

Vermont Department of Mental Health Mental Health Minute

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Current Topic: Thriving And Adversity

True well-being is more than just the absence of emotional or behavioral problems. It involves experiencing positive emotions, being connected and engaged with the community, having good relationships, and developing meaning and a sense of accomplishment in one's life. Stress and adversity can have a negative impact on well-being. Some stress and adversity can be healthy in promoting the development of coping

skills. However, intense, long-term and/or multiple types of adversity, sometimes called toxic stress, can overwhelm a child's ability to cope. The ability to bounce back after experiencing a stressful event is important for healthy development. This component of thriving, also called resilience, in children is a function of individual traits, family characteristics and other influences from their surrounding environments.

Why Is This Important?

Research shows that high level of stress and adversity can negatively alter a child's brain development. Adverse experiences in childhood have also been shown to increase the risk for a number of poor health and life outcomes if left unaddressed. Understanding how to prevent adversity or lessen

its impact by fostering resilience can help to protect a child from these potentially harmful impacts. The Department of Mental Health is interested in promoting factors that contribute to and enhance resilience and thriving for children and their families.

What Does Thriving Look Like In Vermont?

The National Survey of Children's Health gathers information from parents about children's health, access to healthcare, and family and social context. From this survey, we looked at how Vermont children ages 6-17 and their families are coping in the face of adversity. One in six (1 in 6) school-aged children in Vermont have experienced three or more (3+) types of adversity in their lives. Half of all children have experienced at least one type of adversity. The most common types of adversity for Vermont children are

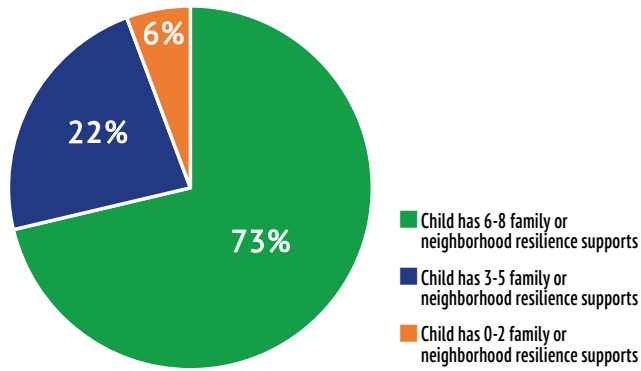
economic or housing difficulties, divorce or separation of parents, caregiver substance use, or a caregiver struggling with severe depression, mental illness or suicidal thoughts (for more information about the types of adversity click [here](#)). Analysis of these data suggests that children who demonstrate resilience show signs of thriving despite exposure to adversity. Creating environments that are supportive, welcoming and responsive to a child and family's needs helps to build resilience, even when other stressors are present.

Types of Resilience Supports

- Child lives in a supportive neighborhood (family knows where to go for help, neighbors help out in time of need, neighbors watch children)
- Family talks about what to do when faced with problems
- Family works together to solve problem when faced with problems
- Family knows they have strengths to draw on when faced with problems
- Family stays hopeful even in difficult times when faced with problems
- Parent is handling demands of raising children well
- Parent shares ideas /talks about things that matter with children
- Child lives with parents who have someone they can turn to for day-to-day emotional support with parenting / raising children

Family and Community Resilience

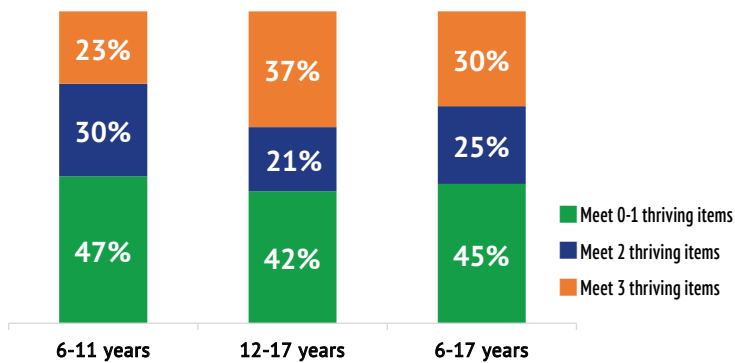
Percent of Children With Family and Neighborhood Resilience Supports



Family and community are important in the lives of children. About 3 in 4 children in Vermont have 6 or more of the 8 identified family and neighborhood resilience supports described above. We are learning more about family and community factors that support resilience. Where there are more of those factors present, children have a better foundation from which to thrive. Understanding family and community resilience and identifying gaps can help direct resources where they are needed most.

Individual Resilience

Percent of Children Who Demonstrate Elements of Thriving



Individual characteristics of thriving and resilience include remaining calm in the face of challenges, showing curiosity about learning new things, and being able to complete tasks. One in three (1 in 3) children show all 3 of these components of thriving. In looking at the components separately, 2 in 5 Vermont parents of school-aged children report their child can stay calm and in control when faced with a challenge. Three in four (3 in 4) children show curiosity and half can complete tasks.

What Does Toxic Stress Mean?

While preventing toxic levels of stress is extremely important to a child's well-being, protective factors that come from the individual, the family, and the community can also help buffer children from some of the negative effects of adversity. Most Vermont

children possess resilience-enhancing factors at the individual, family and community levels. While the number of these factors for kids in Vermont are higher than the national average, there are still too many children who lack these supports.

What Can We Do About Promoting Resilience?

Building family and community awareness about adversity and resilience can lead to conversations and exploration of how we can develop environments that promote and support resilience for children and their families. Communities in Vermont can support parents to know where to turn for help. Parents can seek support as needed to provide the day-to-day emotional support for

their children. Educators can teach resilience skills. Health and mental health professionals can assess and address identified needs. And government officials can help create the conditions that allow children to thrive. There is a lot of work to do, but with a strong and unified effort we can make great strides in reducing adversity and creating a positive environment where our children can flourish.

References & Other Resources

National Survey of Children's Health (NSCH) <https://www.childhealthdata.org/learn-about-the-nsch/NSCH>

Bethell CD, Gombojav N, Rush M. "[Nation/State] Fact Sheet 2019: Strong Roots Grow a Strong Nation". Child and Adolescent Health Measurement Initiative (CAHMI), Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, June 2019. <https://www.cahmi.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/CAHMI-State-Fact-Sheet-VT.pdf>

Harvard Center for the Developing Child <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/>

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