Pūtahi Rangahau Ngātahi
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Conceptualising Resilience: The Factors that Impact Resilience on Early-Mid Adolescents

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Resilience has traditionally been viewed as a stable trait, but contemporary research increasingly conceptualises it as a dynamic process that can be developed in ways similar to learning a skill (Leys et al, 2020). It is shaped by the interaction of external influences, such as family, school, and community environments, and internal factors including personality and genetic predispositions, with gene–environment interplay playing a significant role (Malhi et al, 2019). From this perspective, resilience is understood as a positive adaptation or demonstration of competence in response to adversity, with exposure to significant hardship often serving as the critical environmental condition under which resilience is expressed (Kim-Cohen & Turkewitz, 2012). Resilience is multidimensional, manifesting across emotional, cognitive, behavioural, social, and psychological domains through adaptive systems such as self-regulation, problem-solving, and supportive relationships (Masten, 2015).

Within Aotearoa New Zealand, these insights have important implications for early-mid adolescents aged 9–12. This age group is navigating the developmental transition from primary to intermediate schooling yet has often been overlooked in programme design. Services tend to focus either on younger children or older adolescents, leaving a gap in supports tailored to early adolescents' specific developmental needs. A focus on resilience processes during this stage therefore offers an important opportunity to inform youth programme development.

The Challenge

Adolescent mental health needs are rising across the globe, with increases in conditions such as anxiety and depression well documented over the past decade (Sutcliffe et al., 2022). Aotearoa New Zealand reflects this global pattern. Between 2012 and 2019, the proportion of secondary school students reporting positive well-being fell from 76% to 69%, while the prevalence of depressive symptoms rose from 13% to 23%. Over the same period, self-harm and suicide attempts also became more common (Sutcliffe et al., 2023). These shifts have not been evenly experienced: younger adolescents, girls, and Māori, Pacific, and Asian students, particularly those living in high-deprivation communities, reported the steepest declines in well-being and the greatest increases in distress (Sutcliffe et al., 2023). By 2022–2023, more than one in five young people aged 15–24 reported high psychological distress, and suicide had become the leading cause of death among adolescents in Aotearoa New Zealand (Kim & Low, 2024).

This growing need highlights why resilience is an important focus for research and practice. Resilience is associated with reduced vulnerability to stress and harmful behaviours and enables young people to adapt to future challenges more effectively (Gilligan, 2000; Kim & Low, 2024). As Gilligan (2000) described, "a resilient child is one who bounces back having endured adversity, who continues to function reasonably well despite continued exposure to risk" (p. 37). Understanding what shapes resilience in young people is therefore critical to designing supports and programmes that can respond to this challenge.

Factors Influencing Resilience in Early-Mid Adolescents

Adolescents inherently possess resilience, but individuals have different levels of resilience. This is because resilience stems from both personal traits and social experiences. While a child's personal traits play a key role in developing resilience, the experiences they go through, and the way they perceive and respond to those experiences, are just as crucial (Gilligan, 2000). Gilligan (2000) described three sources of resilience that can be shaped by positive experiences within the context of daily life: 1) a secure base; 2) self-esteem; and, 3) self-efficacy. Gilligan (2000) defined a secure base as attachments that enable children to safely engage and explore their environments. According to him, for young people, such attachments are nurtured through a sense of belonging within a stable social network, trustworthy relationships with responsive individuals, and through reliable routines and structures. On the other hand, Gilligan (2000) conveyed self-esteem as an individual's evaluation of their competence, usually in regard to the degree to which they perceive the alignment between their actual and ideal self. He argued that self-esteem is primarily influenced by two key types of experiences: (a) secure and safe relationships that involve love and emotional safety and (b) successful engagement in tasks that individual consider as personally relevant and meaningful to their interests. Gilligan (2000) believed that self-efficacy in children is influenced by adults' belief in children's ability to exercise control and influence their actions.

Socio-cultural factors also influence resilience levels of adolescents. For instance, individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds or marginalised minority groups often face systemic barriers—such as limited access to resources, discrimination, and reduced opportunities for participation—that can undermine their sense of purpose, control, and hope. These structural inequities are linked to disparities in resilience (Andersen et al., 2010). Similarly, Adolescents who have experienced childhood adversity often encounter ongoing stressors that can undermine resilience and contribute to heightened distress across adolescence (Fritz et al., 2019).
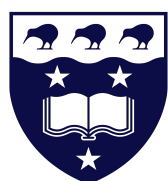
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Adolescents adopt diverse coping mechanisms in response to experiences of adversity. These include use of media (Jennings & Caplovitz, 2022) and physical activity as well as spirituality (Syukrowardi et al, 2017). Jennings and Caplovitz (2022) discussed how adolescents used social media during the difficult time of COVID-19 to alleviate stress, enhance their mood and maintain social connections with their peers. Syukrowardi et al. (2017) found that spirituality significantly strengthened resilience among 162 children aged 9–12 who experienced a major flood in Undar Andir, Serang, Indonesia. Spirituality provided a source of meaning-making, comfort, and connection, enabling children to regulate distress, sustain hope, and maintain a sense of security in the aftermath of disaster. This illustrates how spiritual practices can act as internal protective factors that support resilience in contexts of adversity.

Measurement and Assessment of Resilience

Assessing and measuring resilience in children and adolescents remains challenging, with no measurement exactly fitting the 9-12 age group. Tools such as the Child and Youth Resilience Measure (CYRM-12 and CYRM-28), the Resilience and Youth Development Model (RYDM), and the Resilience Scale (RS) provide helpful insights into exploring levels of resilience in adolescents (Arslan, 2022). However, the absence of a consistent definition of the concept, and a lack of cultural inclusivity in its definitions, have made it challenging to comprehensively evaluate measures of resilience.

Therefore, the established measurement tools provide only a narrow perspective of resilience, failing to grasp individual Assessing resilience in children and adolescents remains challenging, especially for the 9–12 age group, as no single tool captures the full complexity of this developmental stage. Common measures include the Child and Youth Resilience Measure (CYRM-12 and CYRM-28), which emphasises social and cultural resources; the Resilience and Youth Development Model (RYDM), which highlights protective factors in school and community contexts; and the Resilience Scale (RS), which assesses personal competence and acceptance of self and life (Arslan, 2022). While these tools provide valuable insights, they also reflect the broader problem of an inconsistent and culturally narrow definition of resilience.

Existing measures often prioritise protective and risk factors but struggle to capture resilience as a dynamic process that shifts with adolescents' evolving personalities, coping strategies, and environments (Goldstein & Brooks, 2012). This makes it difficult to standardise findings across populations. Moreover, although instruments like the CYRM and RYDM have shown promise in certain cultural contexts, their global applicability remains uncertain, as they may not fully accommodate diverse social practices and values (Arslan, 2022; Sarapathy et al., 2020; She et al., 2020).

A more comprehensive approach is needed—one that acknowledges resilience as multifaceted, culturally embedded, and fluid over time. These insights also shape the design and delivery of youth programmes, which must move beyond one-size-fits-all models and instead tailor strategies to the developmental stage, cultural background, and lived realities of different groups of young people. For instance, programmes for refugee adolescents benefit from nurturing peer and school belonging to support psychological adjustment (Abdi et al., 2023). Initiatives for Indigenous youth that incorporate land-based learning, such as urban nature engagement (Hatala et al., 2020) and short, community-derived camps (Price et al., 2025), have shown promise for strengthening wellbeing through culturally rooted resilience. Meanwhile, youth in economically disadvantaged contexts benefit from structured mentorship opportunities and the creation of safe spaces in schools, community centres, or online settings, which have been shown to enhance resilience, self-esteem, and mental health (Raposa et al., 2018; Meherali et al., 2025).

Interventions and Programmes to Enhance Resilience

Both in-school and out-of-school contexts play critical roles in fostering resilience and well-being in young people. Positive experiences at school – such as feeling connected to teachers and peers – provide a secure base that protects against adversity (Gilligan, 2000). Likewise, participation in structured spare-time activities, such as sport, arts, and community programmes, supports resilience by expanding social networks and building self-efficacy (Gilligan, 2000). At the school level, creating environments where students experience belonging and supportive relationships is particularly important, as these factors are consistently linked to stronger health, motivation, and academic outcomes (Cahill et al., 2014).

In addition to school climate, explicit instruction in social and emotional skills is a common mechanism for resilience-building. Cahill et al. (2014) argue that developing students' personal and social capabilities through targeted teaching of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship skills provides the foundational competencies needed to adapt to stress and adversity.

Evidence from systematic reviews indicates that school-based interventions can significantly improve resilience among adolescents, especially in settings marked by socio-economic disadvantage and limited educational resources (Llistosella et al., 2023). These interventions most often operate through mechanisms such as strengthening emotional regulation, teaching problem-solving, and fostering adaptive coping skills (Llistosella et al., 2023). While positive outcomes are consistently reported, Llistosella et al. (2023) also note that most studies measure effects in the short term, with limited evidence of sustained resilience over time.

Specific school-based programmes provide examples of these mechanisms. Tasijawa and Siagian (2022) reviewed Enhancing Resiliency Among Students Experiencing Stress–Prosocial (ESPS), which targeted adolescents reporting high levels of academic and psychosocial stress. Resilience gains were observed through improved stress management and prosocial coping strategies that supported stronger peer relationships (Tasijawa & Siagian, 2022). Similarly, Learning to BREATHE (L2B), a mindfulness-based curriculum implemented in secondary schools in the United States, promoted resilience via attention regulation, emotional awareness, and improved self-regulation (Tasijawa & Siagian, 2022). Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), when adapted for high school students, produced comparable outcomes, reducing anxiety and strengthening emotional control through meditation, breathing, and body awareness (Tasijawa & Siagian, 2022).

Other interventions have been evaluated in acute contexts. The Resilience and Coping Intervention (RCI), a three-session group programme implemented in post-disaster environments, improved resilience by normalising stress responses and providing adolescents with opportunities to practise adaptive coping in a supportive peer group (Tasijawa & Siagian, 2022). The Girls First Resilience Curriculum, delivered to adolescent girls in South Asia, addressed gendered psychosocial vulnerabilities by developing life skills, building self-confidence, and enhancing problem-solving, leading to improvements in resilience outcomes (Tasijawa & Siagian, 2022).

Therapeutic approaches also demonstrate clear pathways to resilience-building. CBT-based interventions enhance resilience by teaching young people to challenge unhelpful thoughts, apply cognitive reframing techniques, and develop problem-solving strategies (Llistosella et al., 2023). When CBT is integrated with mindfulness practices, additional benefits include reduced depression and anxiety and improved emotional regulation, which further strengthen resilience (Llistosella et al., 2023). Narrative approaches add another layer, with Goldstein and Brooks (2012) noting that encouraging adolescents to reconstruct and reframe their life stories fosters meaning-making and self-reflection, which in turn promote resilient adaptation.

Body-based interventions also contribute significantly to resilience. Sook Yook et al. (2021) evaluated an eight-week programme combining mindfulness-based yoga with learning a new sport. Compared with a control group, participating adolescents reported significant improvements in self-esteem, resilience, and overall happiness. The authors attributed these effects to mechanisms of physical mastery, mind-body awareness, and the development of a positive self-concept (Sook Yook et al., 2021). Additional findings from the same study suggest that ongoing participation in sports and yoga is associated with reduced stress and higher levels of psychological resilience in young people.

Taken together, the literature demonstrates that resilience is malleable and can be enhanced through multiple intervention pathways. Mechanisms such as mindfulness and attention regulation, adaptive coping skills, cognitive reframing, life skills development, and physical mastery provide adolescents with practical tools to manage adversity and support their well-being.

Conclusions

Resilience is a dynamic process that can be fostered through positive relationships, self-confidence, skills practice and physical activity. Evidence showed that resilience emerged not only from individual traits but from interactions with family, school and community contexts. Current measures and interventions often lack cultural adaptability, which is especially concerning in diverse settings such as Aotearoa New Zealand.

Recommendations for youth development programmes

Bridge the measurement–practice gap

- Invest in developing and validating culturally responsive tools for Aotearoa New Zealand, ensuring that measures reflect Māori and Pasifika worldviews of well-being.
- Link measurement more directly to programme evaluation, so tools guide design and show whether interventions are working for diverse groups.

Embed cultural responsiveness as a non-negotiable

- Co-design programmes with Māori and Pasifika communities to ensure they sustain identity, belonging, and meaning-making and incorporate Te Tiriti o Waitangi principles into both delivery and evaluation so programmes avoid reproducing inequities

Reframe resilience as relational and contextual, not individualistic

- Programme design should move beyond viewing resilience as a personal trait and prioritise relationships, supportive school climates, and family–community connections.
- Measurement should capture how these systems interact, rather than only testing individual traits.

Focus on sustainability and equity in implementation

- Move away from short, one-off interventions and ensure resilience programmes include follow-up, teacher training, and organisational commitment.
- Monitor outcomes across groups to ensure gains are equitably distributed and do not reinforce existing gaps in mental health and well-being.

Integrate resilience-building across everyday contexts

- Support schools, whānau, and community spaces to act as everyday resilience environments, not just sites of programme delivery.
- Recognise and scaffold young people's own coping strategies, such as digital connection, spirituality, and sport, rather than treating them as peripheral.

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