



Opinion piece

Dr Michael Ungar, Thinker in Residence

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Care needed to build resilience in children

While we tend to think about resilience as something inside a child, all the evidence tells us that resilience is something we help children develop, not only in our homes, but also through the quality services we provide them.

Children are not born resilient; they are made resilient. That means that public and private institutions, as well as families and communities in WA, have a big role to play in children's psychological and social development.

With my recent task to talk about resilience as the Thinker in Residence for WA's Commissioner for Children and Young People, I was able to meet with five Government Ministers, hundreds of service providers, and more than 1000 parents during my two week residency in May.

What I found inspiring was the commitment shown to children's wellbeing, whether as parents of children with a learning challenge, researchers at the Telethon Kids Institute who are doing groundbreaking studies, mental health and social service professionals finding ways to serve rural populations, or educators who have created innovative programs to engage vulnerable young people in school.

If we stop to think about it, it is this complex weave of services and support that children receive when their development is at risk which decides which path through life they'll follow. And yet we seldom talk about the fact that the children who face the toughest challenges will also be those who have the greatest need for child welfare, mental health, special education, corrections, health and community-based services.

When governments fail to provide or fund good quality services or offer support to families to help them parent better, especially early in a child's life and in

culturally relevant ways, children at risk languish rather than flourish. We can't blame the kids, or even their families, when kids fail to thrive. We need to think about their behaviour as the result of a system's inability (or unwillingness) to help.

The good news is that having met with many service providers from across WA, I felt as if I was looking at a map of superb programs, each a pinprick of different coloured light across the State.

I learnt that WA has a kaleidoscope of innovative services offering an excellent return on investment. Whether it is providing co-ordinated mental health and child welfare services to young people in the juvenile justice system (they need these services far more than most children) or providing Aboriginal language instruction in schools to help engage students –and promote cross-cultural awareness – the pattern is the same.

When we provide children with the support and services they need they are more likely to be resilient, show socially desirable behaviour and become competent, caring contributors to their families, schools, and communities.

The impact of these efforts has been less crime, higher school attendance, fewer unwanted pregnancies, better mental health, less stigma and prejudice towards children who are different from their peers, earlier interventions for families in crisis and far better treatment for childhood trauma when bad things happen.

My research, like that of my colleagues in Australia and elsewhere, shows that children's individual qualities are far less important than social services and the support of a healthy family to the outcomes we desire for our most vulnerable children. In other words, motivation, perseverance and hopefulness – the standard trinity of personal resilience – matter very little without investment in social programs that give children a fertile, safe environment in which to grow up.

Maybe we want to believe the myth of the rugged individual because it justifies our cynicism towards investment in the social safety net. That's unfortunate because the good news is that there are many programs that do work well for young people with complex needs.

For example, early child care and pediatric care for children can help identify learning difficulties and child abuse, and programs that address violence between a child's parents can reduce the effects of trauma on children's brain development. Both are significant predictors of future school drop out, suicidal thoughts, drug abuse and delinquency.

While there is much to celebrate when surveying the work of professionals and families in WA, the problem is that too often innovative and effective programming for children resembles “airplanes”.

Endless pilot projects are started that get liftoff, but are then left to crash when they are denied sustaining funding.

The most vulnerable children will need not one, or two, or even three exceptional interventions.

When State and community services are necessary, it is usually a strong family-community-government alliance of care providers that have the longest and most profound impact on child development.

Dr Michael Ungar is the founder and co-director of the Resilience Research Centre at Dalhousie University in Canada. He was the Commissioner for Children and Young People’s 2014 Thinker in Residence.