

Going strong

In an edited extract from her new book, *Building a Resilient Workforce in the Early Years*, **Helen Garnett** explains what resilience is and how staff can achieve it

Resilience is defined as the capacity to recover quickly from difficulties. The ability to become more resilient increases when people are supported, respected and valued. Similarly, people become less resilient when support is scarce, respect is lacking and they see themselves as having little or no value.

The neurobiology of resilience shows how toxic stress, defined as the 'excessive or prolonged activation of the physiologic stress response systems in absence of the buffering protection afforded by stable, responsive relationships', can affect our early development through the production of stress hormones, such as cortisol. Under prolonged stress, elevations in cortisol levels 'can alter the function of a number of neural systems, suppress the immune response, and even change the architecture of regions in the brain that are essential for learning and memory'.

Likewise, in later life where stress is persistent, the body responds in a myriad of different ways. Cortisol and adrenaline flood the body, and the heart rate and blood pressure increase. This leads to a higher likelihood of catching infections and being more prone to anxiety, anger or depression. Sleep also suffers, and even appetites can change.

ROLE OF RESILIENCE

Early years practitioners under considerable stress require significant levels of resilience in order to keep themselves healthy and to support young children's tender development, at the most formative time in their lives.

The role of a practitioner is a unique skillset, in an environment where each child needs to be observed, supported and nourished on their individual journey. Such focused attentiveness to the child's



formative development makes the work extremely intricate.

Building practitioners' resilience requires a profound understanding not only of the context in which they work but also an awareness of their overall well-being. Only when the impact of stress on individuals and staff as a whole is taken seriously can well-being and performance be strengthened.

The work environment can have a profound effect on a practitioner's motivation, their work performance and job satisfaction. For a practitioner to feel motivated, their role should be meaningful, effective and have opportunities for responsibility, with a level of autonomy. Managers who are aware of the value of motivation can work to create a more resilient team.

ROBUST SUPPORT

A positive environment, with a range of supportive interventions, encourages practitioners to develop their role in the setting. Integral to providing practitioners with individual support is the supervisory meeting, which should facilitate the free flow of ideas and open discussions on views, values and the

well-being of the employee. Supervision meetings provide an ideal opportunity to find out from staff how they are coping in their roles, particularly, for instance, if they have recently been involved in a child protection case, or the Mental Health First Aider has alerted the manager to a potential need for support. Further guidance on providing individual practitioners with the support they require can be found in the Early Years Alliance's *Safeguarding through Effective Supervision*.

Practitioners care for children but they also need to be cared for themselves within a positive and empathetic environment. To achieve this, we need to value and encourage healthy relationships among staff.

Time to Change, a social movement attempting to change the way we think and act about mental health problems, advocates one of the simplest interventions is to 'take time to talk'.

In the same way as children, practitioners need to be valued as unique individuals, with regard to their personalities, traits and characters which add to their suitability for the role, but which also enable them to add to the character of the setting. Connections and positive interactions are key to building strong and effective relationships. This can be achieved through regularly having:

- staff meetings that include a focus on well-being
- in-house events, such as picnics in the garden
- social events, such as going out to see a film
- fun and meaningful challenges
- mini celebrations for birthdays or anniversaries.

Workforces that enjoy each other's company and spend time doing things that are not directly related to their day-to-day work will be more likely to form a 'community' of supportive relationships. ■

→ RESILIENT WORKFORCE

Building a Resilient Workforce in the Early Years by Helen Garnett (Early Years Alliance) draws on the alliance's 2018 well-being survey, *Minds Matter*. Starting with the causes, symptoms and impact of poor mental health within the sector, it goes on to outline strategies for identifying, supporting and improving practitioners' well-being. The title (£13.65 to members; £19.50 to non-members) can be ordered at: www.eyalliance.org.uk/shop or email: shop@eyalliance.org.uk