes from areas of neuroendocrinology, the immune system, and behavior-legacy studies that are involved in stress responses. Also, the cognitive-affective processing of experiences is also mentioned as a protective factor. They would be singly presented below.

#### **2.1.1. Personality Traits Factors**

Plenty of research shows that traits can affect resilience. Resilience and the main five personality factors are shown to have significant correlation with the factors of neuroticism, extroversion and conscientiousness, have less correlation with openness, and is not related with agreeableness. Also, it is found in the further regression analysis that neuroticism and extroversion have significant predict effect to resilience, and conscientiousness affects resilience through coping styles [7]. Also, it is shown that some personal ability can be protective factors. Many resilience related studies show that about a third of at-risk children are well adjusted to the environment [8]. Werner reported in the Kauai, Hawaii study that resilient children have strong interpersonal skills, problem solving skills, pleasant personalities, and the ability to seek help from others when needed [9]. Hu have found that the training of self-efficacy had a positive effect on the resilience enhancement experiment [10]. Intelligence is a major protective factor of resilience, which is influenced not only by innate genes but also by external environments such as nutrition, physical injury, learning, and training. People with high levels of resilience are achievement-oriented in order to achieve success and have high levels of self-control. Incisiveness is a psychological habit that refers to the ability to self-reflect. Resilient people are able to recover their self-esteem after failure by creating new things (e.g., painting, photography, dancing, writing, etc.) Resilient people are able to make clear plans for the future and recognize that they are separated from the negative situation. Behavioral behaviors include problem solving ability, empathy, and interpersonal skills. If an individual has good problem-solving ability, he/she will have more successful experience, and then he/she will be more confident in the future and have a higher sense of efficacy [11].

#### **2.1.2. Biochemical Factor**

Many studies have demonstrated that psychological experience can modify the structure and function of the brain. By using randomized intervention-control methods to investigate how the brain function

changes during the process of resilience improvement, it has been found that neural plasticity is enhanced in the interaction process of biological and psychological psychopathology and resilience [12]. Resilience has been found to be regulated by adaptive changes in neural circuits and molecular pathways that contain large amounts of neurotransmitters [13]. These changes allow individuals to develop neural circuits that regulate reward, fear, emotional responses, and social behavior. The animal's stress response is closely linked to the HPA axis. When an individual senses stress, it activates the HPA axis and releases glucocorticoids from the adrenal cortex. The temporary release of glucocorticoids on the HPA axis in the acute stress response can promote the adaptive behavior and neurobiochemical response to stress [14].

### 2.1.3. Cognitive-affective Processing Factors

Cognitive-affective processing of experiences is also mentioned as a protective factor. Researchers believe children will think about things that happen to them, and will endow them with a certain meaning, that is, children actively process their experience cognitively and emotionally. For example, an adversity that is a welcome and positive challenge to one child may be daunting to another. Many researchers believe that the cognitive and affective processing style of the experience is crucial to the ability to produce resilience [15]. Positive experience also matters. According to Rutter et al, some extremely short or lengthy positive experience generally does not have much effect on resilience, but the positive experience that either overcomes or compensates for the damage caused by the risk factors has a significant protective effect [16].

In conclusion, individual protective factors are mainly controlled by personal abilities and traits, biochemical factors, and cognitive-affective processing difference.

## 2.2. Family Factors

Family factors mainly refer to family environment. Early research noted that the parenting style and the internal function are two important parts of family environment, and they have a related effect on the resilience of children [17].

### 2.2.1. Parenting style

Parenting style is an important part of family environment. Scholars have directly studied the relationship between parenting style and resilience in the family environment. According to Farahnaz Mirzaei et al, there is a strong correlation between parenting style and mental toughness, and parenting style can significantly predict the characteristic variation of mental toughness. Among them, the authoritarian parenting style has an extremely significant negative correlation with mental toughness [18]. In the research on parenting style likewise, Ritter found that the authoritative parenting style was positively correlated with high resilience, while authoritarian and indulgent parenting styles were generally associated with low resilience [19]. A study in China on the relationship between parental parenting style and resilience of left-behind children concluded that the father and the mother's emotional warmth and understanding is the key factor to improve the resilience of left-behind children. The severe punishment of parents is an important factor that hinders the development of resilience of left-behind children [20]. In addition, Hamidi Rezazakeri et al. used the Stenberg Parenting Style Questionnaire and CD-RISC Questionnaire in 2010 to find out that the dimension of parental acceptance involvement was significantly positively correlated with resilience. Regression analysis also showed that the dimension of parental acceptance involvement could significantly predict resilience [21]. In the earlier studies, Masten et al. proposed that a good parenting system can promote the good development of adolescents under adversity, and parents' encouragement of children's success will contribute to the development of children's resilience [22].

Joseph et al.'s 1998 study showed that independence and parental rearing that avoids over-protection leads to high resilience in girls. However, a well-regulated and strictly controlled family upbringing that focuses on emotional expression will make boys mentally resilient [23].

For the group of poor children, most of the present research on parenting styles focuses on parents solely, and ignores that family parenting is a two-way interactive process and that poverty may affect the two-way process at the same time. The parents' parenting style will also be affected by children's negative feedback in the interaction. And this part of influence of poverty is now less focused on. Moreover, the psychological development of children is related to the caregivers, and indirectly related to the level of social support and mental health of their caregivers. However, there is little research on how the social support and mental health of the caregivers affect their next generation.

### **2.2.2. Family Internal Functions**

Family internal functions can be understood as a home care about each other, care ability to cope with events, family cohesion, and difficulties in dealing with the quality of family life. Good family functions provide good conditions for family members on health of body and mental development, such as to meet the needs of belonging and love and provide good conditions for the social development. Studies have shown that when a family can meet the needs of security, love, and respect in the process of individual development, it is conducive to the development of a higher level of resilience [24]. It is generally believed that the better the family function of an individual is, the higher the level will be of resilience [25]. According to Olson's family function scale, family function is mainly divided into two aspects: family intimacy and adaptability [26]. Family intimacy reflects the emotional connection among family members, and the intimate emotion comes from good communication, mutual support, understanding, and care among family members. Adaptability is the ability of the family system to change with the family situation and the problems at different stages of the family development. Research shows that there is a significant positive correlation between the individual's resilience and the current ideal of closeness in family function [27].

Totally, family functions as an important environment for the development of children, and articles are mainly paying attention on the internal functions of family such as social support, caring, and respect etc. However, as for the poor children, the investment parents put in them also matters. Little research focuses on the material life of the poor children or discusses how the material basis affects them.

## **2.3. School factors**

School factors mainly refer to the influence of school environment on children's resilience. School environment contains a lot of factors, and previous classifications are not uniform. Li Haiyan et al. divided the school environment into physical environment, teacher-student relationship, peer relationship, classroom atmosphere, and rules and regulations based on the five dimensions [29]. Yang and Dai argued that the school environment included the negative behavior of the surrounding peer group as well as the school students' and teachers' bad behaviors, focusing on teachers and peers [30]. Specifically, to the school environment's influence on the resilience, previous studies pay more attention to the role of interpersonal relationships. Interpersonal relationships include the relationship between teachers and students, as well as peer relations. Furrer et al. believed that peer relationship and teacher-student relationship are both important protective factors of resilience [31].

### **2.3.1. Teacher-student relationship**

In the study on the effect of teacher-student relationship, Sanders et al. found that teachers can buffer the impact of risks on students, and teachers' respect for students can help them develop resilience

[32]. Johnson analyzed teachers' daily behaviors to cultivate and improve students' resilience, confirming its importance [33]. Tsai and Cheney found that the teacher-student relationship can guide the positive development of children at risk, and teachers can improve the level of students' resilience by establishing a good relationship with students [34]. In general, researchers generally believe that a good teacher-student relationship can play a positive role in children's resilience.

### 2.3.2. Peer relationship

However, conclusions of the impact of peer relationship to the development of psychology resilience are inconsistent. Studies have found that a good peer relationship can reduce the negative impact from parents. This is because the children's relationship with friends can also improve the level of self-esteem, social skills, and academic besides the family relationship [35]. Children's peer relations include peers and adults. Johnson and Masten emphasized that establishing a good relationship with caring adults (such as parents, school staff) and peers is the source of developing psychology resilience [36]. In an empirical study on vulnerable groups, Graber et al. studied 409 adolescents and found that close friendship can improve individual resilience through interrelated mechanisms such as establishing a constructive coping style (including seeking support and positive coping) and supportive friendship network [37]. Chen et al. found that peer support had a positive effect on students' resilience and a better predictive ability on resilience than personal variables and parental support variables [38]. However, some studies have found the negative effect of peer relationship.

Oldfield et al. tested parental and peer attachment, school connection, and resilience in 90 adolescents with financial difficulties, and found that the individual's connection with the school (the degree of feeling accepted and respected by others, tolerance and support in the school social environment, the relationship with teachers and peers, the sense of belonging, etc.) can positively predict the students' resilience. However, peer attachment has a negative effect on resilience, which is believed to be due to the fact that adolescents are more likely to interact with antisocial peers in the absence of adult care [39].

In conclusion, previous studies have mostly focused on the role of interpersonal relationships, instead of the school type in the school environment. There are few studies on the two aspects of peer environment. School types can reflect the conditions of school material resources from the side, and peer environment refers to the overall social and economic status of peers. As important parts of school environment, these two aspects deserve further research.

## 2.4. Social factors

Social protection factors mainly refer to social support that originated from society and social members. Previous studies have shown that social support is an important protective factor for children's resilience [40]. On the one hand, a good society atmosphere can provide children with protective factors, which contain community safety, less violence, high quality of air and water, and less incidents of political conflict etc. What's more, a highly-civilized society values education, which makes children enjoy educational opportunities [41]. These factors can prevent children from vicious incident and negative life experience, thus protecting the resilience. On the other hand, social support provided by social members is also protective factor for the development of resilience [42]. The main source of such social support is the community of government institutions, social organizations, and other social groups. These groups provide financial assistance for the poor children, which may relieve their poverty and help them have equal participation in social activities [43]. This will help the poor children achieve good group identification in society, which has a significant effect on children's personality development [44]. It is also shown that such social support offered from social members would help children gain better social adjustment which can protect children from

being exposed to negative social effects, thus rendering it possible for them to develop positive personality and better resilience [45].

Generally, for this part of factors, there is little research on social support provided at the social level. Most of the research related to social support mainly emphasizes the social support of family and peers. Current research is less about how to provide reasonable social support for poor children. How social members can meet the needs of poor children while protecting their self-esteem remains to be further studied and discussed.

### **3. Improving Path**

Previous studies have shown that the key to the realization of resilience potential is the cultivation of individuals' positive resilience traits and the establishment of a good family and the external environmental support system. Resilience research explores the inner potential of individuals from the perspective of positive psychology and emphasizes more on the potential stimulation and self-transcendence of people when coping with adverse situations [46].

#### **3.1. Cultivation of Individual Traits**

As stated before, traits such as self-esteem and self-confidence, positive cognitive and affective processing style of experience, sense of self-control, sense of self-efficacy, good communication skills, problem solving skills, and planning skills are all positive personality characteristics of resilient individuals. To improve such traits in poor children, the International Research Project proposed a famous strategy of so called "I have", "I am" and "I can". Among them, "I have" is to help individuals discover the external support and resources they have, and develop a sense of security and protection. "I am" helps individuals discover their inner strengths, including their feelings, attitudes, and beliefs. "I can" is to help individuals discover and develop interpersonal skills and problem-solving skills, such as creativity, persistence, humor, communication, etc. [47]. In addition, the study and understanding of the knowledge and skills related to resilience is conducive to the improvement of children resilience. So, educators can organize quality development training such as adversity imagination and other group activities, in which poor children can actively participate to learn various life skills, communication skills, cooperation ability, problem-solving ability and so on. Finally, they will guide their actions with a positive belief, cope with adverse situations as an opportunity to promote their own growth, and cultivate their strong personality.

#### **3.2. Establishment of Social Support System**

In particular, for the group of poor children, in addition to cultivating their individual positive traits, it is also an indispensable measure to enhance the external support from families, schools, and social groups, which plays a very important role in protecting poor children's positive development in adverse situations. A good social support system for poor children must first be established to ensure that they have accessible and adequate support resources. In the family, the warm and harmonious family atmosphere, early safe attachment relationship, parents' positive attention to their children, democratic education, understanding and unconditional acceptance, the establishment of close relationship with parents, and the process of parent-child communication are all important conditions to help poor children develop the characteristics of resilience and realize the potential of resilience. On the schools and social groups' side, affirmation and care from teachers, understanding and company from peers and friends, and success or happy experience also play an important supporting role in cushioning the depressed mood after suffering adversity and setbacks and promoting the individual's good adaptation. Schools or social institutions can also enhance the social identification and social adaptation of poor children by organizing group activities of interpersonal communication

and interpersonal trust. Also, while creating a positive, safe, and healthy atmosphere for the poor children, the society should also pay attention to the self-esteem of the poor children and strive to create a good external support environment for the cultivation of their positive psychological qualities.

#### 4. Summary and Prospect

This study summarized the protective factors of the resilience of poor children and the improving path. In the perspective of resilience, certain support for poor children can help children overcome the adversity brought by poverty, enhance resilience, increase the protective factors and promote the good development of children's personality and sociality. In general, most scholars advocate to treat poor children from a developmental perspective, and to protect and actively involve themselves in the development of their resilience. However, most studies have focused on ordinary children, and there has been little research on poor children. And there's inadequate research on how social policy and agency can help. Future research may pay more attention to such group, and can focus on social influence and policy interventions to help poor children achieve psychological health.

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