

Posted on: Thursday, February 16, 2006

## Some at-risk kids do OK .... Why?

By [Beverly Creamer](#)  
Advertiser Education Writer

Emmy Werner may not be a household name, but the discoveries she has made over 40 years of studying 698 children born on Kaua'i in 1955 have created a sea change in the way society views — and helps — at-risk children.

The words "resilience" and "protective factors" have come from Werner's longitudinal studies of children on Kaua'i and elsewhere, and they have defined the way social workers now look at how to intervene in the lives of troubled young people — as well as delineating markers that can keep a child from going astray.

"When it comes to resilient children, it didn't matter if they were Hawaiian or Portuguese or Filipino or whatever else," said Werner by phone from her California home. "What mattered was whether they had these buffers in their background."

Werner, 76, will be in Honolulu next week to talk about her research in a free public lecture as part of a conference on multiethnic families at the East-West Center. She currently has a research professorship at the University of California Davis.

In the famed Kaua'i Longitudinal Study, done with co-investigator Ruth S. Smith, a clinical psychologist on Kaua'i, Werner showed that despite childhood adversity including poverty, parental mental illness, child abuse and divorce, children with certain characteristics were able to succeed. Her research was some of the first to find that even with a difficult or abusive family life, certain factors protected a child.

There isn't just one protective factor, but a constellation that includes certain innate qualities of the child, as well as certain support in the environment. Other studies have shown the same results, leading social service agencies, school districts and even parents to look now at how to build resilience into children's lives.

"Risk factors were the big thing in the literature at the time," Werner said, "and they tended to focus on something that goes wrong with children. But there weren't really any studies that looked at the whole cohort — everyone born at the same time — and what happened to the successful survivors of which there are many, many more."

Werner discovered that protective factors include a competent mother, especially with some family support, who makes sure the child receives good health-care during growth. "Early neglect of health seems to be a real risk factor that extends into midlife," Werner said.

But resilient children had other safety factors as well, including reading and problem-solving skills. Werner found if children were not reading at grade level by age 10 — about fourth or fifth grade — they began to fall behind.

Just as important are mentors who may provide guidance if parents fail to. They could be any caring adult — a teacher who sees potential in a child, an auntie, grandmother, older sibling, counselor, pastor.

But faith, and being involved in your community, also play a role.

"Some kind of faith that gives you a sense of security, that's the sort of thing resilient children shared," Werner said. "And by middle childhood they were also asked to help others, and challenged to see that they were not just the center of the universe, and that there were others who needed assistance."

Helping others can be as simple as baby-sitting or belonging to a social organization that made them proud to contribute and proud of who they are.

Werner happened upon the Kaua'i study almost by chance, invited to participate by a professor at the University of California Berkeley, where she was working on public health research. Werner was fascinated with the subject of resilience because of her own background as a child in Germany during five years of Allied bombing during World War II. She saw so much suffering and loss of life, and yet watched people pick themselves up and go on with their lives, despite terrible losses.

"People who say, 'Well, that's what happened, but I'm not looking back, I'm looking forward.' That perspective has always intrigued me."

Reach Beverly Creamer at [bcreamer@honoluluadvertiser.com](mailto:bcreamer@honoluluadvertiser.com).

## **RAISING RESILIENT CHILDREN**

Elements of resilience in childhood for children with multiple risk factors include:

**Characteristics of the individual:** Active, vigorous, low distress levels, sociable, affectionate, engaging temperament, social maturity, average or above average intelligence, high achievement motivation, special talents, positive self-concept, impulse control, planning and foresight, faith or a sense of coherence, required helpfulness.

**Characteristics of the environment:** Small family, maternal competence, close bond with primary caregiver, supportive grandparents, supportive siblings, competent peer friends, supportive teachers, successful school experiences, mentors, social organizations such as youth clubs or religious groups.

## **TURNING POINTS**

- During adult studies of the Kaua'i cohort, Emmy Werner discovered that the opening of opportunities in their 20s and 30s led to enduring positive changes for former delinquents, teenage mothers and the majority of the group who had struggled with mental health problems in their teens.
- Among the most potent forces for change were opportunities for schooling, including community college or adult education; skills acquired during military service; marriage to a stable partner; conversion to a religion that required active participation; or recovery from a life-threatening illness.
- Surrogate parents in the extended family, either older siblings or aunts or uncles, grandparents, etc., provided important emotional support as the stimulus for change. Often those who grew up with an abusive or alcoholic parent had a favorite uncle or aunt who became a lifeline.