

**Limiting the impacts of child abuse and neglect by understanding which supports  
matter most: A differential impact approach**

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Child abuse and neglect continue to be associated with immediate and long-term undesirable physical and/or mental health consequences (e.g., Cecil et al., 2017; Turner, Taillieu, Cheung, & Afifi, 2017). When children avoid these consequences, resilience is inferred (Afifi & MacMillan, 2011). Human resilience is generally defined as a dynamic, complex process which supports individuals to develop normatively, remain functional, or return to functional levels despite the presence of stressors (such as abuse or neglect) which predict negative outcomes (Masten, 2014). The dynamism of resilience (i.e., its variability relative to type of risk, developmental stage, sensitivity, sociocultural context, or gender) defies a one-size-fits-all explanation of what supports positive outcomes in the face of adversity. As explained in the previous resilience-focused special issue of *Child Abuse & Neglect* from 2013, respect for the multi-systemic complexity of resilience, and its changeability, is particularly pertinent in the face of abuse and neglect (Tonmyr & Wekerle, 2013). This current special issue continues the conversation, drawing attention to a cutting-edge development in the resilience field known as Differential Impact Theory (DIT; Ungar, 2013, 2015, 2017a). DIT offers a novel approach to explaining the complexities of the resilience process and championing recovery and/or growth in the face of adversity.

As explicated in the lead article of this special issue (Ungar, 2017b), DIT pays attention to which protective resources have greater or lesser protective value in the face of adversity (Ungar, 2013, 2015, 2017a). DIT diverges from more traditional person-focused explanations of resilience in that it proposes a diminished focus on individual determinants of resilience. Instead DIT concentrates on understanding which factors outside of the individual are likely to heighten the chances of positive outcomes, and more importantly which of these factors matter more, or less, for specific groups of children at both high and low levels of adversity.

Whilst individual-level resources (such as individual sensitivity to context; Belsky et al., 2007; Pluess & Belsky, 2013) could certainly account for the variability of resilience processes across individuals, the papers in this special issue suggest that we need just as much attention to be paid to the differential impact of the environment as the differential susceptibility of individuals. Arguably, understanding resilience in contexts of abuse requires this dual perspective and aligns with an ecological systems perspective. From this perspective, resilience is a process which is influenced by multiple co-acting systems such as the individual and the individual's family, community and/or built and natural environments (Masten, 2014; Ungar, 2011). These systems co-facilitate functional outcomes in the face of significant stress such as abuse and neglect, but their impact will depend upon many different qualities of individuals themselves, the resources available and accessible to them in their environments, and the relevance and stability of these resources. For example, African studies of resilience have shown that together with personal resources (such as stoicism), historical influences (such as Apartheid) and contextual realities (such as the relative absence of fathers from rural households and/or communicable disease) shape the resilience processes of adolescents in distinctive ways (e.g., Casale, 2011; Theron, 2016).

The danger of focusing mostly on internal factors – such as biological sensitivity to environmental influences – is that children’s continued vulnerability and/or resilience to child abuse and neglect could be attributed to their levels of sensitivity, rather than to malleable external sources. Similarly, simply reporting which external resources support the resilience of children with abuse/neglect experiences is likely to confirm the long lists of individually focused protective factors which already characterise many accounts of resilience. What is needed is a fuller understanding of which protective factors and processes (e.g., violence reduction and prevention, increased safety and protection, child welfare system-involvement, or child abuse programming engagement) influence children at different levels of risk exposure (e.g., high versus low levels of violence or incidental versus chronic trauma) to achieve or sustain functional outcomes (e.g., improved health and wellness outcomes or enhanced youth agency and youth participation). Without such a nuanced understanding, practitioners and service-providers will be hard-pressed to optimally facilitate resilience to child abuse and neglect. As the authors in this special issue show, there is a nascent understanding that some resources are differentially protective, depending on a range of factors (such as age, gender, ethnicity, race, type and level of risk exposure, and/or cultural affiliation). These differences, and the differential impact resilience-promoting processes and programs have on victims of abuse (and potential victims) offer important intervention pathways.

We have structured this special issue, which documents studies conducted in high and low income contexts in North America, Europe, Africa, and Australia, as follows. In the lead article, Ungar (2017b) theorises the differential impact of social services and what particular value this has for understanding and enabling the resilience of children challenged by abuse and neglect. Wessells (2017) interrogates the usefulness of DIT to practitioners who wish to champion the resilience of children with maltreatment experiences. To do so he draws on his

rich experience of working with vulnerable children in multiple international humanitarian settings over many decades. The remaining eight articles report or synthesize original research studies (mostly quantitative) to provide evidence of DIT. Interestingly, five of these articles focus on parents/parenting. Narayan et al. (2017) report how beneficial childhood experiences (the antithesis of adverse childhood experiences) protect pregnant mothers with a history of child maltreatment. (Their article also reports the psychometric properties of the Beneficial Childhood Experiences scale which is a potentially useful tool for understanding the protective value of the positive aspects of childhood and using this perspective to enable resilience). Romero et al. (2017) focus on the effects of supportive parenting on school delay among South African adolescents from economically deprived communities. Tracy et al. (2017) draw on the Avon study with UK-based families to report the differential impacts of maternal social support in early childhood and paternal involvement in middle childhood, whilst Adjukovic and colleagues (2018) report how maternal social support mitigates child abuse in Croatia. In contrast, the article by Kassis and colleagues (2017) re-examines data from the STAMINA study to report the differential impacts of toxic parenting on ‘resilient’ children. The final three empirical articles consider the differentially protective impacts of factors outside of the family, including prosocial friends and residence in a low socioeconomic neighbourhood (Hopkins et al., 2017), social support (Nearchou, 2017) and participation in organised activities (Kwak et al., 2017).

In summary, this special issue encourages new directions for understanding – and championing – the resilience of specific groups of children challenged by abuse and/or neglect. These directions do not, however, imply that a more nuanced understanding of resilience in the face of abuse and neglect is sufficient to support the wellbeing of children. To be more sufficient, this understanding must be complemented with tireless efforts to prevent child abuse and neglect.

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