ABSTRACT
Supportive Relationships as Protective for Children Exposed to Violence: Exploring Underlying Mechanisms

Jessica L. Houston, M.S.
Marquette University, 2016

The present study examined supportive relationships with parents, teachers, peers, and neighbors as protective for youths exposed to violence. To better understand how support promotes resilience, four mediators were explored: secure attachment, adaptive coping, the opportunity to process traumatic experiences with a supportive person (parent, teacher, friend, or community adult), and an optimistic outlook on life. An at-risk sample of 107 students (71% male) aged 8-19 years (M=15) who were predominantly African American completed measures of violence exposure, social support, attachment security, coping ability, trauma-processing, and optimism. Resilience was defined by lower levels of externalizing and internalizing symptoms rated by participants and a parent, as well as participant-rated self-esteem and competency in several domains (social, scholastic, athletic, and creative). The combined effects of social support with a parent, teacher, peer, and neighbor significantly predicted resilience. Additionally, attachment security, processing trauma with a parent, processing trauma with a friend, adaptive coping, and optimism significantly predicted resilience. Of the four mediators that were explored, processing trauma with a parent and having a more optimistic outlook significantly mediated the relationship between social support and resilience. Thus, seeking out a parent or parent-figure to process a traumatic or stressful life event and having a more positive outlook both explain how supportive others can help promote adaptive functioning in youths exposed to violence.