



Building Strong Connections

FAMILY PROGRAMS HAWAII

## Resilience: Every Child Has Promise

~ by Marianna Sheehan & Judith Wilhoite



IT TAKES AN

Ohana

Resilience: the capacity to spring back, rebound, successfully adapt in the face of adversity and develop social competence despite exposure to severe stress – a quality we want for all children. And one that is very important for the children in our lives who have been affected by out-of-home care.

Mervlyn Kitashima grew up on Kauai enduring many challenges and was considered an “at risk” youth, yet she has blossomed into a strong, happy, productive member of our community. When asked what made the difference for her, she shared four protective factors, all of which have been validated by research done by Dr. Emmy Werner’s Kauai Longitudinal Study.

By providing these protective factors to the children in our care, we may be able to alter, or even reverse, negative outcomes and enable the children and youth in our care to circumvent life stressors and go on to live a life of promise. The four factors are:

***Caring and supportive people and places:*** Every child needs at least one caring, supportive adult who gives caring unconditionally. The more adults in a child’s life who give this unconditional caring, the better. For Mervlyn, the people who made the biggest difference in her life were her grandmother, her elementary school principal and an administrator at Kamehameha schools.

Growing up, Mervlyn remembers hearing people say that because she was Hawaiian she was nothing. Her elementary school principal was the first person Mervlyn remembers telling her differently. He said that because she was Hawaiian, she could do anything she wanted to. This began to instill in her a sense of hope and a shift in the way she thought about her future.

Her grandmother was someone Mervlyn always



Mervlyn Kitashima & former foster youth Ipo Lynch Ma'e

knew she could go to when things were difficult at home. She knew she would always be welcome and that no matter what condition she came to her grandmother in, she would not be turned away. Her grandmother showed her that she was lovable. For many children in out of home care, this is the belief so many children struggle with the most. When people continually give them up, when they are moved from home to home without explanation, they often believe it is because they are unlovable. The evidence in their lives of being unwanted backs this belief up. Tell the children in your home you love them and that they are lovable. Create new evidence for them.

Finally, an administrator at Kamehameha made it possible for her to finish her education after having become pregnant out of wedlock. This administrator went to bat for her, changing the schools policy that until then, prevented female students from continuing their education after becoming pregnant. This administrator helped to further instill in her what her elementary school teacher began to years before, a belief that she could do anything she wanted to and that she was worthy.

Just one adult who loves or cares for a child unconditionally is enough to make the difference between a child “making it” or not. That person may be a family member, older sibling, teacher, coach or other caring adult. That person may be you. All children need positive voices to counteract the negative ones in their lives.

**Opportunities for participation in meaningful activities:**

In this context, meaningful activities are those in which build a sense of self. For Mervlyn, these activities included student government, glee club and intra-murals. These activities created evidence she was talented, good at things, worthy and valuable and these new feelings took the place of “not feeling worth anything”.

The more we teach children, the more opportunities they have to learn new and different things, the more skills they have, the more confident they become and the better their choices in life will be.

**Work and responsibilities:** Children given the opportunity to develop a strong work ethic, a “stick-to-it” attitude, even in the face of adversity, have important tools to fall back on when things get tough. Children who are given work and responsibilities are more resilient because later in life they are able to persevere when things are difficult. They are able to follow through and accomplish tasks and goals when others give up, quit or get bored.

Growing up, many of the responsibilities and chores for upkeep of



*Preparing family meals can help youth build resilience*

the household fell on Mervlyn and her siblings. These skills have carried Mervlyn throughout her life as she completed her high school education, raised 7 children and then went back to school to earn her college degree in her 50's.

**A sense of purpose, a sense of hope:**

For many children in out of home care and “at risk” youth, this sense of purpose and hope often comes from religion, faith and/or spirituality. Having something to believe in (spiritual strength) gives them a reason to hang on when there is no one in their lives to rely on. A belief that God (or whatever spiritual deity they have been exposed to) loves them, can provide them with the means to get through these challenging years in their lives and prevent them from feeling completely alone and hopeless. Religious communities often provide stable people in the lives of children (Sunday school teachers, ministers, priests, etc.) who say positive things such as “you are great”, “we love you” and “God loves you”. These are extremely

powerful messages for a child who does not hear them anywhere else in their lives.

A passion for one's heritage and culture in combination with exposure and involvement in cultural activities and organizations can also provide similar or the same sense of hope and purpose. It can instill a sense of pride and worth from identifying with a particular group or culture.

So as you can see, there are many different ways to contribute to a child's development of resilience. Children need to not only hear they are lovable, worthy, valuable and that there is hope for a positive outcome in their lives, but they also need the opportunity to create evidence of these facts. These opportunities lie in spending time with an adult who cares unconditionally for them, participating in activities that are meaningful to them, completing work and chores and being a part of a community that teaches hope. Think about how you can provide these opportunities for the children in your life and take action on them. If you need support and information on how you can provide these opportunities, contact It Takes An `Ohana.

*Marianna Sheehan is a former foster youth who works with the children of Hawai'i as a physical therapist.*

*Judith Wilboite a family advocate for It Takes An `Ohana, a program of Family Programs Hawai'i. She & her husband have raised 5 birth sons and 3 foster sons. You can reach her at: (808) 540-2543 or [jwilboite@familyprogramshbi.org](mailto:jwilboite@familyprogramshbi.org).*