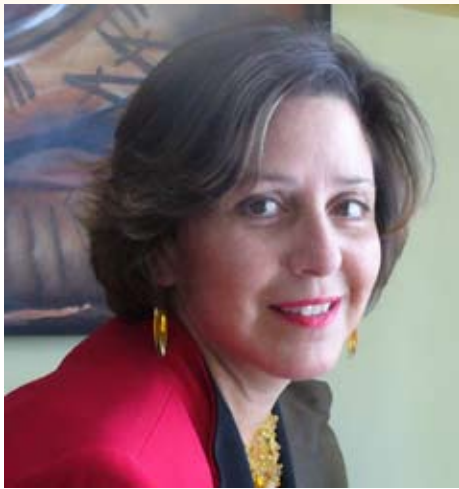


FOCUS ON RESILIENCE



From the Director

Some months ago, my book club read *What is the What?*, a novel about Valentino, one of the 20,000 Lost Boys. At the age of ten, Valentino escaped a massacre in his village in Sudan and walked thousands of miles through Sudan, Ethiopia and Kenya, spending eight years in a resettlement camp. Many of the boys died during the journey, some of starvation and dehydration, others at the mercy of lions

and armed forces. But others, like Valentino, made it. All the way to America.

The story stayed with me—not just because of the utter horror described, but because it made me wonder about our own foster children and why some “make it” and others don’t.

Resilience in physics is the quality of bouncing back, the ability of a body to recover its shape after some force has changed it. Resilience in children refers to the ability to adapt and achieve positive outcomes despite adversity.

Resilience is the great miracle of foster children. Many survive the effects of maltreatment and impermanency, and go on to get an education, find jobs, become part of communities and become good parents. What is the difference between these children, and the ones we also know who end up in prisons, homeless, unemployed or with debilitating emotional problems? As child advocates, we must answer this question. In this newsletter, we review the efforts of researchers seeking to understand resilience. We also share our stories and ideas on how to apply this understanding to our work.

Every day, our volunteers work to promote resilience...to help make sure children in foster care have the chance to thrive. We are proud of all the volunteers and child welfare professionals who make it possible for children to live in safe permanent homes. And we thank the courts and our community for the opportunity to be of service.

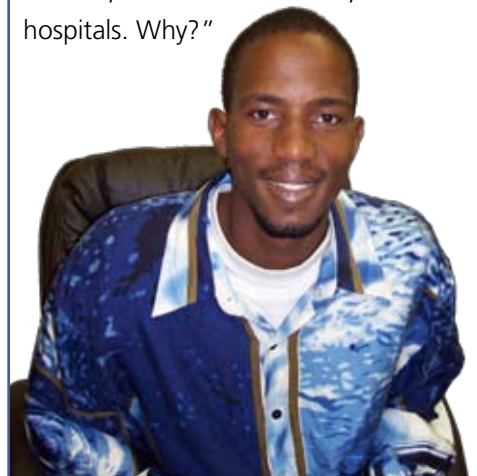
Ana Maria Pozo, J.D., Executive Director

Tim Moore Asks the Question

Here is Tim Moore, still struggling at 29 to create a good life for himself. Tim entered the foster care system at five, taken, along with his identical twin brother, from a mother who was addicted to drugs.

Tim’s story has a few bright spots. There was a favorite social worker with a ready smile. “We need more of those,” he says. “She was a real one.” He has a relationship with his God. “The pastor says God has a purpose for you, but we have to take the first step.” But he also spent eight years in prison, didn’t complete school, did not qualify for independent living resources and is still struggling to find full employment and a place to live. “Since my release in 2002,” he explains, “I have only been in jail to beat the cold, rain and predators on the streets. But I always get released to the same problem: No one is there.”

“Yes, I have been to Disneyworld,” Moore adds. “But I’ve also seen doctors, psychiatrists, treatment centers, nine shelters, eleven foster homes, two hospitals. Why?”



ORDINARY Magic

To understand the nature of resilience,

researchers need to find ways to quantify and measure success in life, the adversities that threaten development, and the strengths that help a person overcome



Ann Masten, Ph.D.

adversity. Ann Masten, Distinguished McKnight Professor in the Institute of Child Development at the University of Minnesota, has been studying resilience in young people for over 25 years. She, like other scientists studying resilience, seeks to describe the complex transactional

nature of resilience in human development. While work is ongoing, Masten believes the research supports conclusions that point to strategies for promoting resilience.

First, Masten concludes that resilience is not a rare trait. "The great surprise of resilience research is the ordinariness of the phenomena," Masten writes. Describing these fundamental protective factors as "ordinary magic," Masten has argued that, "If these systems are protected, development is robust even in the face of severe adversity." If however, the major systems are impaired, and/or the adversity is extreme and prolonged, resilience can become challenging or impossible.

Summarizing decades of research, Masten has come up with a "short list" of factors that predict resilience:

- **Positive relationships with competent and caring adults**
- **Effective parenting**
- **Intelligence; problem-solving skills**
- **Self-efficacy...a sense of being able to accomplish goals**
- **Self-regulation skills**
- **Talents and appealing qualities valued by society and self**
- **Beliefs that life has meaning**
- **Faith and religious affiliations**
- **Socioeconomic advantages**
- **Effective teachers and schools**
- **Community Resources**

Some protections develop within the child, such as problem-solving and self-regulation skills, while others are based in the family or community. The transactional nature of resilience means genes and experience interact and influence each other. Poor nutrition or neglect can undermine the development of cognitive skills. An engaging personality or talents can attract adult attention, which in turn affords opportunities for positive relationships with teachers or coaches.

What should we do?

Our time and money should go to programs that strengthen the protections on the short list, according to Masten. Our investments need to be strategically timed: Early competence builds later achievements.

Two of the protective factors on the short list--caring connections with adults and good intellectual skills--may be the most powerful influences on development.

Connecting children to caring competent adults can be supported through parenting skill development programs, in-home services to at-risk parents and literacy and job training for parents. But when this fails, we must support high-quality foster care and

foster parenting, as well as mentoring programs that bring children in touch with people who can nurture their development.

The intellectual abilities of children can be supported by both protecting normal brain development and also by supporting learning. Adequate prenatal care, for example, helps protect the child's intellectual potential by preventing the challenge of premature births. Nutrition programs also support healthy brain development. Supporting quality schools, investing in teacher education and tutoring programs are good for all children, but they may provide special intellectual nutrition for children growing up in especially hazardous or risky conditions.

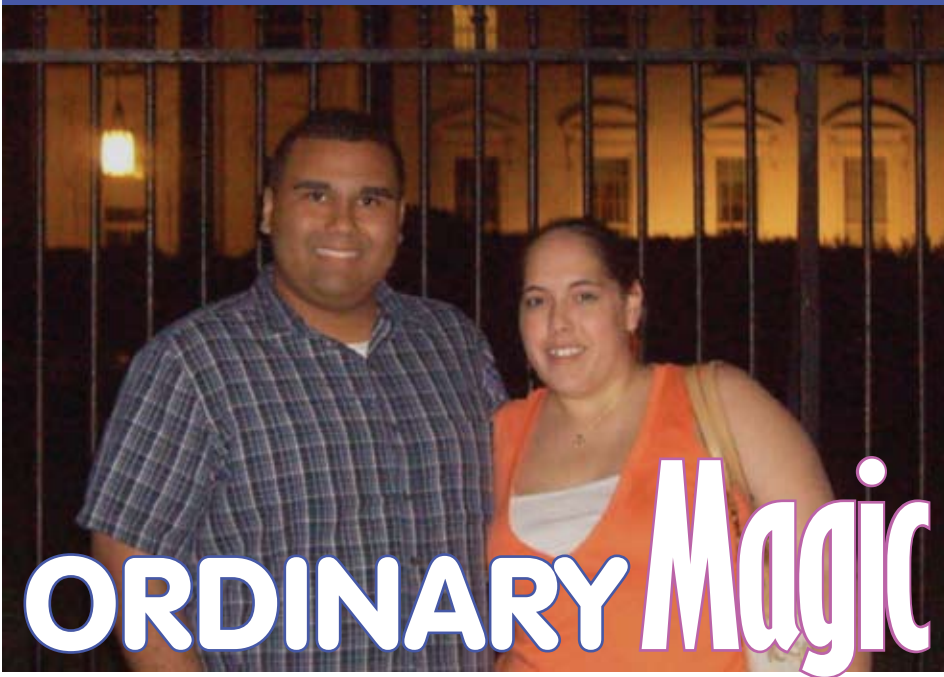
Masten's work also suggests that resources some may see as "frills," such as music lessons, sports and other extracurricular activities, can be excellent ways to promote the sense of mastery and self-efficacy that supports resilience. They also bring high-risk children into positive school and peer environments.

Cautions about resilience

The idea of resilience is very appealing, Masten writes, and the stories of resilient children can be inspiring. But she points to potential dangers in some interpretations of resilience.

First, don't expect children to overcome adversity on their own. The research on resilience clearly confirms the crucial importance of relationships with adults and resources in the family or community for resilience. There is also no magic bullet. No one solution will foster resilience in all children at risk. Many children face multiple risks requiring "cumulative protection models" and a respect for the unique situation and resources of every child.

And we must stay focused on prevention, she says. "The enthusiasm for strength-based programming and policies should not lead us to ignore the fact that many hazards in the lives of children are preventable."



ORDINARY Magic AT WORK...

As a Department of Children and Families child abuse investigator, Sixto Acevedo reports he has been able to save the lives of several children. "It's very stressful and daunting work," he says. Acevedo's life has gone full circle. He was once one of those children.

His mother died when he was two. He and his brother were raised in Miami by an abusive, alcoholic father. The boys were removed from the home when Acevedo was twelve. In the next six years, he was in ten or twelve foster homes. "Some of them were horrible," he says. "One was later closed down. But a lot of the moves were just bureaucratic ones and meant a lot of changing schools." Acevedo attended four different high schools. In his second year, he was technically a freshman with a 1.5 grade average. He was told by a guidance counselor to drop out of school and get a GED.

Jump forward nine years. Acevedo

graduated on time from high school with a 3.5 average, is a college graduate, married and with a job that has deep meaning for him. What happened?

Acevedo says luck, but it is clear that Masten's short list of ordinary magic was also at work. He had countless social workers, but that sophomore year in high school, his file landed on the desk of a social worker at Children's Home Society who stayed with him for two years, motivated him and pushed him. Acevedo went to summer school and caught up the next year by doing a double year through night school. His social worker brought him to his judicial reviews with Foster Care Review volunteers, where he met Octavio Verdeja, Sr., who helped direct him toward college and later toward a first job. Acevedo's abilities had finally met with the right nurturing.

"I was on the brink of being crushed," he says. "But any kid can dig his or her way out with the right attention."

Our Own Stories of Resilience

I entered foster care at age 12 when my mother died. In high school, I attached myself to a group of college-bound kids and simply did what they did, including taking the SATs and applying to the best schools I could hope to get into. It kept me with a group of motivated young people and helped me to succeed.

Foster Care Review Board Member

Starting at age eight, I lived in three different children's homes in New York. The last one I stayed in through high school graduation. It offered dance lessons, music lessons, sports and medical and dental care. Most of the staff were warm and sensitive, and I had one particular counselor that I was close to. I also had occasional visits from my parents and other relatives. I think all this helped me grow up to be pretty normal!

Foster Care Review Board Member

Mentors play a huge role. Through my own personal experience in foster care and through the cases of children we have reviewed, I see that the more adults the youth has to confide in and trust, the higher likelihood they will be successful in their adult life.

Foster Care Review Panel Member

Applying the research to case reviews

Foster Care Review's citizen review panels help the Juvenile Court monitor the safety, wellbeing and permanency of dependent children. They also play an important role in assuring children have access to the things known to promote resilience. Panel members need to monitor these important areas and assure permanency plans are being followed.

Adult Relationships Parents, foster parents, mentors, coaches, teachers... any stable, caring adult can nurture resilience. *Does a child have any?*

School Intellectual development and education are major predictors of success. *Does the student have the supports needed to succeed?*

Mental and Physical Health Services Foster children have higher than normal rates of physical and mental health problems that will affect resilience. *Are needed services being provided?*

Permanency Long stays in foster care and disruptive moves have a negative effect on every aspect of a child's chances for success. *Is progress being made on the permanency plan?*

Visits with Family Visits with parents, when allowed, and visits with siblings or other relatives need to be part of the case plan. *Are these visits occurring?*

Extracurricular Activities Music and drama, sports and other activities are not frills but important ways to build self-esteem and positive relationships. *Are these available?*

Helping "Aging Out" Youth

Quality of life after foster care is a key measure of resilience. FCR conducts special reviews of youth ages 13 to 17 to monitor their preparation for adult living. Data from FY 2007 reviews show 76% of the children have special education needs, the majority with severe emotional disabilities. Among the 16- and 17-year-olds, those closest to leaving the system, 60% did not have plans for housing; 70% did not have plans for secondary education; 60% needed mental health treatment; and 80% did not have a personal relationship with an adult. What can we do to prepare these young people for life after foster care?

As volunteers, we can focus on Masten's first predictor of resilience: competent and caring adult relationships. We can make sure visits with biological parents or relatives take place. We can connect youth with guardians ad litem, mentoring programs, neighbors or teachers. And we can encourage case managers, mental health professionals and others to do the same. Foster youth need someone to turn to, just as our own children do.

Print and Internet resources

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BE PART OF THE ORDINARY MAGIC

Foster Care Review (FCR) helps the Juvenile court by conducting care reviews of dependent children, making sure they are safe and getting needed services. Since 1990, FCR volunteer citizen review panels have monitored over 40,000 Miami-Dade foster children. If you would like to make a difference in the lives of foster children by volunteering or making a donation, please contact Ana Maria Pozo, Executive Director, at anapozo@fostercarereview.org



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