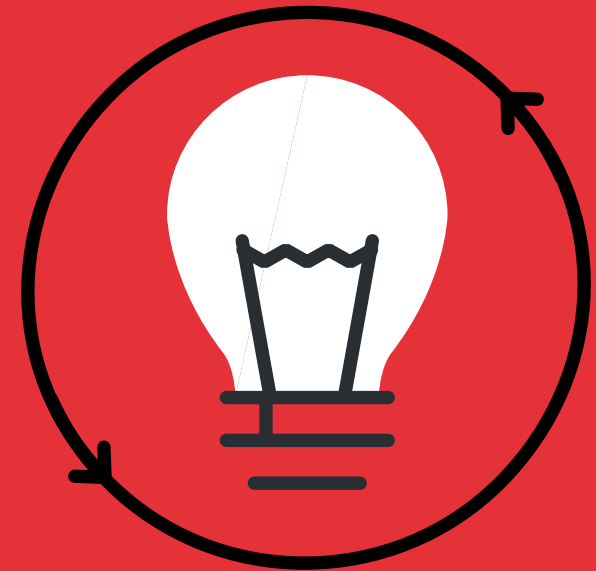

MARCH 2022

RISE AND SHINE

INSIGHTS BRIEF #2

BUILDING RESILIENCE IN EARLY YEARS
SERVICES IN TIMES OF UNCERTAINTY



INTRODUCTION

Through the Rise and Shine funding programme, Comic Relief supports 21 organisations around the UK working on early childhood development. Funded partner organisations deliver projects focused on a number of different areas such as family support in deprived communities, early years work for children with a disability, and work with children experiencing trauma or adverse childhood experiences. As such, these funded partners are providing direct support to often highly vulnerable families facing multiple challenges, such as poverty, social isolation, long term health conditions and experiences of domestic violence. During the pandemic the Rise and Shine projects have often been the first, and sometimes only form of external support for these families – be that emotional, practical or other forms of support.

This briefing offers valuable insights, reflections and learning from funded partners delivering in times of uncertainty, particularly around resilience for them as staff teams and for the families they support. It also reflects on the experiences of families who are supported by the Rise and Shine projects. This report follows the learning and insights shared in Insights Brief 1.

CLICK TO SKIP TO...

1. How we captured learning

2. Key learning for us:

- Building up resilience
- Building on resilience
- Blockers to resilience building

3. Key learning for others:

- What is resilience?
- What can support resilience?
- What can be done to create the right conditions for resilient children and families?
- What gets in the way of building family resilience?

4. About the authors and the report

1. How we captured learning

The learning was captured during small, online facilitated group sessions with funded partners in October 2021 and a subsequent online learning event in November 2021 in which 14 organisations participated.

As a mechanism to enable reflection, during our group calls with funded partners, we asked workers to reflect on the following question:



“If you created a time capsule covering the last 6 months... what 3 items would you put in and what would they represent? Think about: challenges, needs or issues, successes, learning, insights – these can be related to personal or professional impacts”

We put boundaries within the exercise (6 months, 3 items) to give a focus to what has been an intense experience for all. The concept of the time capsule allows people to take a meta position and look back with a sense of distance.

In the question posed to funded partners, the use of metaphor was powerful and enabled people to articulate their reflections. A wide range of responses were elicited, and nine strands emerged. However, an overarching thread we observed was that of ‘resilience’. Both the need for resilience amongst the families being supported but also the resilience of staff teams in projects.

We categorised the nine streams into three key areas of learning to support other projects delivering in times of uncertainty. That is:

- **Building up resilience**
- **Building on resilience**
- **Blockers to resilience building**

(click on each section to read more)

When exploring resilience, many of the reflections shared in the group were also tools and approaches funded partners had used during the pandemic, to support the resilience of themselves, their staff teams and the families they support.

2. Key learning for us:

Building up resilience

Click on each icon image to read more

The achievements of staff

Care and kindness

The importance of self-care

2. Key learning for us:

Building on resilience

Click on each icon image to read more

Staff teams' adaption and flexibility

The value of laughter, fun and joy

The value of connections

2. Key learning for us:

Blockers to building resilience

Click on each icon image to read more

Mental wellbeing and isolation

Increased mental health needs

Poverty and the political climate

3. Key learning for others:

What is resilience?

Resilience is not a trait or personal characteristic, there is no such thing as a resilient person. Resilience is the ability to adapt positively to a changing environment in a context of stress and uncertainty. Positive adaptation isn't just about what an individual person does – it is also about the interaction between a person and their social environmentⁱ.



ⁱ <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/inbrief-resilience-series/>

3. Key learning for others:

What can support resilience?

When we are dealing with a very changeable and uncertain context, the following can be crucial contributors to our ability to be resilient:

- Having positive relationships
- Having networks of support.
- Self-care - looking after your physical and psychological health and well-being.



Funded partners reported several strategies for maintaining their own resilience which reflected the above and included:

1. **Self-care approaches to help promote a positive mindset** e.g. exercise, reading, baking, mindfulness, walking the dog, listening to podcasts. There was a sense that self-care has been easier with less commuting due the pandemic.

"Self-care is paramount."

2. **Reaching out for support when needed.**

"Knowing I can reach out for support when I need it and not be judged."

3. **Avoiding overwhelm by being realistic about what is achievable** e.g. looking at alternatives, break tasks into manageable bite size chunks, being honest and open with people.

"To do what you can each day and recognise that that is enough for today."

3. Key learning for others:

What can be done to create the right conditions for resilient children and families?

For many reasons, we know that many families supported by Rise and Shine funded partners do not have access to the factors that can support resilience (i.e. positive relationships and networks, ability to practice self-care). The role of funded partners in helping enable these protective factors to build resilience is key.

The approaches being taken by funded partners to help create the right conditions for resilient children and families fell into five categories which we believe will be helpful learning for others:

1 Ensure practical needs are met

Families are unlikely to engage in projects, and access the factors necessary to become resilient if they don't have basic essentials (e.g. food, heating, adequate housing). Funded partners have therefore focused on meeting families' immediate and practical needs e.g. providing food and clothes, help with heating bills, support around housing issues and providing equipment to get online.

2 Offer opportunities for connection

Lockdown and social distancing has meant that connecting with others and having positive relationships has been difficult. Funded partners have sought to create opportunities for connection through creating small peer to peer groups e.g., new mums meeting with no agenda to "share a cuppa", small groups for families to share concerns about coming out post lockdown etc. Staff teams have listened and offered support where needed. One project described the great value in providing an outlet and place to connect with others through 'injecting energy' into communities, for example through film making sessions, or having a chef come once a month, bringing families together to create pizzas.

3. Key learning for others:

What can be done to create the right conditions for resilient children and families?

3 Nurture relationships and make people feel important

In the absence of positive relationships for many families, funded partners recognise that the quality of their interaction with them is crucial. Funded partners talked of the importance of giving families lots of positive reassurance and validation and praise for things they do well. Many talked about their role in nurturing families and making them feel valued and important, for example making the project setting a special, homely space for families to feel safe in.

"We care about the quality of the tea and coffee we provide to women. We give them the same as we would have at home... people have had to put up with crap all their lives."

Some teams also provided personalised items for children (e.g. a teddy with their initials on) which can help them feel 'someone was waiting for them'. This consistency and safety was seen as important in helping build resilience in children.

The provision of special, celebratory events was another way funded partners made families feel nurtured and valued:

"Honouring the journeys of mothers living with HIV through provision of a 3 course meal, after which they shared their stories and testimonies. This served as a safe space where women could talk and make connections with each other. The gratitude and love they show for each other is amazing."

4 Create culture of caring and stress the importance of love

Funded partners talked about the importance of enabling and providing a culture of caring, and found various ways to give that message to families. One funded partner talked specifically about the importance of 'love' and feeling loved as "people don't change unless they feel loved".

5 Have the right staff team to look after families

Having a strong staff team with the right skills and attitude, who come to work to make a difference, were seen as important in supporting the resilience of families. Nurturing and looking after staff is vital for the staff themselves as well as for the families they support.

3. Key learning for others:

What gets in the way of building family resilience?

1 Funding for families

Accessing funding for the basics and immediate needs of families was a challenge. Likewise, the very familiar pattern of precarious funding for local grassroots organisations created added strain for some during the pandemic. The decline in provision of local welfare schemes also presented a challenge.



2 Time needed to build trust and relationships

Adequate time is essential in building relationships with families and enabling full disclosure from those who may be facing multiple and complex issues. The time pressures imposed by statutory agencies can be a real barrier to building resilience. Statutory agencies work at different paces which often doesn't allow for this relational time.

"We need to go at the family's pace – and walk with them - not run. We need to be sensitive to where they are. Building trust takes time."

3 Political context and wider systemic issues

Whilst funded partners are doing their utmost to meet the needs of families and promote resilience, there was strong recognition of wider societal and structural factors impacting on their ability to be resilient e.g., poverty, uncertain immigration status, domestic abuse system that leaves people trapped in relationships, increasing racism and violence. Food and fuel poverty was highlighted by many and some funded partners felt that a lack of political will and interest was compounding the problems faced:

"We are seeing the poverty and the impact on the ground – but the voluntary sector is not being listened to and they don't give us any respect...they need to see us as a key part of the social care sector."

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON RESILIENCE:

We encourage readers to head to the Harvard University Center on the Developing Child - some short videos are [here](#), and a longer report is [here](#).

ABOUT THIS REPORT AND AUTHORS

Comic Relief's Rise and Shine programme supports partners working on early childhood development, with a focus on not leaving children behind, narrowing disadvantage gaps and improving life chances. By investing in children in their early years, we can help break the cycle of poverty. By investing in young children most likely to be left behind, we can help break the cycle of injustice.

This report has been written by the learning coordinator consultancy team, commissioned by Comic Relief for the duration of the Rise and Shine funding period to facilitate a shared learning process for grantees and the wider ECD community. The team includes Tim Hobbs CEO Dartington Service Design Lab (DSDL) and DSDL Associates Sarah Frost, Dawn Hart and Dorothy Flatman.

ABOUT DARTINGTON SERVICE DESIGN LAB

Dartington Service Design Lab is a research and design charity focussed on using evidence and design in innovative ways to help those working with children and young people have a greater impact. Our team of researchers and specialists are skilled in service design and improvement methods, systems thinking approaches, and data visualisation and communications. As an organisation, we have more than 50 years of experience working across the public and voluntary sectors.

ABOUT COMIC RELIEF

Comic Relief's vision is of a just world, free from poverty.

Founded in 1985, Comic Relief supports partner organisations in the UK and around the world. We focus on early childhood development, gender justice, mental health, homelessness and insecure housing, and forced migration.

GET IN TOUCH:

If you'd like to find out more about Rise and Shine, or there are themes you'd like to explore or hear more about, please email:

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