Presentations by Michael Ungar PhD

Michael Ungar, PhD, is an engaging public speaker who frequently visits communities, organisations and conferences in numerous countries around the world, from Slovakia to South Africa, to share his expertise.

Here are some of Michael’s available presentations:

One-to-Two-Hour Presentations for Parents or Professionals

1) We Generation: Raising Socially Responsible Children and Teens

In this presentation, Michael shows how parents can raise children to think ‘We’ in ‘Me’-thinking times. He shows that children and teens, even while they push their parents away, still want and need physical, emotional and spiritual connections. But, there are barriers: Fewer responsibilities for children at home, no-touch policies in our schools, monster size houses in which children become invisible, and a lack of consequences for children when they make mistakes, are all threatening the connections kids need. Building these connections is still the best way to protect children and teens from the dangers of early sexual activity, drug abuse, and delinquency. Based on his clinical work and research, Michael will offer practical suggestions about how to raise children to become competent, caring contributors to their families, schools and communities.

2) Nurturing Children’s Mental Health through Connections

It is a well-worn cliché to say it takes a village to raise a child. But, research into the factors that predict a child’s healthy growth when exposed to danger or stress shows us that a child’s resilience depends on his or her family and community just as much as personal strengths. In this presentation Michael reviews what we know about resilience and how it can help us reach out to young people who are challenged by mental health problems in different cultures and contexts.

3) Too Safe for Their Own Good: How Risk and Responsibility Help Children and Teens Thrive

As a social worker and family therapist, Michael is concerned that we may be keeping our children Too Safe for Their Own Good. If we adults think back to when we were young, didn’t the risks we take and the responsibilities we had help prepare us for the challenges we would face later in our lives? Over his years of practice, Michael has seen a disturbing trend: a connection between all the security we offer children and troubling behaviors like drug abuse, early sexual activity, violence and truancy. In this presentation Michael will discuss ways to offer our children and teenagers the right amount of risk and responsibility. He shares what he has learned from families who have found ways to provide their children with the ‘risk-takers advantage’.
4) Playing at Being Bad: The Hidden Strengths of Troubled Children and Teens

Whether dangerous, delinquent or disordered, children and youth can be difficult to help when their behaviour is misunderstood. In this presentation, Michael offers parents and professionals a way to help young people substitute solutions for problems. He shows how to identify young people’s hidden resilience, and discuss strategies parents can use to build their children’s strengths.

One-to-Two-Day Workshops for Professionals
(More intensive two-day versions of these workshops provide greater detail on clinical techniques and more time for case discussions.)

1) Strengths-based Counseling with At-risk Children and Families: Interventions to Nurture Hidden Resilience across Cultures and Contexts

This workshop challenges professionals working with children, youth and families labelled ‘dangerous,’ ‘deviant,’ ‘delinquent’ and ‘disordered’ to better understand problem behaviours. Based on research with high-risk young people around the world, a culturally sensitive model of intervention that nurtures young people’s ‘hidden resilience’ will be presented.

While we commonly think of resilience as an individual’s capacity to ‘beat the odds’ and overcome great adversity, this workshop focuses on how mental health professionals and human service providers can ‘change the odds’ to make resilience more likely to occur. An integrative strengths-based model of practice will be discussed and its application in child welfare, mental health, education and correctional settings explored. Using interactive exercises, clinical transcripts and video recordings of work with children and families, Michael shows how this model of practice helps professionals discover the pathways to resilience people use to survive and thrive. This culturally-sensitive approach avoids the ‘resistance’ commonly found when those intervening label and stigmatize those they are trying to help. This workshop both explores this model of treatment and gives participants an opportunity to discuss the most challenging children, youth and families with whom they work.

2) Nurturing Responsibility and Resilience among Children and Youth: Helping Parents Avoid the Perils of Overprotection and Emotional Control

Manageable amounts of risk and responsibility provide children and youth both a ‘risk-taker’s advantage’ and genuine opportunities to think ‘We’ in me-thinking times. Both experiences can nurture a child’s resilience when confronted with multiple life challenges.

In this workshop, Michael shows how overprotective parenting and few expectations for responsible behaviour can thwart children’s healthy psychosocial development, contributing to both internalizing and externalizing problem behaviors. Michael will explore these family patterns, explaining them as culturally and contextually embedded aspects of family functioning. To help change these patterns, Michael will demonstrate a three-part model of intervention that integrates principles of a social ecological theory that integrates systemic, solution-focused and constructionist principles of practice.

Intervention encourages parents to first reflect on their own early experiences of risk and responsibility and the life lessons learned. Secondly, the model helps families challenge patterns of overprotection that disadvantage children, while identifying safe substitutes that provide children and youth developmentally appropriate experiences for growth,
including opportunities to contribute to the welfare of others. In the third phase of intervention, families are helped to facilitate opportunities for young people to experience definitional ceremonies that allow them to achieve the 4C’s of positive development, to become competent, caring contributors to their families and communities.

This model is based on Michael’s clinical experience with street youth and youth in child welfare, educational and correctional settings, and builds on findings from his research on resilience in more than a dozen countries. Clinical illustrations and interactive discussions of families which are experiencing intergenerational conflict will be used to demonstrate the techniques of intervention.

Two-Hour, Half-Day or Full-Day Workshops
Presentation for Professional Service Providers in Child Welfare, Correctional, Mental Health and Educational Settings

1) Pathways to Resilience: What Young People and their Families Need from Service Providers

How we structure social services (like child welfare, corrections, mental health and education) and collaborate as service providers has a large influence on the ability of children, youth and their families to cope with adversity. In this presentation, Michael explores both the research on best practices and examples from the lived experience of professionals on the front-lines of practice. He shows that we already know a great deal about how to provide effective services to vulnerable populations who face the challenges of acute stressors like abuse and the chronic stressors of poverty, racism, disability and other forms of marginalization.

Building on Michael’s work around the globe with youth across cultures, a model of coordinated services that helps young people navigate their way to professional and community supports, while negotiating with service providers for programming that is culturally relevant will be discussed.

2) The Social Ecology of Resilience

Despite decades of resilience research, there continues to be ambiguity in how to define and operationalize positive development under adversity. In this presentation, Michael will use examples from his research collaborations on six continents to explore the nature of resilience when risk factors are plentiful. His work suggests the need for an ecological interpretation of the construct.

Michael presents four principles to guide theory development, research, and the design of integrated approaches to intervention that ensure resilience to more likely occur. These principles include: decentrality, complexity, atypicality, and cultural relativity. Employing these four principles informs a definition of resilience that explicitly accounts for the disequilibrium between vulnerable individuals who lack opportunities for growth and the influence of social and physical ecologies that facilitate or inhibit resilience-promoting processes.

If you are interested in Michael presenting for your community, organization or professional conference, please contact the Resilience Research Centre, 902-494-3050, RRC@dal.ca.