

## **7. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SCHOOL CONNECTEDNESS, FAMILY FUNCTIONING, AND RESILIENCE**

### INTRODUCTION

Increasing community concern about the level of anxiety and depression in the Australian population has led to calls for the implementation of resilience training in schools, with parents being encouraged to focus on their children's resilience (Allen & McKenzie, 2015; Lawrence et al., 2015). Resilience is defined variously, but its essence is captured in the following definition: 'Resilience is the ability to cope and thrive in the face of negative events, challenges or adversity' (DET, 2017).

In general, it is assumed that resilience is a set of attitudes and skills that are learned, based on the constructivist view that it is possible for individuals to act on their life experience and build a positive and successful self. The process of developing resilience is complex and multifaceted (Garmezy, 1985; Rutter, 1987), and, following the ecological model of development posed by Bronfenbrenner (1977, 1979) has been shown to relate to a range of contributing factors: individual microsystemic factors including the attitudes and skills of the individual (Prince-Embury, 2007; Schwarzer & Warner, 2013), and meso- and exosystemic factors such as family, school and community (Epstein, Bishop, & Levin, 1978; Lemerle & Hardie, 2004; Phillipson & McFarland, 2016; Ross, Shochet, & Bellair, 2010). Ecological systems theory, in demonstrating that individuals exist within multiple complex systems, identified that protective factors come from three broad areas: first, an individual's personality factors, or mechanisms within the individual; second, family factors; and finally the availability of external support systems such as friends and school community (Garmezy, 1985).

Robust adjustment can be seen as an outcome of the capacity of the individual to utilize their assets and minimize the impact of adverse circumstances. Protective factors decrease the saliency of risk factors in determining adverse outcomes (Garmezy, 1985).

Resilience, as an asset, has been identified as a capacity which helps to protect the individual from negative outcomes (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005; Prince-Embury, 2007). External factors or resources may also influence a child's development of resilience. Research studies have shown that influences such as peer relationships and connectedness to school can reduce the impact of adversity on the individual

(Goodenow, 1993). The study reported herein addresses two of the contextual elements that have been established as important protective factors in supporting young people when in difficult situations – the family and the school.

## FAMILY

Family is the foundation arena for healthy psychological development alongside providing for children's basic needs. It is the centre for learning about dealing with others and dealing with life's challenges. Throughout development, transitions challenge young people and can raise stress and anxiety. Although there is a keen focus in research on the adjustment needs of adolescents, prepubescent children have also been found to experience challenging changes and health risks (Eccles & Midgley, 1990; Shochet, Homel, Cockshaw, & Montgomery, 2008). Family support can provide a sense of security, self value, and comfort. The way in which the family functions can impact on the degree to which it can provide these supports. Family factors that have been shown to influence child development are parenting approach, interest in education, and family relationships (Tollitt et al., 2015). Negative outcomes associated with dysfunctional family patterns have been noted in academic achievement, low prosocial skills, bullying, disordered eating patterns, anxiety and behavioral difficulties (Berge, Wall, Larson, Loth, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2013; Renzaho, Mellor, McCabe, & Powell, 2013; White et al., 2014). The impact of socioeconomic status demonstrates that family circumstance can also be a factor in children's academic achievement, which is integral to their wellbeing (Tollitt et al., 2015).

The McMaster Model of Family Functioning (Epstein, Bishop, & Levin, 1978) provides a useful model in the study of family practices. Using its accompanying survey tool, The Family Assessment Device (FAD), the model allows the researcher to locate family practices on a spectrum from healthy and well-functioning to poor and unhealthy functioning.

### *Resilience and Family Functioning*

A number of studies have demonstrated that healthy family functioning plays an important role in positive developmental outcomes for children. Lester and colleagues (2013) applied the McMaster Model of Family Functioning to improving resiliency outcomes for children living on military bases. The study examined the effect of a family-centered prevention program aimed at resilience training with 280 families. The training provided information about stress reactions, communication, identifying and utilising family strengths, and on child development and stress reactions, as well as education in cognitive behavioural skills that promote resilience including emotion regulation, goal setting, and, problem solving and communication. Positive changes in the FAD, particularly in relation to affective involvement, problem solving and communication were associated with reductions in child distress.