

# Respectful Alliances

A photograph of a sunset over the ocean. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a bright, golden glow that reflects on the water. The sky is filled with dark, dramatic clouds, some of which are illuminated from below by the sun. In the foreground, three people are silhouetted against the bright light of the sunset. They are standing on a sandy beach, looking out towards the ocean. The overall mood is serene and contemplative.

Response Ability Pathways

*RAP*

# Response Ability Pathways

*building bonds of respect*

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# Response Ability Pathways

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## Foreword

# Sacred Beings

Martin Brokenleg

In my childhood, I knew Lakota elders who were at the Battle of the Little Big Horn when Custer was killed. My grandfather was a medicine man and a horse trainer who gave us our family name, Brokenleg. My parents were stolen from the embrace of their families and sent to residential schools. They were treated as inferiors to be trained rather than *sacred beings*, the Lakota language translation for *children*. Because Mother and Father were so repulsed by these experiences, they made certain we were raised according to our traditional Lakota tribal ways.

My earliest memories are joyful ones—full of warmth, laughter, connectedness, and many, many people—all who deeply cared about me. Although poor in possessions, we were rich in personal relationships of love and constant support. My many uncles were my fathers, and my aunts were my mothers. Dozens of grandmothers and grandfathers told me of our traditions and kindly scolded me if I strayed from these cultural teachings.

Surrounded by love, I felt *belonging* with my relatives which included not only people but animals, plants, Mother Earth, and all of creation. I was to walk gently and, by learning well, would know *mastery* over my life. I was cautioned to use wisely the power that brought me *independence*. My behavior could be a blessing and *generosity* was always expected.

Today, I can see the trauma many children face, no matter where they live in the world. Families have many distractions and the struggle to earn a living may require parents to spend less time with their loved ones. Many young people know the hollow emptiness of loneliness, the searing suffering of trauma and loss, the icy silence of physical or emotional abandonment. Children in pain need caring persons in their lives.

In writing about the “Circle of Courage,” Larry Brendtro, Steve Van Bockern, and I brought together different cultural backgrounds. This philosophy is universal, although we initially used Lakota images and stories to express the ideas. Circle of Courage values transcend culture and are embraced by people in many parts of the world who care deeply about our sacred beings.

Lakota leader Sitting Bull once told some European settlers, “Let us put our minds together and see what kind of life we can make for our children.” With that goal, we combined Indigenous and Western wisdom to lead our children on pathways to responsibility. All children need loving, committed, and consistent adults around them if they are to bloom fully. In traditional communities, young people also learn to be caregivers to one another as older children teach and protect those who are younger. We must reclaim that enduring wisdom and become the new tribes of elders, parents, and peers who surround and nurture every child.

# Chapter One

# Enduring Truths

## Introduction

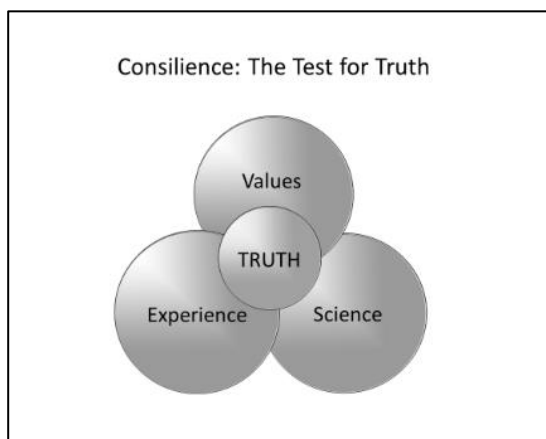
*Everything should be made as simple as possible but not simpler.*

—Albert Einstein

Einstein called for down-to-earth vocabulary so ideas in any field could be understood by all. *Response Ability Pathways*—or RAP—is relevant to youth and family workers, educators, parents, paraprofessionals, and any adult or peer mentors. RAP provides strategies to respond to the needs of young people instead of reacting to their problems.

This RAP text and related training use principles of *universal design* to be understood by the widest group of readers.<sup>1</sup> While grounded in research evidence, concepts are presented in plain language to make this useful to a broad audience. As Einstein quipped, *If you can't explain your theory to a six-year-old, you probably don't understand it yourself.* This book provided practical tools for reaching young people facing difficult life challenges.

There are increasing calls for *evidence-based* methods in education, treatment, and youth development. But one hardly knows where to start amidst the explosion of knowledge—just Googling *children* and *resilience* produces over 100 million hits. In 1847, British scholar William Whewell faced a similar challenge setting out to review the entire body of science known at that time.<sup>2</sup> He coined the word *consilience* to describe his solution: bring together knowledge from different fields to identify powerful simple truths. An example of consilience is the Circle of Courage model of resilience.



**Values:** Universal Circle of Courage value-based needs for Belonging, Mastery, Independence, and Generosity

**Experience:** Wisdom of youth work pioneers, practice expertise, and life experiences of those we serve

Resilience is the ability to overcome challenges and thrive. Children are like acorns with the potential to become mighty oaks. All are endowed with the seed of some greatness. But as they struggle and grow, children encounter challenges and make missteps. Yet young people who surmount challenges can make a mark on the world:

- As students, Albert Einstein and Thomas Edison hated school which hid their genius.
- As a boy, Gandhi was sickly and timid but courageously opposed colonial oppression.
- Eleanor Roosevelt fought her teachers but championed peace at the United Nations.
- Maya Angelou, mute after raped as a child, became a poet laureate of resilience.

The folk tales of every culture recount “the power of one” to triumph over personal hardship and make a difference in the lives of others.<sup>3</sup> Cervantes once said, *great persons are able to do great kindnesses*. Even those from troubled and traumatic backgrounds have inner strengths and can become responsible contributors to the human community. These are the heroes of this book.

### **Response Ability Pathways (RAP)**

*Response Ability Pathways* puts the Circle of Courage into practice by meeting universal biosocial needs for Belonging, Mastery, Independence, and Generosity. RAP was piloted in South Africa as that nation replaced apartheid with democracy.<sup>4</sup> An extensive discussion of the Circle of Courage is found in *Reclaiming Youth at Risk*<sup>5</sup> and the evidence base of these principles is reviewed in *Deep Brain Learning*.<sup>6</sup>

RAP offers practical tools for adult or peer mentors working with persons facing challenging situations. Natural everyday life events become the basis for problem-solving. RAP dialogues are not limited to discussing problems but also highlight strengths and help youth develop positive goals. RAP includes three sequential interventions:

- Connecting for support
- Clarifying challenges
- Restoring respect

Connecting, clarifying, and restoring are normal self-corrective processes of the resilient human brain. We all do these things our entire life, some of us are better than others. Thus, RAP is a natural, intuitive way to strengthen capacity that people already possess: building positive bonds, making sense of challenges, and putting relationships back in balance.

While connect, clarify, and restore is the natural sequence of RAP, these can also be separate interventions. It is not always possible or necessary to follow all RAP stages since each is a positive initiative in its own right:



**Connect:** Connections are natural emotional bonds, the basis of respectful relationships. Not all connections are time intensive but may involve brief positive exchanges. When trusting bonds are established, a person is open to communication.

**Clarify:** By giving persons the opportunity to reflect on challenges and think clearly, we support natural problem-solving. Young people can examine how their actions affect self and others. With better understanding of a situation, fresh solutions emerge.

**Restore:** Resolving conflicts and meeting needs creates natural harmony and healing. The goal is to build strengths and provide supports to help a person develop resilience. The focus is on needs for Belonging, Mastery, Independence, and Generosity.

Since RAP employs natural interpersonal abilities, it can be used in a wide range of settings by both adult and youth mentors. While RAP can be *therapeutic*, it is not designed to replace therapy. While RAP is *educational*, it is not a formal curriculum. RAP is *mentoring for resilience*. The goal is to build strengths, and the person being helped is as much an expert as the mentor.

RAP can provide as much support as the *teaching moment* allows, whether an instant or an extensive discussion. Short RAP interactions spread over time may be as effective as an intensive session. Young persons may be in conflict about whether to approach or retreat; brief positive connections without a lot of conversation can be less threatening.

Teachers often feel frustrated that they have so little time to spend with certain young persons whose needs are so great. Sometimes a single act of kindness can become a *tipping point* that alters the pathway of an individual's life.<sup>7</sup> Brief encounters can be potent because they focus on a specific goal and motivate the person to change the direction of behavior.<sup>8</sup> RAP has an economy of efficiency by targeting challenges and spotlighting strengths.

## Indigenous Wisdom

*The old are dedicated to the service of the young as their teachers and advisors,  
and the young in return regard them with love and reverence.*<sup>9</sup>

—Charles Eastman (Ohiyesa)

A critical error in the history of modern science is the belief that people prior to the industrial revolution lived in ignorance and superstition. Herbert Viliakazi, professor of sociology at Zululand University in South Africa, decried the arrogance of discarding the bulk of human knowledge as useless.<sup>10</sup> For millennia, Indigenous peoples have known how to raise courageous and resilient children without resorting to harsh punishment. Across tens of thousands of years in egalitarian communities, humans lived in relative harmony. Diverse societies shared core

values which have been portrayed in the four directions of the Circle of Courage. A medicine wheel drawn by Native American artist George Blue Bird depicts four universal needs: Belonging, Mastery, Independence, and Generosity. Inge Bolin described similar values among Indigenous groups in Peru who rear children in “cultures of respect.”<sup>11</sup>

Such practices are widespread in societies that deeply value children. Long before modern psychology, tribal peoples on many continents possessed sophisticated child-development knowledge. Passed on through oral traditions and careful modeling, elders taught important values to each new generation. A common theme in these cultures is that children are deeply respected and surrounded by caring relatives who nurture their needs.<sup>12</sup> The Lakota (Sioux) term for child literally means sacred being. In the Maori tongue, a child is called a gift of the gods. Indigenous Australians speak to children with great respect. Vilakazi describes traditional African values concerning children:

A child draws from within us the inclination and instinct for kindness, gentleness, generosity, and love. Accordingly, there is nothing more revolting to our humanity than cruelty to children. These truths we knew at one time and somehow subsequently forgot.<sup>13</sup>

There is evidence that values of respect between children and adults were once part of the early history of Europeans.<sup>14</sup> But throughout most recorded history, the treatment of children in Western civilization was a long tale of neglect and abuse.<sup>15</sup> Children like women were legally property (chattel) to be used, misused, or discarded by their “superiors.”

As Europeans conquered tribal people on many continents, they imposed punitive discipline practices. The goal of colonial education was to *civilize savages* as children were ripped from their families and sent to distant residential schools. Youngsters who had never known hostility from elders were beaten harshly, even for speaking in their tribal tongue. A Native American author recalls his forced removal to a church-sponsored institution as *The Aboriginal Sin*.<sup>16</sup> Indigenous Australians refer to the cultural kidnapping of their children as *the stolen generation*.<sup>17</sup>

Child-rearing customs differ based on cultural values, but the basic needs of children have always been the same. Abraham Maslow’s well-known hierarchy of human needs was strongly influenced by his experience living on the Blackfoot First Nations Reserve in Alberta, Canada in 1938.<sup>18</sup> He concluded that the Blackfoot were much more generous with one another and deeply committed to meeting needs of children than was the case in Western society. The great majority of the Blackfoot thrived and met their potential, which Maslow saw as unlike the reality in more supposedly *advanced* nations.

Maslow observed that basic human needs are tied to core human values.<sup>19</sup> In his final version of the hierarchy of human needs shown in the accompanying chart, he placed *self-*

*transcendence* (concern for a person or cause beyond self) at the highest level of development.<sup>20</sup> We have listed the Circle of Courage value-based needs alongside Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. When these needs are frustrated, youth show problems. When these needs are met, young people develop positive life outcomes.

<b>Maslow’s Hierarchy</b>	<b>Circle of Courage Needs</b>
Self-Transcendence	Generosity
Self-Actualization	Independence
Esteem	Mastery
Belongingness	Belonging

## Voices of Pioneers

*Reformers in education and youth work intuitively discovered the essential principles for what now is called Positive Youth Development. The historic importance of these pioneers is that they challenged punitive, autocratic notions of Western culture.*<sup>21</sup>

—James Anglin & Larry Brendtro

For hundreds of years, leading thinkers challenged the prevailing view that children were born evil and needed harsh discipline. In the sixteenth century, Dutch educator and clergyman Erasmus described punishment as adults indulging their passions rather than correcting the errors of children. In the same era, French philosopher Montaigne called for eliminating discipline by horror and cruelty.<sup>22</sup> During the Napoleonic Wars, Pestalozzi founded orphanages for children roaming city streets.<sup>23</sup> He took the scriptural call to *become as a little child* to mean that adults should treat children with deep respect, as equals before the creator. But these were minority views in cultures with power as the measure of worth.

Dorothea Dix discovered the mistreatment of youth when she taught Sunday school to incarcerated girls. She crusaded in North America, Europe, and Asia for enlightened *moral treatment* based on compassion and respect. This nineteenth century mental health movement inspired idealistic young physicians to work in small mental hospitals creating close relationships with their patients.<sup>24</sup> Restraint and locked isolation were virtually eliminated, and most residents were able to heal and return to their communities.

Democracy posed widespread challenges to coercive practices. In many nations, youth work pioneers proclaimed that positive potentials could be found in the most devalued children and teens.<sup>25</sup> Rabindranath Tagore founded a school for cast-off children in India, describing them in stirring poetry for which he received the 1913 Nobel Prize in literature. Anton Makarenko gathered street children who terrorized Soviet cities after

the Russian Revolution and created schools to teach them *joy*. Maria Montessori educated children from Rome's slums, demonstrating that they had highly absorbent minds.

In 1900, Ellen Key of Sweden wrote of *soul murder in the schools* and called for abolishing hostile and demeaning punishment.<sup>26</sup> Corporal punishment just did not work in a free society and was being questioned as the centerpiece of school discipline. A typical Boston public school of the era housed 400 pupils and gave 65 whippings a day, one every six minutes, almost an assembly line. In hundreds of rural schools, students were driving punitive teachers away.<sup>27</sup>

The modern juvenile court was founded in Chicago in 1899 by social worker Jane Addams.<sup>28</sup> Children were removed from adult prisons to be provided care appropriate to their needs. The children's court soon spread to all democratic nations. These philosophies led to many schools for wayward youth based on self-governance.<sup>29</sup>

There was no greater champion of children than Janusz Korczak who worked with street children of Warsaw.<sup>30</sup> Korczak criticized both capitalist and communist systems for viewing children as economic commodities rather than persons with dignity: "The market value of the very young is small. Only in the sight of God and the Law is the apple blossom worth as much as the apple, green shoots as much as a field of ripe corn."<sup>31</sup>

In Berlin following World War I, Karl Wilker transformed the most abusive institution by replacing bars and barbed wire with positive bonds between adults and youth. In an important book on youth empowerment, Wilker wrote:

What we want to achieve in our work with young people is to find and strengthen the positive and healthy elements, no matter how deeply they are hidden. We enthusiastically believe in the existence of those elements even in the seemingly worst of our adolescents.<sup>32</sup>

When Hitler came to power, Wilker's books were burned and he fled to South Africa where he taught Black students. South African educator and author, Alan Paton, would replicate Wilker's reforms in the Diepkloof reformatory.<sup>33</sup> Paton decried a society that punishes and destroys the very youth it corrupts. Rejecting racist and dehumanizing methods, Paton built relationships, responsibility, and respect. Diepkloof became known world-wide as a model of enlightened practice.

Despite the efforts of these reformers, progressive ideas were slow to take hold. Democracy was a fragile flower and harsh discipline was still in style. There were no training programs to prepare new generations of professionals in positive methods. Further, there was not yet a solid science of positive youth development. By the mid-twentieth century, the hopefulness of earlier decades had given way to pessimistic views. What once were called

*wayward* kids were now described as *disruptive, disobedient, disturbed, and disordered*. Such labels masked their needs and potential.

Still, influential persons were calling for a return to a positive psychology. Carl Rogers showed that children could overcome difficult backgrounds by gaining insight into their circumstances and taking responsibility for their behavior.<sup>34</sup> Anna Freud studied a group of orphaned children rescued from Nazi concentration camps.<sup>35</sup> While antagonistic to all adults, the children showed amazing loyalty and love to one another. Fritz Redl reported research on the reclaiming aggressive children and suggested an entire book could be written on their unrecognized virtues.<sup>36</sup> Australian therapist Michael White berated the deficit mindset of psychology: "Pathology. The word makes me wince."<sup>37</sup>

The most eminent psychiatrist in the twentieth century was Karl Menninger who blasted his profession for pessimistic views on the human condition. When in his nineties, Dr. Karl was asked which of his many books would have the most enduring impact, he quickly chose *The Vital Balance*.<sup>38</sup> That work described three stages in the history of mental health. The past was focused on *mental illness*. Next came the era of *mental health*. In the future we will discover how to help persons become *weller than well*.

Dr. Menninger foretold a science of resilience where even life's disruptions could strengthen human character. His prototype of "weller than well" was William James who overcame serious personal problems to achieve eminence in both psychology and philosophy. A century ago, James wrote: "The potentialities of development in human souls are unfathomable."<sup>39</sup>

The twenty-first century saw a paradigm shift by the American Psychological Association from a focus on deficits to strengths. This new positive psychology is researching character virtues like courage, responsibility, and hope: "Much of the task of prevention in this new century will be to understand and learn how to foster these virtues in young people."<sup>40</sup> In this spirit, Zvi Levy of Israel gave this challenge to youth: "What is in you is good enough to take you to places you have never dared to go."<sup>41</sup>

## Chapter Two

# Pain-Based Behavior

*I didn't want no one to love anymore, I had been hurt too many times.*<sup>42</sup>

—Richard Cardinal

In a study of youth at risk in ten Canadian treatment programs, James Anglin of the University of Victoria concluded that *each of these young persons without exception* experienced deep and pervasive emotional pain.<sup>43</sup> But few who work with such children were trained to recognize or address the pain concealed beneath the problem behavior. Instead, typical discipline interventions were sharp verbal reprimands ("Watch your language!") and threatening consequences or loss of privileges. Anglin concluded that many who deal with difficult youngsters *react* to their own frustration, rather than *respond* to the pain and needs of the young person. This is the key distinction between ineffective and effective approaches to youth in conflict.

### A Profile in Pain

Richard Cardinal was a Métis boy from Canada who was removed from his alcoholic parents at age four. He and siblings were placed with different White foster families throughout Alberta. For the next thirteen years, Richard was shuttled through foster care, group homes, children's shelters, and locked facilities. Cut off from his family and Native cultural roots, Richard's most basic physical, emotional, and growth needs were blocked.

Richard communicated his pain in the language of problem behavior, and adults reacted with increased punishment and rejection. When Richard wet his bed, he was shamed and humiliated by being stripped naked and beaten before an audience of other children. When he broke rules, he was starved and given a sack of raw turnips for food. His longest placement was four years living in a dingy basement where he walked on planks to avoid water covering the floor.

By adolescence, Richard was in and out of different placements and schools. His talents went untapped, and he failed all his subjects in school. He showed interest in caring for farm animals, but this still left him empty of human love. In desperate attempts to control the course of his life, Richard repeatedly tried to run away. He ran to the north, once making it as far as the village where he lived as a small child.

Facing repeated rejection and pain, Richard sunk deeper into despair. A foster parent found a diary Richard had been keeping and was shocked to discover how much anger he experienced because he seldom showed this outwardly. On isolated occasions Richard acted out, but not directly against persons—he stole a truck, shot a cow, and repeatedly ran away. Mostly, Richard directed his rage inward. Lonely and depressed, Richard called attention to his pain with self-destructive acts. He cut his wrists, once while in school, and again while sitting on the street in front of a convenience store, bleeding onto the sidewalk. Another time he was found curled up in a doghouse, with self-inflicted wounds and "please help me" written in his own blood. Crying out for help which did not come, Richard was losing the will to live.

Occasional interventions by treatment professionals failed to address Richard's needs. He tried to drown his pain in drink and again attempted suicide. He was brought by ambulance to a hospital and nearly died. He woke up strapped to a restraint table and cried out in pain. A nurse responded by releasing Richard's bonds and embracing him, assuring him that everything would be all right. He could not remember how long it had been since someone had hugged him, and he missed it very much. Richard was discharged the next day without any restorative plan.

Richard died spiritually long before he took his own life, hanging from a birch tree in the back yard of his last foster home. He left behind his diary describing years of struggle and suffering. Richard's voice was finally heard, as his words provided a window into his private world. The National Film Board of Canada created an award-winning video documenting his life.<sup>44</sup> Richard wrote these lines about removal from a foster home where he lived with his brother:

I had four hours before I would leave my family and friends behind. I went into the bedroom and dug out my old harmonica. I went down to the barnyard and sat on the fence. I began to play real slow and sad-like for the occasion, but halfway through the song my lower lip began to quiver and I knew I was going to cry. And I was glad so I didn't even try to stop myself. I guess that my foster mother heard me and must have come down to comfort me. When she put her arm around me, I pulled away and ran up the roadway. I didn't want no one to love any more. I had been hurt too many times. I began to learn the art of blocking out all emotions and shut out the rest of the world. The door would open to no one. Love can be gentle as a lamb or ferocious as a lion. It is something to be welcomed; it is something to be afraid of. It is good and bad, yet people live, fight, die for this. Somehow people can cope with it. I don't know. I think I would not be happy with it, yet I am depressed and sad without it. Love is very strange.<sup>45</sup>

Richard's final diary entry is an apology for the pain he might cause others by his suicide. In a final gesture of generosity, he shares his love for his brother and then tells persons in his life not to take his death personally: "I just can't take any more."

## Pain, Lots of Pain

Children encounter many difficulties growing up in an unsettled world. Most steer clear of the more serious hazard but others are physically or psychologically battered in hostile environments. Swimming in rivers of pain, they struggle to survive using whatever means they know. While our hearts go out to children who hurt, when their behavior bothers others, concern can quickly turn to blame. Seriously troubled kids are treated as damaged goods to be discarded. Their behavior is a cry of pain, a call for help that goes unheard.

In his book *Pain, Lots of Pain*, Brian Raychaba shines a light into the little-known inner world of troubled young persons.<sup>46</sup> He interviewed Canadian youth like himself who had been removed from their families. Raychaba himself came from such a background, so most were open to him. They recounted the powerlessness of being buffeted by traumatic life events. They believed their pain was seldom understood, even by trained professionals. Yet, beneath their fury or fear, most hungered for love and hoped for a better future.

Human behavior is motivated by pain or pleasure. Before children can speak, they experience a full range of emotions from "lung-wrenching anger to limb-flapping joy."<sup>47</sup> By eighteen months, children develop the capacity to size up a new acquaintance as friendly or threatening, respectful or humiliating. At school-age, they can also detect a full range positive and negative emotions in others.

While children quickly acquire the universal language of emotions, it takes many years to learn to manage these feelings. Small children in emotional pain instinctively display tears or distress. Ideally, caregivers *respond* to their pain with empathy and try to meet their needs. But problem behavior can stir up such distress in us that we *react* emotionally and pay back the pain. Some problem behaviors are reactions to a temporary stressful situation. Others trace back to earlier trauma or mistreatment. A girl describes her pathway from being hurt to hurting others: *After my dad assaulted me when I was eight, I was put in a foster home. I was there for a year and a half. That was the first time the violence really came out of me.*

This small girl likely had painful feelings of anger and depression, painful thoughts that she was bad and unworthy of love; she reacted by hurting others. Pain is a powerful force impacting emotions, thoughts, and behavior:

***Painful emotions*** include negative fear, anger, sadness, and shame. With dozens of names for bad feelings, most are variations of a handful of basic emotions.



**Painful thoughts** include worry, distrust, hatred, guilt, and helplessness. Defenses like denial, blame, and rationalization distort thinking to suppress painful feelings. **Pain-based behavior** is a reaction to painful emotions and thinking. A person may try to escape from pain, act out pain, relive pain, block out pain, cause pain to others, or even punish themselves with more pain.

Those who cannot constructively cope with problems often react with defensive *fight or flight* behavior. Returning to the story of Richard Cardinal, we can see numerous examples of self-defeating reactions to distress:

- Preventing the pain of rejection by refusing to love again.
- Avoiding the pain of failure by abandoning attempts to succeed.
- Escaping the pain of powerlessness by running away.
- Internalizing the pain of anger by self-destructive acts.
- Medicating the pain of loneliness with alcohol and other drugs.
- Brooding on the pain of hopelessness in withdrawal and depression.

Rather than hurting others, Richard Cardinal turned his problems inward. Many children act out their pain and create problems for others. They react to powerlessness with defiance and rebellion. They seek retribution for their victimization by attacking others. They mask the pain of emptiness through the wild pursuit of pleasure. And they silence the pain of conscience with selfish and calloused thinking.

Whether young people hurt themselves or others, flight or fight reactions only make matters worse. These emergency pain-avoidance systems cannot heal pain, meet needs, or develop strengths. Humans are by nature problem-solvers who try out various ways of coping with challenges. Adaptive coping leads to social harmony and well-being. But pain-driven reactions lead to destructive and self-defeating behavior.

## Tit for Tat

The human brain is hard-wired to react to others in the way they react to us. Like a mirror image, friendliness usually invites friendliness while hostility sparks hostility. Psychologists call this the “Tit for Tat” rule.<sup>48</sup> The principle is simple: *On the first encounter with another person, be friendly. Then return the friendly or hostile reaction encountered.*

Humans by nature seek social connections and Tit for Tat is a starting point. But friendliness could make one vulnerable, so Tit for Tat is an inbuilt self-protective option. At the first sign of danger or disrespect, we are programmed to stop being friendly and revert to

hostile or defensive behavior. Tit for Tat uses the *friend or foe detector* in the brain's *polyvagal system*, instantly spotting subtle cues by reading facial emotions, voice tone, eye contact, and bodily posture<sup>49</sup> The vagal nerves connect to our inner organs giving us a *gut feeling* of whether this person is safe to be trusted. If danger is detected, It spikes the heart rate and activates the stress reaction in readiness for fight or flight. When safety is detected, it calms emotions and prepares for social engagement.,

Tit for Tat worked well when humans lived in simpler societies. It was a better way to deal with strangers than treating each outsider as an enemy. Tit for Tat still operates across all cultures and is embedded in the human genetic code. But in today's impersonal world, we are surrounded by strangers. Tit for Tat is too limiting as tense encounters can trigger violence.

A high-profile example of Tit for Tat going wrong is when police stop a car and fear the intentions of the occupants. The professional response would be for the officer to begin with a respectful demeanor. But officers who fear their safety may think they must project power to gain cooperation. The slightest sign of citizen resistance leads to shouted orders and sometimes profanity.

Even if police are belligerent, most citizens submit to authority; while obedience calms interactions, it reinforces the officer's view this was an effective strategy. But tensions escalate if both parties become mired in Tit for Tat hostility. Angry conflict cycles fuel emotionally charged reactions by both citizens and police. When rage or fear hijack the reasoning brain, tragic outcomes can occur. Tit for Tat is also morally bankrupt—the Tit for Tat rule is a payback scheme while the Golden Rule calls for treating others like we wish to be treated.

Love and hate reactions are inevitable with children showing emotional problems. The challenge is to prevent a vicious cycle where hate is answered in kind. Children in pain are likely to draw adults into Tit for Tat hostility. They telegraph pain and are hypersensitive to subtle signs of disrespect. Since angry conflict can ruin relationships and even lead to violence, both youth and adults need to learn ways to resolve conflict. Successful coping is a *double struggle* as we try to manage both the external difficulty and our internal emotional reactions.<sup>50</sup>

When signs of threat or opportunity are detected, positive or negative emotions are triggered in the brain's amygdala. Emotionally charged events are stored in long-term memory. Thus, we are more likely to recall painful or pleasurable experiences. When we say we have *hurt feelings*, this is literally true. Neuroscientists found that physical and social pain operate in similar ways.<sup>51</sup> Brain scans show that being excluded or rejected triggers feelings of distress, and a burst of activity in the deep brain's pain center. Research subjects who were best able to handle rejection had greater activity in the higher brain. Being able to verbalize distress may calm the emotional brain. Thus, talking with friends or

a counselor, or expressing feelings in poems and diaries can be helpful.

Humans are sensitive to rejection because social bonds are crucial for survival. We have evolved a brain-based warning system that is activated at any sign one is being excluded so the person can take corrective action. When signs of rejection are registered, this triggers the emotion of shame.<sup>52</sup> In contrast, belonging produces feelings of pride and well-being.

Shame is often confused with guilt. Guilt signals that our behavior is wrong. Shame calls into question a person's self-worth. Rejected persons who do not restore belonging become social outcasts. In the extreme, shame can lead to suicide, or the person turns pain outward and attacks those seen as causing the pain of rejection. The quiet, bullied student who shoots his tormentors and then himself is an example of shame directed both at self and others.

While shame is universal, culture influences how people react. In some Native American and Asian groups, suicide was once an acceptable response to the shame of loss of love or defeat in battle. In aggression-prone *cultures of honor* like the Celtic traditions that shaped the American South, an insult or disrespect can lead to a duel in the deep-seated belief that one cannot *lose face* without striking back.<sup>53</sup>

Youth excluded from a group often switch allegiance to other peers to replace the pain of shame with pride of belonging. Kids who fail in school and are rejected by peers have low self-worth. But joining a gang or group of other outcasts raises scores on tests of self-esteem.<sup>54</sup>

Persons who experience much hostility do not get used to this. Instead, they are on guard for the slightest sign of disrespect. If they feel violated, it seems logical to them to be violent in return. Angry conflicts are highly interactive. Once Tit for Tat programs are triggered, conflict is self-perpetuating until one party disengages or is defeated. Conflict can continue to stir in the mind after the event, making a person a prisoner of hate.<sup>55</sup>

Humans are born with the ability to feel empathy with persons in pain. But self-centered thinking allows us to tune out the hurt we are causing others. We are most susceptible to thinking errors when emotionally aroused and when we are under the influence of a powerful group or authority figure. At such moments, the brain switches from logical control to control by others.

When one blindly follows others, individual decision-making is turned off. If the group or leader is positive, no harm is done. But followers are easily misled and swept up in problem behavior. Since children do not yet have mature logical brain controls over emotions, they are more susceptible to the excitement of the moment and group contagion. Even adults in times of threat suspend logical thinking and embrace a powerful leader or group. Thus, our natural desire for cooperation can lead us to give up self-control by *obedience* to authority and *conformity* to a group. Group thinking can silence conscience and individuals no longer take personal responsibility for their actions.

Violent kids who react from fear or group contagion may not immediately show remorse. This does not mean they are "kids without conscience." Those who really get to

know such youngsters seldom find them truly empty. After studying aggressive children for a half century, Fritz Redl concluded he had never met a kid who was truly a psychopath. However, children not bonded to adults have delays in conscience development. They show little concern for others and can act in cruel ways. In Tit for Tat fashion, hurt children have few qualms about hurting others.

The pathway to violence often starts with mistreatment or trauma in the early life of the child. Kids who cannot cope with severe emotional pain are in a state of crisis. They brood about a problem and turn anger inward or act out against others. Once they become comfortable hurting others, change is more difficult. Without positive social bonds, such persons continue to be a danger to others—and themselves.

Beyond the pains of early relational trauma, many persons are deeply hurt by mistreatment based on their identity or status. Notably are cultural or racial trauma, religious bigotry, social class, and hostility based on sexual orientation. For those who work with children in pain, it is easy to react to their behavior than respond to their needs. This inbuilt Tit for Tat program can only be overridden through a belief in the potential strengths and worth of every youth.

## Chapter Three

# Pathways to Resilience

*Every trauma survivor I've met is resilient in his or her own way, and every one of their stories inspires awe at how people cope.*<sup>56</sup>

—Bessel van der Kolk

### From Risk to Resilience

The word *risk* is a synonym for danger. When terms like *children at risk* first came into use, this referred to *dangers in the environment*, like poverty or abuse. Over time, this came to mean supposed deficits in *at-risk youth*. Some current risk assessment approaches mirror this shift by profiling persons thought to pose a danger. The resilience revolution turns this thinking around, seeing all children at risk as potential children of promise.

The starting point for all problems is stress, a state of physical and psychological arousal that signals some challenge or difficulty. Stressful events make up the fabric of normal life. Surmounting stress builds resilience. But stress that becomes too intense and lasting leads to pain-based behavior. Hundreds of stressors surround children:

**Physical stressors** disrupt well-being. These include abuse, illness, hunger, lack of sleep, noise, crowding, and dangerous environments.

**Emotional stressors** produce psychological pain as experienced in feelings of fear, anger, grief, shame, guilt, and worthlessness.

**Social stressors** disrupt normal growth needs. These impede the development of belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity.

Stress in the family can disrupt adult-child relationships or cause families to bond together. Potential stressors include frequent moves, lack of supportive relatives, divorce, solo parenting, death of a caregiver, harried work schedules, inadequate childcare, substance abuse, and neglect. School stressors, such as the fear of failure, disrupt learning. Peer relationships are often problematic during teen years. Mismatch in temperament between children and caregivers and intrusive discipline are other sources of stress.<sup>57</sup>

A quick way to tally up the scope of trauma and stress is the Adverse Childhood Experiences scale developed by Kaiser Permanente, a large health insurance company, and

the U.S. Center for Disease Control.<sup>58</sup> This is a list of ten adverse experiences experienced by children before reaching 18 years of age:

**Household Stress**

Divorce or separation  
Substance abuse  
Domestic violence  
Criminal behavior  
Mental illness

**Abuse and Neglect**

Psychological abuse  
Physical Abuse  
Sexual Abuse  
Physical Neglect  
Emotional Neglect

The beauty of the ACEs score is its simplicity—just total the number of adverse events experienced before age eighteen. The more ACEs, the higher the risk of life-long behavior and health problems.

While most can overcome a few of these risk factors, having multiple stressors is correlated with many problems. For example, someone with four or more ACEs is six times more likely to struggle with alcoholism as an adult. Still, a large majority with multiple ACEs do not become alcoholics, an instance of resilience in action.

When do adverse childhood experiences have long-term toxic effects? The critical factor is whether developmental needs are met through supportive relationships. A blind spot in most discussions of trauma is that challenging events are recast as trauma while the potential for resilience is overlooked.<sup>59</sup>

A limitation of this insurance-company list is that it is not comprehensive, and many propose adding more adverse events.<sup>60</sup> But resilience scientist Ann Masten cautions researchers against the proliferation of long lists of risks and protective factors.<sup>61</sup> This complexity obscures targeting those factors that are the active ingredients in positive outcomes with youth at risk.<sup>62</sup>

In their classic study, *Children who Hate*, Redl and Wineman note that all children face experiences with potential traumatic impact, but they can cope if reared in a friendly environment devoted to their needs.<sup>63</sup> Most childhood emotional and behavioral problems result from too much stress with too little support.<sup>64</sup> Such stress can produce both emotional disturbance and outward social maladjustment. Many youth show multiple

problems such as depression, defiance, school failure, delinquency, substance abuse, and other risk-taking behaviors.<sup>65</sup>

Acting-out behavior often masks inner emotional distress. A classic study found that over ninety percent of delinquents showed clear evidence of “having been very unhappy or discontented in their life circumstances or extremely disturbed because of emotion-provoking situations or experiences.”<sup>66</sup>

Children drowning in distress react in different ways. Some get into conflicts with peers and authority. Others retreat into an inner world cut off from those who might offer support. However they show their pain, these are children of discouragement. But when their basic needs are met, children can turn *risk* into *resilience*. Long before these terms came into common use, Alfred Adler used *courage* and *discouragement* to express similar ideas.<sup>67</sup> Children need people in their lives who help them gain the courage to face difficulties without becoming overwhelmed and discouraged.

## The Resilience Revolution

*Glance at problems, gaze at strengths.*<sup>68</sup>

—J. C. Chambers

Resilience science is a relatively recent arrival on the psychology scene. A leading researcher described resilience as achieving positive life outcomes despite risk.<sup>69</sup> Resilience involves the ability to rebound from adversity with greater strength to meet future challenges.<sup>70</sup> Even serious disruptions can offer unexpected opportunities for growth.

Initially, some believed that resilience was a rare trait of a few *invulnerable* super-kids. But studies following high risk children into adulthood found that 60 percent eventually made positive adjustments.<sup>71</sup> Even those exposed to severe trauma such as Romanian orphans can turn their lives around if they find supportive persons.<sup>72</sup> Far from being a rare quality, humans are by nature resilient—we are descendants of survivors. Still, there are no invulnerable persons for if our basic needs are frustrated, we all are at risk.

The science of resilience was sparked by research on children who successfully surmount terrible backgrounds. Prominent researchers include Emmy Werner and Ruth Smith who followed high-risk Hawaiian children into adulthood; most turned out well despite a rocky early history.<sup>73</sup> Similar studies were conducted by Michael Rutter of England on the Isle of Wight.<sup>74</sup> Others have studied resilience in special populations as varied as delinquents, survivors of war, and street children. Norman Garmezy concluded, “If there is any lesson to be derived from recent studies, it lies in the reaffirmation of the resilience potential that exists in children under stress.”<sup>75</sup>

Resilience involves inner strength in the individual and external support:

**Strengths.** These are positive personal qualities or virtues. When growth needs are met, children develop their strengths. In Circle of Courage terms, these include Belonging, Mastery, Independence, and Generosity

**Supports.** After reviewing a half century of resilience research, Suniya Luthar concluded resilience is ultimately about relationships.<sup>76</sup> The view that is emerging is that humans are by nature potentially resilient. We have inherited from our ancestors a resilient brain that possesses bioprograms for survival and well-being.

Resilience research broadens our view of problem behavior beyond narrow psychiatric labels. Certainly, progress continues to be made in studying brain-based disorders. But prominent child psychiatrists note that only a few conditions, such as autism, appear to fit the classical medical model. Many of the most common childhood problems—like anger, fear, impulsiveness, inattention, and moodiness—are part of normal development or normal reactions to stressful environments.<sup>77</sup> Such problems are best addressed by nurturing children's needs and building their strengths.<sup>78</sup>

The human mind is designed to solve the problems our species has faced for survival and well-being. For example, we build bonds to others to learn from them and protect ourselves against danger. This is no coincidence since the brain is formatted with *universal logic* that motivates behavior. Therefore, a person in crisis is programmed to seek support from a trusted companion.

Resilience requires abilities to survive and thrive, even in the face of difficulty. All humans are by nature resilient, having inherited these capacities from ancestors who overcame all manner of hardship. Although specific methods of coping may vary with individuals and culture, resilience is universal because it is based on the innate capacity of the human brain.<sup>79</sup>

How can we make sense of the mushrooming literature on the science of resilience and positive youth development? The Circle of Courage has been described as *The Resilience Code* because it translates strength-building research into a concise and understandable format.<sup>80</sup> The Resilience Code is more than a metaphor; it describes universal human growth needs. The key landmarks on the journey to resilient outcomes are Belonging, Mastery, Independence, and Generosity.<sup>81</sup>

Children whose physical and emotional needs are met show little high-risk behavior. But when these basic needs are blocked, all manner of difficulties follow. Perhaps the most extensive research on risk and resilience comes from studies of Developmental Assets by the Search Institute.<sup>82</sup> This is a list of forty assets which lead to positive outcomes in youth



development. Twenty are *internal assets* like responsibility and achievement motivation. . Another twenty are *external assets* like family support, positive peer influence, and a caring school climate. Internal assets are *strengths* within the young person; external assets are *supports* provided by families, mentors, schools, and communities.

Studies in hundreds of communities show that youth with many developmental assets usually turn out well. Those with few assets are at risk for a host of bad outcomes, including substance abuse, reckless sexuality, school failure, emotional problems, and delinquency. Remarkably, in a typical community, 60 percent of youth have fewer than twenty assets. Youth with ten or fewer of these assets show an average of nine high-risk behaviors. In contrast, youth with more than thirty assets average only one risky behavior. It could not be simpler: *meeting growth needs builds resilience*.

## The Resilient Brain

*Resilience is universal across all cultures and encoded in human DNA. Our brains are designed to cope with challenges that have confronted all persons in history.*<sup>83</sup>

—Larry Brendtro & James Longhurst

Knowledge about trauma and resilience has expanded with research on how the brain handles stress.<sup>84</sup> Most childhood emotional and behavior problems trace back to stressful life events. Children who successfully cope develop a *steeling effect* that prepares them to successfully cope with future stressors.<sup>85</sup> But trauma becomes toxic when it interferes with normal emotional and behavioral development. Highly distressing experience produces very painful feelings, and the individual adopts defensive coping behaviors.

A key task of the brain is to deal with danger. The brain initially treats unfamiliar persons or stimuli as potentially threatening. Throughout history, the most serious threat to human survival has been other humans. Our brains go on high alert when we encounter a situation that triggers conscious or unconscious memories of previous painful events. An abused youngster facing an angry authority figure may experience emotional reactions that replay the original abuse. When children tap into past trauma, their reactions may range from low level alarm to feeling overwhelmed by panic, fear, anger, or terror.

Intense emotional experiences, both pleasurable and painful, are etched, sometimes indelibly, in the brain's emotional memory. Traumatized children are "at risk" because their brains become less plastic—less likely to face new experiences in a curious and confident way. A child who is chronically maltreated may live in a persistent state of vigilance and may respond to perceived threat with aggression (fight), withdrawal (flight). The opposite coping strategy is to numb or block out the pain (freeze). Painful experiences become the dark lens through

which present experiences are filtered. If painful memories are triggered, the brain replays the past by using defensive strategies to avoid further pain.

Traumatized persons overuse more primitive brain systems. Their survival brains are chronically stimulated, and they are at risk of engaging in behaviors which hurt themselves or others. These destructive emotional impulses can only be regulated by mature capacity in the higher brain centers. But traumatized children and teens find it difficult to self-calm in times of stress since their brain pathways for self-control are not well developed.<sup>86</sup> This lack of emotional self-control interferes with rational problem solving.

Prolonged alarm responses can alter the brain's neural systems. Some pathways are strengthened (e.g., strike out, retreat). Others are weakened (e.g., stay calm, problem-solve). Brains rigidly organized in this way are less responsive to the environment. Rather than learning new behaviors, a child's emotional energy is diverted to avoiding pain. Traumatized children cannot optimally perform in the classroom when in a persistent state of arousal. The brain that should focus on learning is preoccupied with survival and safety.

### **Epigenetics and the Resilient Brain**

The nature-nurture debate is becoming history as the new science of epigenetics helps us understand the remarkably resilient human brain.<sup>87</sup> Researchers who mapped the human genome hoped to find genes for mental disorders. Instead, genes and environment are in constant interplay. *Epigenetics*—*epi* means *on top of*—shows that genes are not destiny since environmental events can turn genes on or off.<sup>88</sup> There has long been a puzzle about why genes only take up a small space on our chromosome. What once was called *junk DNA* turns out to be home to four million epigenetic switches that adapt to environmental cues.<sup>89</sup>

While epigenetic responses evolved to make humans more adaptive, life experiences far outside the norm can have unpredictable results. Thus, there are thousands of chemicals in today's environment that humans never encountered in their evolutionary history. Some trigger maladaptive epigenetic reactions that impair health and can be related to autism, aggression, and other emotional and learning problems.

Classic studies by Michael Meaney of McGill University found that nurturing parenting creates resilient, emotionally stable offspring.<sup>90</sup> In contrast, maternal neglect alters the expression of genes necessary to regulate stress. This pattern is seen in victims of childhood trauma who have difficulty managing emotions and behavioral impulses.<sup>91</sup> Throughout most human history, children were protected from abuse by a community of caregivers dedicated to their well-being. Nothing in our epigenetic design prepares us for maltreatment from those who are supposed to protect us.

Genetic differences in temperament can interact with experience to create changes in brain and behavior. Children with timid, sensitive temperaments are more likely to be hurt by bullying or mistreatment than those with a tougher temperament.<sup>92</sup> Bold kids are better

insulated from the environment which gives some protection from adversity. Children with reactive temperaments do poorly in adverse environments yet thrive with quality care. They are shaped by their experience, for better or worse. Thomas Boyce calls these types of temperament *The Orchid and the Dandelion*.<sup>93</sup>

Moderately stressful environments build coping strength, but severe stress can impair brain and body.<sup>94</sup> Over 80 percent of genes impact the brain, so epigenetics has profound effects in pregnancy when neuron growth is at its peak. Maternal stress or toxic chemicals during the prenatal stage can cause a child to be born anxious, irritable, and hard to soothe. Indigenous peoples were long aware of this and developed elaborate rituals to insure well-being during pregnancy.<sup>95</sup>

A startling finding from epigenetics is that some effects of experience can persist for up to three or four generations. While it once was thought that epigenetic markers were wiped clean and not inherited, research shows that extreme life experiences of the parent can echo into later generations. Of particular importance is the cross-generational effects of trauma.<sup>96</sup> Effects of cultural trauma can be long lasting and impact a whole group of people. In war, slavery, and cultural conquest, an entire community is traumatized. Cultural trauma is profound among Indigenous populations world-wide whose civilizations were devastated by colonial domination.

On a positive note, epigenetics is not genetics. Since changes in gene expression are caused by experience, new experiences may create new changes. The resilient human brain has remarkable neuroplasticity and can redesign itself, even in later life. Epigenetics also points to the type of environments in which humans thrive, particularly the role of relationships and caregiving on healthy development. Ann Masten observes that humans have inborn brain programs for resilience with modules dedicated to social competence, problem solving, autonomy, and purpose.<sup>97</sup> These mirror the Circle of Courage needs for Belonging, Mastery, Independence, and Generosity.<sup>98</sup>

## Chapter Four

# The Circle of Courage

Early anthropologists observed that Natives of the Americas raised courageous, respectful children without relying on coercive controls.<sup>99</sup> However, European colonizers, convinced of their superiority, removed Native children from their family and culture to “civilize” them in punitive boarding schools. The irony is that Indigenous peoples had a sophisticated system of rearing children in what Canadian anthropologist Inge Bolin calls “Cultures of Respect.”<sup>100</sup>

The Circle of Courage is a consilience of Indigenous and Western science which identifies four core needs for positive youth development: Belonging, Mastery, Independence, and Generosity.<sup>101</sup> Cultures vary in how much attention is given to these needs. The table below contrasts the value systems of Cultures of Respect and Domination.<sup>102</sup>

<b>Cultures of Respect</b>	<b>Cultures of Domination</b>
<b>Belonging.</b> Trusting bonds in a network of caring relationships	<b>Alienation.</b> Disconnected from family, school, and community
<b>Mastery.</b> Motivation to learn and develop competence	<b>Superiority.</b> Motivation to win and appear better than others
<b>Independence.</b> Recognizing all persons’ right for autonomy	<b>Intimidation.</b> Using power to subjugate others
<b>Generosity.</b> Showing care and concern for one another	<b>Privilege.</b> Pursuing “the good life” in self-centered materialism

The Circle of Courage needs are universal because they are embedded in the human brain, having evolved over millennia of human history.<sup>103</sup> Cultural psychologist Barbara Rogoff observes that Indigenous cultures place a higher priority on meeting the needs of the young than is true in materialistic, power oriented Western societies.<sup>104</sup> In this chapter, we highlight these four value-based needs of the Circle of Courage.

## Belonging

*Be related somehow to everyone you know.*<sup>105</sup>

—Ella Deloria, *Speaking of Indians*

Native American anthropologist Ella Deloria noted that treating others as relatives formed powerful social bonds in communities of respect. From early childhood, a youngster was immersed in a caring community. Every older member of the tribe—adult or youth—was responsible for the well-being of younger children. Luther Standing Bear observed that each child belonged both to a particular family and to the band.<sup>106</sup> Wherever children strayed, they were at home, surrounded by a circle of love.

Kinship in Indigenous societies was broader than today's tiny nuclear family. In 1938, Erik Erikson studied Sioux child-rearing on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota.<sup>107</sup> He was surprised that young children did not identify one singular mother, since every child had many mothers. Indigenous peoples world-wide have used extended family system to ensure that no child was neglected or abused.

Martin Brokenleg observes that many contemporary problems result when one or two biological parents struggle to meet the needs of children without the support of an extended family.<sup>108</sup> For most of human history, the tribe, not the nuclear family, protected children and insured survival of the culture. Parents may falter but the tribe was always there to nourish the new generation. Today, schools and communities are challenged to become the new tribes to support families and children.

A rich array of research shows that humans possess a fundamental need to belong.<sup>109</sup> This need is fulfilled by frequent positive interactions with at least a few persons who share mutual concern. The desire to form attachments is encoded in the human DNA. Attachment is the primary brain program for ensuring safety.<sup>110</sup> Attachment behavior has been studied across the life span from infancy through the expanding relationships of childhood, adolescence, and adulthood.<sup>111</sup>

Children crave close bonds with caring adults and peers. Their drive for attachment is seen in frequent *bids* to connect. In the book *The Science of Trust*, John Gottman describes *bids* as the basic unit of emotional communication.<sup>112</sup> Bids can be verbal or nonverbal and can be expressed with emotions, questions, or physical actions. Bids can be fun or serious, and sometimes involve misbehavior. What once was called *attention-seeking behavior* that was supposed to be ignored is now understood as an attempt to form an attachment. Gottman describes three possible reactions to bids. For example, if a youth makes a verbal bid, *I had a bad day at school*, these are the options:

**Move toward** by welcoming the bid (“I’m sorry, what happened?”)

**Move away** by ignoring the bid (silence and indifference)

**Move against** by reacting in a negative way (“I suppose you messed up again!”)

For better or worse, bids shape relationships in marriage, parenting, teaching, the workplace, and peer relations. Gottman was able to predict the likelihood of divorce among newlyweds with 90 percent accuracy by identifying the nature of their bids.

Mentors face a challenge in connecting with youth who distrust others and push them away. Concerned helpers continue reaching out to make respectful connections, even if the person engages in off-putting behavior. Mark Freado and J. C. Chambers described strategies of *Kid Whispering* to respond to needs of the *inside kid* instead of reacting to problems presented by the *outside kid*.<sup>113</sup>

Research by Carol Gilligan and colleagues identified gender differences in attachment.<sup>114</sup> Girls are generally more connected than boys who may learn to fear intimacy. Small boys begin with the ability to be emotionally perceptive and responsive in their relationships. But these supposedly “feminine” qualities are stripped away by the macho individualism in Western society. Thus, boys try to prove their masculinity by showing they are not girls.<sup>115</sup> The classic study of delinquency by Albert Cohen showed that boys without nurturing male role models come to view sensitive, kind behavior as feminine.<sup>116</sup> In group settings, they engage in rule breaking and rough talk to prove their male identity. An important goal in work with these youth is to help them put away the front of badness and tap their inborn potential to build close relational bonds.<sup>117</sup>

Along with physical survival, the most essential human need is to connect with others. Urie Bronfenbrenner stated that, to develop properly, every child needs at least one adult who is irrationally crazy about him or her.<sup>118</sup> When relationships are damaged, floods of painful emotions signal the need to restore social bonds. Without a sense of belonging, many crave attention, engage in risky sexual behaviors, or join a gang to find connections. Some individuals who do not belong withdraw and isolate. They may be highly distrustful—feeling others are actively trying to be hurtful or make life difficult. But, when belonging is experienced with family and friends, life is fulfilling and fun. One can trust others, be trusted in return, and feel pride and acceptance.

## Mastery

*We only think when we have a problem.*<sup>119</sup>

—John Dewey

The goal in socializing children in any society is to develop competence. In Native cultures, one of the first lessons a child learns is to carefully observe and listen to adults and then practice that behavior. Cultural psychologist Barbara Rogoff notes that “Learning by Observing and Pitching In” (called LOPI) is still the dominant educational strategy in traditional cultures.<sup>120</sup> Children model more experienced adults or peers and use their new skills to contribute to the community. Ella Deloria gives this example:

A grandmother tending a baby wrapped in a blanket on the ground calls her five-year-old son. “I need to go, so watch this baby. He is so small, so see that nobody steps on him, he is so tiny, and shoo the flies away. Until I return, you are his new father.” Sometime later the boy is standing guard. His friends are playing nearby but he does not leave his post because a father does not desert his son.<sup>121</sup>

Small children are taught to listen carefully and observe those with more experience. And adults carefully demonstrate the tasks children are expected to learn. Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky showed that learning with more experienced models was much more efficient than working individually.<sup>122</sup> Barbara Rogoff describes *Learning by Observing and Pitching In* (LOPI) as the way the brain is designed to acquire knowledge and skill.<sup>123</sup> LOPI as used in Indigenous cultures is much better attuned to how the brain learns than depersonalized instruction *assembly line schools*.

A central motivation behind much human behavior is the quest of become competent.<sup>124</sup> Children can acquire a mass of knowledge, including an entire language code, without formal instruction. The human brain creates order out of chaos and develops strategies for social and personal survival. Problem solving has been studied for over a century since John Dewey first suggested that all thinking begins with some *felt difficulty*.<sup>125</sup> The brain operates best with tasks that are challenging but not boring or overwhelming—this has been called *Just Manageable Difficulty*.<sup>126</sup> By mastering new skills, children are better equipped to face future challenges.

The leading expert on intelligence is Robert Sternberg who has studied this topic in cultures world-wide.<sup>127</sup> Intelligence is broader than the test-score driven standard of the Western world. Sternberg describes this triad of types of intelligence:

**Analytic intelligence** is the ability to solve problems like those on IQ tests.

**Practical Intelligence** is the ability to skillfully solve problems of everyday life.

**Creative Intelligence** is the ability to find fresh answers to new situations.

Practical intelligence is the ability to creatively solve problems and meet one's goals. These young people develop their strengths and overcoming weaknesses. They defy negative expectations, even from low scores on tests. They are persistent in pursuing their goals, realizing that surmounting obstacles is part of the challenge. Successfully intelligent youth seek out positive role models. They also observe people who fail and make sure they do things differently.

While Western culture sorts people by test scores, other societies place high emphasis upon skills fostering interpersonal harmony. In Zambia, intelligent children are those who are socially responsible, cooperative, and respectful. In Zimbabwe, the word for intelligence is *ngware* which means skill in social relationships. In Kenya, intelligent children are those who are responsible, verbally quick, and successful in interpersonal relationships. Likewise, Indigenous, Latino, and Asian cultures highly prize social competence and contribution.

Carol Dweck identifies two contrasting views of intelligence: *a fixed mindset* and *a growth mindset*.<sup>128</sup> Those with a fixed mindset believe you are born either smart or not, and they often give up in the face of failure. Those with a growth mindset believe you can become smart by hard work; they stick with challenging tasks and use failure as a learning opportunity. Youth who believe that they can overcome failures by working hard actually grow new brain pathways for intelligence. Such research is redefining intelligence as “a person’s ability to respond successfully to challenges and to learn from such experience.”<sup>129</sup> This sounds like resilience.

In his book *Schools that Matter*, Steve Van Bockern applies the Circle of Courage values to education.<sup>130</sup> Instead of pursuing test scores, the focus is on meeting needs of students and staff as well. These schools balance teaching the mind with reaching the heart. Schools should be environments where needs are met, and the end goal is learning and well-being.



## Independence

*Responsibility is the first step in responsibility.*<sup>131</sup>

—W. E. B. DuBois

The evolution of modern culture has placed young people in a powerless situation without meaningful roles in society. Persons lacking a sense of power see themselves as pawns in a world where others control their destiny. Traditional Native culture placed a high value on individual freedom. Survival outside the camp circle depended on making independent judgments, so training in self-management began in early childhood. Even young children were given decisions to make, and their efforts at independence were celebrated. Abraham Maslow was fascinated to observe how Blackfoot First Nations people in Canada taught personal autonomy and responsibility:

I can remember a toddler trying to open a door to a cabin. He could not make it. This was a big, heavy door, and he was shoving and shoving. Well Americans would get up and open the door for him. The Blackfoot Indians sat for half an hour while that baby struggled with that door, until he was able to open it himself. He had to grunt and sweat, and then everyone praised him because he was able to do it himself.<sup>132</sup>

Native elders believed that if children were to develop responsibility, they must be approached with maturity and dignity. In the nineteenth century, Elijah Haines observed that Natives treat children with great respect and avoid any harsh punishment.<sup>133</sup> The main strategy of discipline was to engage the child in a discussion which began as soon as the youngster could communicate. Adults talked gently but never harshly. This was not permissiveness since children were given clear expectations. In simple terms, adults expected responsibility, not fearful obedience.

Independence is not self-sufficiency but a journey towards responsibility. It begins with self-control and expands to self-confidence as persons learn to use their power in a responsible way. Developing autonomy fosters resilience and self-efficacy. Even if life is difficult, youth have confidence they can make things better. They stand up to negative influence and are not easily misled. They emotionally distance themselves from harmful friends or family members, setting their own pathway.<sup>134</sup>

Close relationships with caregivers builds independence. Securely attached children have a safe base from which to explore the world.<sup>135</sup> Youngsters who learn to trust others also are better able to trust themselves. Still, some youth without the benefit of close adult bonds become very self-reliant because they learn to depend on themselves.

Before about eight years of age, most children think adults run the world. Then they discover that grownups are not all-powerful.<sup>136</sup> The biggest developmental change as children move into adolescence is a heightened desire for autonomy. This can create conflicts with adults who still expect young people to be submissive.

Many behaviors that irritate adults are landmarks on the road to independence. Children test their strength with loudness and physical horseplay. Teens show bravado and risk-taking, testing the limits of adult control. Locked in power struggles, young people seek autonomy while adults seek control. Rule-breaking can be a practice run in meeting the need for independence.

## Generosity

*If I am not for myself, who will be?  
But if I am only for myself, what good am I?*<sup>137</sup>  
—Hillel the Elder, circa 30 BCE

Children in Native cultures often sat in a circle while an older person talked to them about their future and what they should do to live good lives. A recurrent message was that the highest virtue was to be generous and unselfish. A boy would look forward to the day when he could participate in a hunt and bring home his first game and give it to those in need.<sup>138</sup> Training in generosity began in childhood. When a person was in need of food, a mother would involve her children so they could experience the satisfaction of giving.<sup>139</sup> As Rogoff has shown, to this day, children in Indigenous cultures are motivated to help at home and school without being asked, while European heritage children are more motivated by individualism and preoccupied with their own needs.<sup>140</sup>

Humans thrive when part of a community of mutual social support. By contributing to others, they discover that they have value. But for decades, psychology operated as if all human behavior was selfishly motivated.<sup>141</sup> But research on altruism shows that caring is central to human nature.<sup>142</sup> Science now shows what the great religious traditions long have taught: concern for others is the foundation of character and morality.<sup>143</sup>

Kurt Hahn, founder of Outward Bound, noted that many modern youth suffer from the misery of unimportance and long to be used in some demanding cause.<sup>144</sup> An *I'll-get-mine* culture leaves students self-absorbed and devoid of purpose. Generosity is an antidote for this narcissism. Giving to others fosters moral development and gives a sense of purpose. Those who were societal liabilities become valuable assets. Through helping others, youth discover they have the power to influence their world in a positive manner. Those from troubled backgrounds are often the most responsive to others in need.

Children ask the same questions as adults as they seek to find meaning in life.<sup>145</sup> Youth in pain and turmoil are among those most likely to pose deeply spiritual questions like "Why was I even born?" and "What is the reason to go on living?" Perhaps the best way young people find meaning in life is to commit to a cause beyond self.<sup>146</sup> Teens in a detention center were asked if they had any hopes or dreams for their future. One boy responded, "No. That's why we're here." As young people gain an understanding of their worth and value, they discover a sense of calling for their life.

Native psychologist Joseph Gone of Harvard University calls for healing trauma and building resilience by tapping traditional cultural wisdom.<sup>147</sup> Martin Brokenleg observes that centuries of colonial rule sought to wipe out Indigenous cultures of respect. But Native peoples have survived by reclaiming their enduring traditional wisdom: Belonging, Mastery, Independence, and Generosity are essential for healthy growth and healing trauma. These are called the Circle of Courage because resilience is the courage to surmount life challenge. This is a birthright for Indigenous children and a bequest for all the children of the world.<sup>148</sup>

### **The Resilience Revolution**

Martin Brokenleg describes the Circle of Courage as an Indigenous model of resilience since resilience involves the courage to surmount difficult challenges. The core principles of the Circle of Courage are supported by a massive literature on positive youth development.<sup>149</sup> In one of her final publications in a 50-year career, resilience researcher, Emmy Werner described how children thrive when Circle of Courage needs are met.<sup>150</sup>

The Circle of Courage applies to a wide range of settings and cultures. It is a prototype for Indigenous populations. U.S. Bureau of Indian Education studies found that residential schools which embodied Circle of Courage values had improved retention rates and academic gains as well as fewer behavior incidents and less need for external mental health services.<sup>151</sup>

Circle of Courage RAP training was implemented county-wide in heavily populated urban district near Washington, DC. Research showed a reduction in crisis behavior and increase in graduation with students presenting emotional and behavioral challenges.<sup>152</sup> Parents also received training in RAP methods, learning to shift from punitive to restorative discipline.<sup>153</sup>

Pennsylvania State University resilience researchers conducted a six-month follow up study of teachers in that state who had taken a RAP course with a comparison group who had not.<sup>154</sup> Those with RAP training had more cooperative student relationships, used fewer restrictive interventions, and were less likely to refer students for disciplinary action.

The Circle of Courage principles are the foundation of the Positive Peer Culture model which is an evidence-based approach for building prosocial values and behavior in youth at risk.<sup>155</sup> Outcomes include climates of respect in schools and youth work settings and long-term changes in values, behavior, and adjustment in the community.

## Chapter Five

# Connecting for Support

*In contemporary cultures, large numbers of youth are disconnected from adults.*<sup>156</sup>

—Martin Brokenleg

### Disconnected Kids

A society advanced in one area is not necessarily well-informed in other realms. For example, some Aboriginal cultures in Australia have hundreds of kinship terms, showing how sophisticated these people were in interpersonal wisdom. Yet they are considered a stone age culture. Brokenleg explains:

Western society is an advanced technological culture, but—I believe—lags in spiritual development. For example, the language of my Lakota (Sioux) culture has many more words for spiritual, emotional, and intellectual states than does English. Negotiating Lakota society requires an advanced social intelligence.<sup>157</sup>

Children are not born responsible but must learn from those with greater maturity and wisdom. All young people need at least one person who is irrationally crazy about them, says Urie Bronfenbrenner.<sup>158</sup> Yet many children have few positive bonds with caring adults. Reaching kids in pain takes special skill. Those who have been hurt before import anger from earlier relationships and target even well-meaning persons who try to help them.

Educational pioneers saw positive relationships as the foundation of teaching. In a nineteenth century book written for educators, Stanley Hall wrote, “If you succeed in gaining their love, your influence will be greater in some respects than that of parents themselves. It will be in your power to direct them into almost any path you choose.”<sup>159</sup> In 1935, August Aichhorn of Austria declared that love was the secret to successful work with *wayward youth*.<sup>160</sup> All had received too little genuine love, be it a lack of kindness or excess of indulgence. In either case, the reaction was the same, hatred and negative behavior.

Aichhorn would be shocked at contemporary discussions about keeping *professional distance* from clients. Resilience researcher John Seita, a former youth at risk, contends that the preoccupation with maintaining *boundaries* is often little more than a rationalization for detachment from young persons.<sup>161</sup> Examples of the keep-your-distance mentality abound:

- Treat them all the same. Don't play favorites.
- Don't let children become dependent on you.
- Those who get emotionally involved burn out.
- Relationships risk accusations of sexual abuse.
- Discipline requires keeping your social distance.

Seita says that relationships change people, not programs. His own case file was filled with diagnoses by professionals who were unable to build trust with him. Once he was able to establish a trusting bond with an adult, he was able to turn his life around.

One symptom of the depersonalization of Western society is that human touch is taboo says Ashley Montague.<sup>162</sup> It is remarkable that we ignore the input from the largest sense organ of the body, the human skin. We have created a culture of untouchables, strangers to one another who ward off all forms of unnecessary closeness. While some children in pain may not respond well to physical touch, the message from relationship science is clear. All young people need to be touched by some acts of kindness that convey they are valued by others.

Everyday life events provide powerful teaching moments for developing resilience.<sup>163</sup> But those who spend the most time with children seldom have skills for connecting with youth in conflict and help them cope with problems. Such skills needed by parents, foster parents, educators, child and youth care workers, social workers, psychologists, probation officers, community and faith-based mentors, police, and, of course, peer helpers. In Western Europe and Canada, a front-line child and youth professional is often a highly trained *educateur*, skilled in connecting with reluctant youth. In North America and elsewhere there are movements for certification in child and youth care.<sup>164</sup> And, a growing knowledge base identifies effective strategies for connecting with adult-wary kids.<sup>165</sup>

## Making Connections

While there is plenty of rhetoric about the importance of relationships, this can be a vague concept. In common usage, relationships refer to intimate bonds with relatives, friends, and sexual partners, but not to therapeutic alliances. A general perception is that building relationships is a slow, intense process. Since busy professionals such as teachers serve large numbers of students, they would seem to have little time for relationship building with individuals. Simply, it is seldom possible to invest huge amounts of time in individual children as one might with one's offspring.

Even without long-term relationships, brief encounters can provide powerful teaching moments for developing meaningful connections. *Connections are positive emotional bonds.* But if children have learned that adults are dangerous, connecting is not easy. Fortunately, we now know a great deal about how to reach these attachment-wary kids.

Connections depend on the emotional brain more than the logical brain. Most of the meaning in social interaction come from nonverbal emotional cues like facial expressions, tone of voice, and gestures.<sup>166</sup> Emotional messages are instant and powerful; even first impressions can lead to a quick connection or a hasty retreat. Words do not have very much impact on connection except when used to send positive emotional messages like, “Wow, you are great!” or negative emotional messages like “You are such a jerk!”

Connections involve rhythm and harmony.<sup>167</sup> Recall an awkward encounter where you were out of sync with another person. One can be smart with words but tone deaf to emotional cues. We recall young people in residential programs who initially could not connect with professional counselors but quickly warmed up to cooks or maintenance workers. Three essentials in building connections are trust, respect, and understanding.

**Trust.** We seek out people with whom we feel comfortable and avoid those who make us feel uncomfortable. When trust is built, we let down our guard and become vulnerable, believing that this individual intends no harm. When persons pose physical or emotional threat, conditions for genuine trust cannot exist. While children may submit in obedience to an oppressor, this reaction is helplessness rather than trust.<sup>168</sup> Developmental psychologists see trusting bonds as the foundation for positive development.<sup>169</sup>

**Respect.** We gravitate to those who show positive regard and make us feel valued and pull away from those who do not seem to like us. Signs of interest, friendliness, and optimism invite youth to approach and engage. A hostile glance or tone of voice warns us to keep our distance. Youth respond best to persons who recognize their strengths and worth and avoid like a plague those show disrespect.

**Understanding.** We connect with persons who respond with empathy to our needs. Empathy involves tuning in to another’s emotions. Humans and higher animals have innate ability to *feel* the emotions of others, for example, by reacting with distress to the cry of another mammal. For empathy to be more than distress, we must use our higher brain to take the perspective of others and respond to their needs. When we cannot understand or predict the behavior of another, we become uncomfortable or fearful. Those who connect can understand each other, often without the exchange of words.

Children who have learned to distrust others are wary of attempts to build connections. Distrust can be amplified by differences of race, gender, and social status. The *historic distrust* of racism can taint initial attempts to connect across the color line. The principal of a youth prison in Australia gave this example of one of her teachers:

Most of our residents are aboriginal youth, but our teachers are nearly all white. A new teacher came to me concerned when a student had put his hand on her shoulder when he thanked her for helping him with a difficult task. She said he seemed very respectful and this brief touching did not appear to be sexual. However, she wondered what she should do if he did this again. “Whatever you do, don’t recoil from him,” I advised. “In his culture, this is a sign he wants to connect with you. If you are afraid of these students, you will never reach them.”

Building trust is not some fuzzy feel-good notion but is based on hard science. Over millions of years, humans have developed elaborate systems for deciding whether to approach or avoid others. Both fearing and craving social contact, we search for clues about all who enter our world. When meeting a stranger, we try to predict whether the person represents danger or opportunity. The brain’s amygdala is a security screener, reacting to cues from eyes, face, tone of voice, and physical demeanor. In an instant, a tentative decision is made as to whether this is friend or foe. Our higher reasoning brain also gets into the act by calculating risks and benefits of reaching out. In the end, we make a simple decision—to connect or disengage:

**Connect.** If a person shows friendly intentions and is interesting to us, we are curious and motivated to approach. We exchange eye contact, smiles, respectful greetings, handshakes, conversation, humor, and other friendly bids for connection.<sup>170</sup> If the individual responds in kind, we connect.

**Disengage.** If a bid for connection is greeted with indifference or hostility, the emotional brain registers a potential threat, and we avoid these persons. With negative facial expressions, voice tone, or awkward conversation, we conclude, “I just can’t connect with that person.”

By school age, most children are adept at connections with peers and adults. A particularly powerful connection is provided a mentor. The term mentor comes from Greek mythology and refers to a trusted teacher or counselor. Mentors can include both adults as well as capable peers who provide support and guidance.<sup>171</sup> Rather than influence by coercion, mentors employ the power of trust:

- 1) Positive thinking—optimism rather than pessimism;
- 2) Positive feelings—respect rather than rancor;
- 3) Positive behavior—cooperation instead of hostility

Distrusting youth start with a 0 of 3 score for negative thinking, feelings, and behavior.

Without removing obstructions to trust, we are locked in strained or superficial contact without ever making a real connection. Mountains of files document failed interventions with our most challenging youth who seem to be hopelessly incorrigible. Many are *therapy veterans* with successful records at outwitting those who try to change their behavior.<sup>172</sup>

Some youth respond quickly to bids for connection. Others take longer to feel secure enough to overcome distrust. Building connections does not usually call for a huge investment of time, but, rather, short, distributed positive interactions. These give the youth time to *case* the adult and gain the courage to connect. With cautious persons, attempts to *rush to intimacy* will be strongly resisted. By nature, humans are suspicious of strangers who attempt *forced teaming* without normal rituals of getting acquainted.<sup>173</sup> Animals are no different. If you try to pet a strange dog, you might get bitten.

Martin Brokenleg and Larry Brendtro met sixteen-year-old Russell when his grandmother brought him in tow to attend a workshop on alternative schools for youth at risk. She introduced him to us and remarked, "Please talk to him; this boy has caused me more trouble than all my sons put together. He got kicked out of school and was sent to an alternative school, but he hates it. He won't talk to his counselor from the court either."

Russell initially appeared embarrassed and uncomfortable as the only youth in attendance. In a series of short, informal interactions, we used humor to engage him, making sure not to become pushy and drive him away. During the workshop, he sat with his grandmother in the front row and became interested in a discussion of how adults have difficulty connecting with youth. When Russell volunteered examples from his own experiences, he was well-received by the professionals in attendance. Here are some comments he shared:

*People who try to talk to me don't set up a comfort zone. They just dive in and probe for information about my problems. They are perfect strangers so why should I give them my life history? I just tell them what they need to know. Adults shouldn't be afraid to be friendly and tell a little about themselves and why they want to help kids. Some adults set themselves above kids. They lay down the law: "You do what I say when I say it!" or "Don't get up without my permission." They would get better results if they would say, "I'd appreciate if you would help me figure out what you want to happen with your life." Kids listen to adults who listen to them.*

Russell connected with participants at the workshop. Meeting respectful adults was a new experience, and he relished this positive attention.



## Connecting in Crisis

People are more susceptible to change in times of crisis. The brain has two inbuilt programs for thinking about solutions to serious problems. The first is to withdraw into solitary contemplation. The second is to reach out to a trusted person for support and guidance. Kids wrestling with conflict are already motivated to resolve this problem. Of course, they may be flooded with negative emotions and may have earned not to trust others but rely on themselves. Effective mentors make themselves a safe island in the storm. Nick Long suggests that when dealing with an upset person, we must be a thermostat to turn down the heat instead of a thermometer that boils over with rising emotions.<sup>174</sup> The goal is to turn stress cycles into resilience cycles.

Children's brains are primed to seek attachment figures in times of trouble. The very presence of trusted adults or peers serves to reduce anxiety or stress. Problems are a burden which is why we are anxious to have somebody help us carry them. Those who have experienced trauma or unresolved conflict are hungry to find a supportive listener. They want to tell their story and are likely to share if the listener can establish trust and communicate in a respectful manner.

Since problems pose powerful teaching opportunities, it is ironic that traditional discipline cuts off positive communication at the very time youth could need such support. Some believe that giving attention to youth who are misbehaving is rewarding problem behavior. The reality is usually quite different. Providing support in moments of crisis strengthens connections and coping skills.

The best way of handling angry and upset persons is to gain their voluntary compliance rather than asserting power. This has become a central goal in community policing. A prominent example is *verbal judo* developed by George Thompson, a communications professor who became a cop.<sup>175</sup> The Japanese word *judo* is a combination of *ju*, which means gentle, and *do* which means way; so judo means the gentle way. Judo is different from karate, which is warlike.

When Thompson first became a police officer, he got into frequent verbal confrontations with citizens because he expected to be treated with respect and would take no crap from anybody. In time, he learned the power of deflecting disrespect with dignity and style. If a citizen directs hostile communication at an officer, the goal is to respond with respectful communication rather than react with force. This does not mean telling upset persons to *calm down*, since this implies that they have no right to be upset.

In a conflict situation, the best response is to accept the angry feelings of the other person but try to shape a positive outcome. Thus, a driver who is pulled over may angrily accuse an officer of *profiling*. A verbal judo response might be, "I hear what you're saying—may I please see your license so you can get on your way?" By showing empathy, one can stay calm amidst

conflict and deflect verbal abuse. Thompson concludes that if you cannot empathize with people, they won't listen to you, no matter how sincere you may be.

Adults cannot convey respect to young people by focusing on their flaws. But this deficit mindset is entrenched. Sigmund Freud is quoted as having said, "I have found little that is good about human beings. In my experience most of them are trash."<sup>176</sup> Such pessimism becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Persons respond best to those they think like and believe in them. They react poorly if they believe they are disliked and blamed for their problems. In negative encounters, various defenses are used to fend off such attacks:

**Counterattack** fuels hostility in both parties.

**Submission** gives a payoff for angry coercion.

**Withdrawal** allows angry feelings to fester.

**Disarming** the person is the most effective tactic.<sup>177</sup>

Disarming a person defuses conflict. We disarm the attacker by getting out of the line of fire. Initially we may simply ignore some interactions. It may be helpful to join with the other, embracing the angry feelings ("I can see you are really upset"). Tense encounters and crisis situations become opportunities to develop more positive connections.

## From Conflict to Cooperation

Throughout the history of humanity, most problem-solving was a group activity. Persons formed an alliance to work cooperatively towards mutually agreed goals. But mutual problem-solving cannot occur if mentors try to impose their ideas and solutions. Adolescents in particular resent directive authoritarian styles which can trigger strong resistance to change.

The opposite of alliances are adversarial encounters. From an early age, children get into such contests with those in authority. Some become skillful psychologists in dealing with adults. Children read subtle emotions and gauge a response. Ellen Key explained:

The child, even at four or five years of age, is making experiments with adults, seeing through them, with marvelous shrewdness making his own valuations and reacting sensitively to each impression. The slightest mistrust, the smallest unkindness, the least act of injustice or contemptuous ridicule, leave wounds that last for life in the finely strung soul of the child. While on the other side, unexpected friendliness, kind advances, just indignation, make quite as deep an impression.<sup>178</sup>

Charles Darwin was first to show that the capacity to read emotions is inborn. He had missionaries from around the world take along photographs of persons displaying various

emotions. In every tribe or culture, the same emotions were identified. Emotions are the universal human language.

We convey emotions in facial expressions and eye contact which signal our inner state to others. It is significant that when drawing a person, small children produce a face but few body details. They already know the most vital information for social survival is displayed by happy or distressed human faces. A second major channel for emotional information is tone of voice. Reading emotion in voice and facial expressions is the job of the amygdala and the polyvagal system of the brain.<sup>179</sup>

Swiss educator Paul Diel observed that verbal or nonverbal rancor renders any correction ineffective.<sup>180</sup> Rancor is an emotionally charged communication conveying bitterness and malice. It is the prime symptom of discord in any disrupted relationship. The first step in work with families or teachers is to secure an agreement from the adult that any sign of rancor and reproach would immediately cease.

Emotional negativity stirs conflict and ruins relationships.<sup>181</sup> Instead of speaking vaguely of the need to *build positive relationships*, we now can identify the specific behaviors that create or destroy positive connections. Both mentors and youth must show respect and stop rancor in interactions. This includes the words one uses, the tone of the voice, and the nonverbal demeanor. Young people react to the *total package* to decide if this is a person with whom they are willing to connect.

It is difficult to continue a positive investment in those who keep resisting our bids for connection. Blanchard suggests resistant individuals are trying to teach us a better way to engage with them.<sup>182</sup> Here is a quick listing of the perceptions of youth who resist engaging with a mentor, followed by actions that serve to foster connections:

1. *I do not feel safe.* Use small interactions to build trust.
2. *You are getting close too fast.* Slow down and respect boundaries.
3. *You think I am stupid.* Engage in a talent hunt to find strengths.
4. *Nobody understands.* Listen without preaching.
5. *I feel blamed and ashamed.* Never embarrass or insult.
6. *I feel like giving up.* The youth searches your face to find hope.
7. *I distrust your motives.* Be transparent and direct about your intent.
8. *These talks are boring.* Follow their interests and goals.
9. *I don't feel accepted.* Be friendly, show you enjoy the youth.
10. *I am treated like an inferior.* Respect youth and share power.

If a youth's behavior says, "I cannot connect with you," we do not take this personally. Instead, we figure out how to be more helpful, responsive, and respectful. Even when discussing problems, we have opportunities to validate the positive qualities of young persons.

For example, instead of asking, “Why did you do something like that?” we simply frame the question, “How did a kid like you get into trouble like that?” This implies that the youth is more than his or her behavior.

In a fascinating study, young people residing in Boys Town group homes evaluated video clips of actual interactions between staff and youth.<sup>183</sup> They were asked to rate the behaviors of adults that they most liked and disliked. The table *Youth Grade Adults* summarizes their ratings.

<b>Youth Grade Adults</b>	
<b>Disliked Behaviors</b>	<b>Desired Behaviors</b>
Accusing and blaming	Calm pleasant voice
Shouting	Offering to help
No chance to speak	Joking and humor
Mean insulting remarks	Positive feedback
Unwanted physical touch	Fairness
Bossy and demanding	Explaining things
Unfriendliness	Politeness
Lack of understanding	Gets to the point
Profanity	Smiling

Ratings of boys and girls were similar in most categories with two exceptions. Girls disliked unpleasant physical contact even more than boys. Boys disliked profanity even more than girls. The researchers were surprised to find that although joking was one of the most highly valued adult behaviors, these humorous exchanges were absent from actual observations of staff in these group homes for troubled youth. This list was used to train staff to use desired behaviors leading to positive connections and avoid behaviors evoking negative reactions from youth.

Canadian researchers interviewed youth about their experiences with counselors who were trying to diagnose problems.<sup>184</sup> Youth said that they do not cooperate with workers with whom they have no established connections. They resented being forced to answer questions about their personal lives that they felt were intrusive and demeaning. They resisted those who probed into their past but were more willing to discuss challenges being faced *now and tomorrow*. The researchers concluded that the most important diagnosis is made by the youth: *Can I trust this person to help me overcome my difficulties?*

## Chapter Six

# Clarifying Challenges

*In the worst of times, incredibly, that's when hope appears.*<sup>185</sup>

–Maya Angelou

### Problems as Opportunities

*Response Ability Pathways* provides mentors with skills to respond to needs rather than react to problems. Most children learn to cope with life's challenges through informal support rather than direct instruction. But some have gaps in social problem-solving skills and require more intentional teaching or treatment. Among the most widely researched approaches for teaching strengths is social skills training. Typically, such training shows positive initial results which may not lead to lasting change.<sup>186</sup> Skills taught through an artificial curriculum may not readily transfer to the natural environment.

Young people are most receptive to help offered through natural social support by trusted adults or peers. Real-life learning is more relevant than contrived lessons. The most powerful interventions move problem-solving into the natural *life space* where difficulties occur. RAP focuses on the here-and-now challenges young people face in their daily lives.

A problem is a challenging situation which produces stress or “felt difficulty.”<sup>187</sup> Our ability to deal with stress is a combination of inner strengths and external supports. Walking down a dark street at night, a person trained in self-defense might feel confident while others might be terrified. Whatever their resources, individuals are better able to cope with stress when in the company of trusted persons. An otherwise frightening situation can be fun when we are with a group: witness the bravado of a group of teens. But to those lacking inner strength or external support, stress becomes a crisis.

Early studies of coping behavior show that managing stress is part of the normal process of growth.<sup>188</sup> There is no such thing as a person without problems. In fact, children who have a too bountiful start may not be well-equipped to deal with inevitable life challenges. The difference between those seen as *disturbed* and those as *normal* is not the existence of problems but how these are handled. Persons from challenging backgrounds often develop adaptive coping strengths like reading social cues and emotions.<sup>189</sup>

Every child struggles to find solutions to problems in school and life. Most children have a checkerboard of strengths and limitations that make them both resilient and vulnerable. If they use ineffective coping behavior, they create more problems instead of solutions.<sup>190</sup> These are common coping strategies:

***First things first***—focus on only one problem at a time.

***Dosing challenges***—break hard tasks into smaller steps.

***Working harder***—expend more effort to find a solution.

***Tolerating frustrations***—accept situations that cannot be changed.

***Defensive reactions***—fight or flight behavior and distorted thinking.

Those who learn to cope effectively develop strengths to meet future challenges. Resilient children learn to trust in their abilities and in others. They have a healthy pride and can tackle the challenges of life. Fourteen-year-old Karl explained: “As you encounter one stressful experience, it strengthens you, like a vaccine, for future crisis...you have to bounce back or you couldn’t go on.”<sup>191</sup>

Psychologists have many theories about problem-solving, some complex and others simple. In the mid-twentieth century, Mowrer<sup>192</sup> and Piaget<sup>193</sup> each proposed similar three-stage models for problem-solving. Any successful problem-solving must accomplish these tasks, which Piaget called *acts of intelligence*: 1) identify a problem, 2) search for a solution, and 3) take purposeful action.

The human brain specializes in problem-solving—after solving one problem, it seeks out another. If we have are unable to solve a problem, the brain keeps scanning for solutions, sometimes even when asleep and dreaming. The motivation to keep working on unsolved problems is called the Zeigarnik effect.<sup>194</sup> Recall a time when could not remember the name of a person you know well. Even after you quit racking your brain, the answer pops into mind. .

The Zeigarnik effect can spark either creativity or distress. When we keep worrying about problems, intrusive, negative thoughts fuel anxiety. And ruminating on a conflict with another person can deepen distrust.<sup>195</sup> On the other hand, pondering problems to explore possible solutions can produce positive emotions.

The good news about the Zeigarnik effect is that if someone has not solved some problem, there is an inborn drive to do so. This provides natural motivation for change.<sup>196</sup> Persons with unresolved conflicts are more receptive to help and to trying new alternatives than when life is in a steady state. A mentor can help provide a fresh perspective if the youth trusts enough to talk about the problem. Conversations in time of conflict or crisis are important because emotionally charged events are archived in memory.

## Powerful Life Events

One of the first to recognize the power of talking to kids in conflict was Fritz Redl who came from Austria to the United States prior to World War II.<sup>197</sup> He found office-based therapy had little effect with explosive youngsters.<sup>198</sup> While other therapists probed a child's early history, Redl focused on *here-and-now* problems in a child's immediate world. Redl also rejected the notion of *catharsis*, that children would get better by acting out their angry feelings. Instead, they needed adults who set *secure limits* until they could develop *controls from within*.<sup>199</sup>

Redl saw problems as learning opportunities and replaced punishment with serious talks called *life space interviews*. A temper tantrum, a school problem, conflict with peers, illness of a parent—such critical events became the basis for teaching. Redl found that most troubled kids did not think clearly about their actions but reacted impulsively. If asked, “Why were you kicked out of class?” a youngster might say “because the teacher is a jerk.” By helping the child examine what triggered this problem and recognize the consequences of behavior, children could learn better ways to cope with challenges.

Every person has stories to tell if a trusted listener can be found. Those who live or work most closely with young people are in the best position to engage them in these discussions. Redl's proposal was simple: ask an individual to recount what happened in some significant event. For example, a teacher sends a student to the school office for some misbehavior. By exploring what happened in this problem event, we get a snapshot of how this young person thinks, feels, and acts.<sup>200</sup>

The advantage of exploring events is that almost anybody can understand them. Even young children and those with cognitive disabilities can communicate by relating stories of events. The young person is the best expert on what has been happening in his or her world: “A life event is best understood how it was experienced and interpreted rather than viewing behavior through the distorted ‘optics’ of a particular discipline.”<sup>201</sup> In recounting events, a person clarifies the timeline of action, the goal of behavior, the related thoughts and feelings, and the consequences.

Humans are naturally motivated to discuss emotionally charged events if a trusted listener is available. One cannot change past events but can learn from them. Youth should not be forced to disclose painful material they are not ready to reveal—re-opening old wounds can re-traumatize a youth. And, if a youth brings up a problem that a mentors are not prepared to handle, this should be referred to a trained professional. These are reasons to keep the primary focus on *here-and-now* events. We want kids to gain insight, not so much into their distant past, but into such practical questions like: *How does my behavior affect others? How is my behavior helping me meet my goals?*

Since young people value adults who are good listeners, we try to avoid taking charge of the conversation. Those who interrupt or change hanging topics without getting permission disrupts communication. Probing into private matters causes threat and resistance, which is why many kids do not want to talk with counselors. But asking questions to clarify a youth's own account helps keeps conversation flowing.

In the natural flow of conversation, we listen for *window words* which offer an opening for asking clarifying questions. For example, a Native American teen said, "I used to be smart until second grade." A well-meaning but off-target response might be, "Oh you are still smart." Instead, the mentor asked, "What happened in second grade?" The youth responded, "That was when they took me away from my family and put me in foster homes." Window words are verbal bids which invite the listener to learn more. While youth resist probing questions, responding to their ideas builds genuine communication.

## The Inside Kid

Young persons are the leading experts on their own lives. Alfred Adler contended that the best way to understand behavior was to discover the private meaning beneath the action which is based on an individual's view of self, others, and the world.<sup>202</sup> This is called *private logic: I am ... Others are... The world is...* Such *inside information* is often missing. Thick case files may describe and diagnose problems but fail to explain the purpose of the behavior.

Problem events are seldom isolated occurrences but part of a pattern. Humans do not reinvent themselves every day. Instead, they keep making the same mistakes. Persons stuck in these ruts do not learn from punishment. Frustrated adults keep asking the wrong question: *What kind of consequence can change this behavior?* A better question is: *Why does this behavior persist despite negative consequences?*

Even *senseless* behavior often makes sense when we understand a young person's private logic. For example, a youth who liked school kept acting out to try to get expelled. Finally, a teacher discovered that the boy was living with an elderly grandmother who could not afford medication she needed. In the youth's private logic, if he were kicked out of school, he could get a job to support his grandmother

When we listen to youth, we open a window into their private logic. As they describe events, a certain *thinking style* becomes apparent. This is important because the way one thinks determines how one acts. Distorted or biased thinking can lead to self-defeating behavior. John Gibbs identified common thinking errors behind much problem behavior of youth.<sup>203</sup> These can be remembered by the acronym BAMMS:



## **Blaming**

Not taking responsibility but shifting the blame to others

*People always make me mad.*

## **Assuming the worst**

Pessimism and false beliefs that others have hostile intentions

*You can't trust anybody; they will stab you in the back.*

## **Minimizing**

Describing harmful behavior as if does not matter

*So I got stoned, what's the big deal?*

## **Mislabeling**

Giving belittling labels to others

*He's such a loser.*

## **Self-Centered Thinking**

Dwelling on one's own needs and ignoring others

*When I see something I like, I take it.*

Some thinking errors protect fragile self-esteem, so we do not steamroll over their style of thinking. Usually by posing respectful questions, we can help a person clarify their private logic. But entrenched thinking errors may call for more focused intervention. The next chapter provides strategies to help youth take responsibility for their behavior.

Even if one cannot immediately change long-standing patterns of thinking, it is possible to help youth slow down and look at their behavior. By considering views other than their own, they see how their actions cause problems for others. By examining their behavior, they are preparing to take new approaches to meet their goals.

A youth who is overwhelmed by anger, fear, or sadness is not ready to solve problems. Extreme emotion shuts down the brain's centers for rational thinking.<sup>204</sup> Thus, in times of emotional distress, priority one is to create a safe environment and help the youth calm feelings. David Roush describes how youth in a Chicago detention facility are learning to replace impulsive *hot* thinking with *cool* thinking to build emotional control.<sup>205</sup>

With emotionally agitated young persons, the immediate goal is to restore calm. But we need to honor their feelings and not tell them they should not be upset. We will not connect

with youngsters by maintaining a deadpan calm and ignoring their pain. Thus, we respond to feelings by showing genuine concern, by joining with them in their moment of pain. The ultimate antidote to negative emotions is to arouse positive emotions.<sup>206</sup> If their emotion is positive, we join in that as well.

Kids in conflict are locked in pain-based emotions.<sup>207</sup> Providing support de-escalates angry feelings. Leaving the person alone to cool off works with some, but with others only fuels fury and alienation. We build supportive bonds by being there in times of crisis and walking with them through the storm.

## CLEAR Thinking

Traditional behavioral assessment tracks what happens before and after a specific behavior. Psychologists call this sequence ABC, which stands for Antecedent, Behavior, and Consequence. ABC may be useful but only looks at the outside kid. We want to connect with the inside kid, to understand private logic and emotions underlying the behavior.<sup>208</sup>

Only the youth really knows what is going on in his or her private world. We do not probe private logic by asking “How do you feel?” or “What are you thinking?” Instead, we engage a youth in discussing a here-and-now event. Thus we understand how the behavior relates to the young person’s private logic and motivations. Brain research shows humans cope with stress in predictable ways. *Challenge triggers Logic and Emotions causing Actions that lead to Response.* We call this coping cycle **CLEAR**:

**Challenge.** An external or internal event triggers stress. Challenges are tests of one’s abilities or resources to cope with difficulty. These range from minor distractions to major disruptions posing threat or opportunity. Challenges are detected by the brain’s sentry, the amygdala which alerts both the reasoning and emotional brain.

**Logic.** This involves perception, thinking, and language. Individuals develop private logic drawing from personal experiences as well as innate brain-based programs. This world view is used to make sense and plan actions to meet desired goals. Logic and reasoning are managed by the higher problem-solving centers of the brain.

**Emotions.** Emotions motivate a person toward some action. The words emotion and motivation come from the same root word, *move*. Without control from the logical brain, emotions lead to impulsive reactions. The emotional brain also connects to the “reptilian brain” which governs reflexive flight-flight-freeze reactions.

**Actions.** Behavior is directed towards some goal. All behavior serves some purpose, whether it “makes sense” to the individual or outside observers. Behavior may be pro-

social or anti-social and self-defeating. Behavioral actions are influenced by both the emotional and logical brain.

**Response.** Actions have consequences. These can be overt behavior such as the reactions of others, or private thoughts and feelings, such as “I hate her.” Even punished behavior may be reinforced in a person’s private logic. As problems are resolved, the brain is calmed. Unsolved problems trigger conflict and crisis.

We seek CLEAR thinking by exploring this timeline of an event. While we do not force youth to report on this sequence in the exact way it occurred, at the end of the conversation we should have a good idea about important facts at each stage.

What initial event triggered stress or challenge?

What was the person’s private logic?

What were the emotions motivating action?

What action did the person take?

What was the result?

These are broad guidelines, and the more natural the flow of conversation the better. We want the details of exactly what happened. Kids in conflict do not think in logical, sequential ways. As we clarify events and thinking, youth see how others view their behavior and whether their actions are achieving their goals.

One of the more useful strategies for both adults and youth is the Conflict and Resilience Cycle inspired by Nicholas Long.<sup>209</sup> The accompanying figure broadens that model to include both crisis and resilience. All events start with a challenging situation leading to logic and emotions that trigger some action. The resulting response either resolves the problem or escalates into more conflict and crisis. For example:

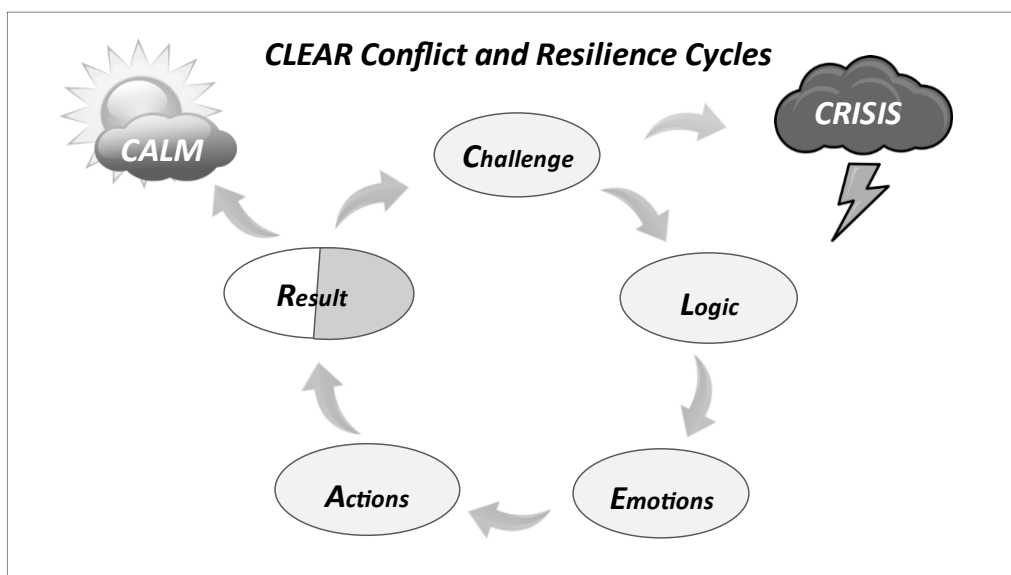
**Challenge:** A teacher corrects a student with sarcasm: “I guess it’s too much to expect you to pay attention since you’re not a real student.”

**Logic:** The student thinks, “She is disrespecting me in front of the class.”

**Emotions:** The student becomes angry which motivates fighting back.

**Actions:** The student retorts, “Well the problem is that you’re not a real teacher.”

**Result:** The teacher either disengages from conflict or escalates it into a crisis.



Following this CLEAR problem-solving format, two or more persons put their minds together to try to develop more effective ways of coping with challenge. Of course, if the issue is too serious, formal counseling can follow. But research shows that even very troubled persons can gain valuable insight by talking with trusted adults or peers in their natural setting.<sup>210</sup> Solving here-and-now problems increases the likelihood that learning will generalize to later behavior. Young people are trying to cope in ways that make sense to them but sometimes cause more pain to self and others. They need to learn to deal with challenges in mature, responsible ways. Such is the goal of RAP.

### RAP in Action

To demonstrate RAP, we share this story by the senior author who was speaking to a conference of youth professional where he met a teen who had grown up in the care system..

Before my luncheon address, a short speech was given by a youth in care named Jonathan. His topic was *The Person Behind the File Number*. His sobering theme was that—in his experience—most professionals do not really listen to kids but just treat them as cases to be managed. Though he clearly did not trust adults much, he made his points with genuineness and his talk was well received.

During my address on the topic of resilience, I noticed that Jonathan was intensely interested in my examples of young persons who surmounted great difficulties. Though Jonathan was fifty feet back in the audience, I occasionally made brief eye contact with him without making this obvious to others in attendance. For example, speaking of “hidden

greatness in every young person,” Jonathan and I locked eyes for a second or two. Soon Jonathan was hanging on every word.

After the speech, Jonathan greeted me near the door and held up a typed copy of his speech. “I heard you edit a journal and maybe you would like to put my talk in that magazine.” I accepted his offer, and he was surprised to learn that youth authors receive \$75 for their writing. “Would that be U.S. or Canadian funds?” he asked with an entrepreneurial sparkle in his voice. As he signed a copyright release form, it was clear we had connected.

Then Jonathan surprised me by making a bid for further communication: “I was supposed to keep my speech short, but there are other important things in my life I could write about. I don’t have anything to do this afternoon if you have time to talk.” Soon we were sitting in the corner of the hotel lobby. Without prodding, Jonathan began to recount his life story as I wrote this out on a legal pad. Jonathan was removed from his parents as a young boy and had spent several years in care facilities. Despite adversity, Jonathan displayed remarkable resilience. With humor and insight, he shared what it was like to grow up as “property of the government” and to have no voice concerning his destiny.

My usual inclination was to talk about the present and future, but Jonathan seemed to want to talk about unhealed wounds. As he became more comfortable, his humor gave way to sadness. Then he opened a window into his private world by saying, “I never told anybody this before, but I sometimes wish I could disappear and go somewhere where I could start my life over. *Since I was four, I haven’t had any good memories.*” These were window words, and Jonathan was inviting me to share his pain. “What happened back then to make you so unhappy?” I asked.

Jonathan plunged into his pain of all pains. He told of being with his Dad at age four and watching him shoot himself. “I blamed myself for my Dad’s death, but I didn’t say anything about this. I always thought that maybe I had done something to make him kill himself. I can’t figure out if I was not a good kid and caused him trouble. I would have nightmares, but I didn’t want to tell anybody. Even though it’s a bad memory, it’s my only memory of my Dad, so if I shared it with anyone, it would not be my own.”

I told him how much courage he had to talk about things that had bothered him all these years. I said it was normal for any little kid to blame himself when something goes terribly wrong and they lose someone they love. I assured him that now that he is more mature, he will begin to realize that he could not possibly have had anything to do with his Dad’s death. He seemed reassured, and we decided what parts of his life story would be included in his article for the journal *Reclaiming Children and Youth*.

Jonathan had just turned 18 and when his article was published, he chose to use his own name and photo. We close this chapter with excerpts of Jonathan's article. This young veteran of the care system gives advice to those working with young people in pain:

"I know you are all busy—lots of work that demands paper, paper, paper. But I am here to tell you that I am more than a file. I am a person. I have feelings and am entitled to respect. Please don't only see the problems, see the potential. Over the years, I have had good and bad experiences in the system. The good parts have been some of the caring, trusting, and supportive people I have come in contact with. The bad parts are when people don't listen or trust me.

I check out people very carefully. I am good at reading people. Sometimes I use reverse psychology, like if a counselor is getting too close, then I ask him about his life, his problems, and it scares him away. I can tell if a person really cares and wants to help or is just doing a job for the money.

If I find a person who is open, his personality reaches my own and I bond quickly. But I don't want to talk about things that hurt. After being somebody who doesn't care about anything for so many years, it is hard to change.

I still find it hard to trust anybody except myself, but my life is now starting to turn around. I am in a supervised independent living program and am working and completing high school. I am working as a chef in training. Someday I would like to be a chef on a cruise ship, as one of my other interests is marine biology. I also enjoy boxing.

For kids like me in the system, there is a lot of fear. Most kids I know don't want to talk about their problems or experiences because it will cause them more trouble. Adults need to build a bond with kids and then they will tell you if they are ready.

Sometimes workers lose sight of the person behind the file number. I have desires and goals, and it is important to be there in helping me achieve my potential. Some people clear the way for me, and others put up roadblocks. I am the best resource you have to know and understand what is going on inside of me."<sup>211</sup>

## Chapter Seven

# Restoring Respect

*Let us build a country in which our children and youth can learn to care for and respect others.*<sup>212</sup>

—Nelson Mandela

### Building Strengths and Supports

Nelson Mandela once said, "There can be no keener revelation of a society's soul than the way it treats its children."<sup>213</sup> When young people feel respected, they have no reason to be disrespectful to adults or peers. Plato believed that teaching children to live in harmony and respect was more important than riches. But he cautioned that respect cannot be taught by reprimand, but only by lifelong visible practice that models the behavior and values we hope to teach.

The two previous chapters focused on *Connecting* with persons in need and *Clarifying* challenges. The final stage of RAP is *Restoring* harmony and respect. The Minnesota Study on Risk and found most problems of children result from too much stress and too little support.<sup>214</sup> Thus, RAP focuses on building strengths and supports with young people. In addition to basic safety and physical needs, we target like a laser Belonging, Mastery, Independence, and Generosity—the foundations of resilience and positive development.

Behavior is a function of a person in an environment, so both must be addressed.<sup>215</sup> Research from the Search Institute spanning five decades shows that positive youth development is fostered by internal and external *Developmental Assets*.<sup>216</sup>

***Internal Assets*** include social competence, commitment to learning, positive self-identity, and positive values—echoes of the Circle of Courage needs.<sup>217</sup> Children who develop these internal assets are on the pathway to resilience.

***External Assets*** include relationships and opportunities to support youth in reaching growth goals. Sources of support include families, schools, peer groups, and community mentors. Family bonds and supportive peers are key in asset building.

The resilience lens shifts the perspective from viewing families in distress as damaged to seeing them as life span experts on their children. Likewise, we have evidence-based strategies

for building positive peer cultures where youth become a valued resource instead of a source of negative influence. Rather than giving up on families and youth in conflict, we enlist them in a partnership. In the remainder of this chapter, we highlight strategies for implementing Response Ability Pathways.

## Restoring Social Bonds

Children do not learn respect by obedience training but by being treated with respect. The word respect is equivalent to the Golden Rule—treating others as you would want to be treated. The children who most need respect may not seem to deserve it. As Desmond Tutu observed, those who do not respect themselves are likely to show it by being disrespectful to others.<sup>218</sup> Tutu called for treating adversaries with respect since the goal is reconciliation. August Aichhorn described his work with *wayward youth* as the “practical psychology of reconciliation.”<sup>219</sup> Conflict is used to achieve an educational purpose, and restoring social bonds is the pathway to harmony.

How should a society, a community, or a group respond when its members cause pain and harm to one another? This question is as old as human experience and only two answers have arisen, retribution or restoration:

### ***Those who hurt others must be made to suffer.***

Such is how justice is defined in dominator cultures. The survival brain is hard-wired for Tit-for-Tat retribution. But as Martin Luther King, Jr, often observed, an eye for an eye leaves everyone blind.<sup>220</sup>

### ***Those who hurt others must restore their broken bonds.***

This type of justice as practiced in cultures of respect which treat all members as relatives. This restorative principle gains support from the Golden Rule which is central in all spiritual traditions.<sup>221</sup>

While restorative approaches are grounded in scientific evidence and practice wisdom, how we treat others ultimately is a question of values. A leader in restorative approaches contends the core value that must govern our approach to human conflict is respect, even for those who are different or seen as enemies.<sup>222</sup> Respect demands that we respond to the needs of all, those who are hurt as well as those who harm others. All need healing.

Young people need to understand the consequences their actions have on others. This requires teaching them to respect others and mend broken bonds. The core value of the community becomes: *No one has the right to hurt themselves or others and everyone has the responsibility to help.*



In a society where alienation between children and adults is widespread, many youth seek out other adult-detached peers to meet their needs. Weakly bonded to family or school, they form negative youth subcultures and become trapped in self-centered, exploitative lifestyles. Angry and lacking hope and purpose, they neither respect themselves nor treat others respectfully. They desperately need prosocial modelling and values from caring adults and peers. However, their antisocial behavior leads to punishment and exclusion, which further weakens social bonds.

Actions of youth in conflict can impair connections with adults or peers. A fight in a classroom may result in exclusion or suspension. An argument between parent and child may fuel tension and rupture relational bonds. An act of violence may lead to alienation from family and community. When connections are broken, even for brief periods, the pain experienced by all calls for restoration. Young people need encouragement and support to repair bonds as soon as possible. Prolonged disconnections fuel animosity and cause further conflict and rejection.

Creating respectful relationships requires transforming the values and thinking patterns that have caused youth to hurt themselves or others; even highly troubled individuals have strengths to make positive contributions. Achieving restorative outcomes involves practical strategies to make caring fashionable, instill responsibility, confront with concern, foster a spirit of service, and help youth find purpose in life.

## Making Caring Fashionable

Caring is not in style among many youth who may even take pride in self-centered or destructive behavior. Cultures transmit values with language, and words can be used to promote destructive behavior. For example, drugs of abuse are given exotic labels like calling cocaine *angel powder* and heroin *black pearl*. The meme *snitches get stiches* has spread worldwide to threaten any who might challenge or report antisocial behavior. In the teen subculture, a vocabulary of terms designed to malign others spreads rapidly through the social media. For example: *cancel* means to reject a person, *creeper* is a social outcast or creepy person, and *ghost* is to purposely ignore or ostracize a person. Weaponized words become bullets in the culture of cruelty.

To instill positive values, adults (and subsequently youth) learn to use positive labels to describe prosocial behavior, while negative labels are applied to hurting. A boy trying to impress peers by bragging about *deflowering chicks* was surprised when his group asked him, “Why are you always talking about *messing over* girls?”

The technique of relabeling can be used to enhance positive behaviors or remove the glamor from negative behavior. Thus, if exploding with profanity is seen as *macho*, it might be

reabeled as immature. If ridicule is spun as “we were just joking,” then youth learn that the purpose of insults is to destroy another person’s self-worth—some fun.

Initially, helping others is not a core value in many groups. The technique of *relabeling* is used to challenge this antisocial spin. For example, if drug abuse or delinquency are considered strong, cool, or sophisticated, such labels are stripped away. In their place, helping others is seen as a measure of maturity. Here are two other examples: If bullying is seen as bringing status, it can be relabeled as *hurting little kids*. If stealing is seen as *slick*, it might be relabeled as *sneaky*. It is critical that negative labels only apply to the person's behavior, never to the person. The message must come through as "this is a very immature way of acting for someone as great as you."

## Instilling Responsibility

Children do not develop responsibility by being turned loose without limits. Adults who nurture but fail to set behavioral expectations seldom have strong impact. Youth may see them as weak, as *friends without influence*.<sup>223</sup> On the other hand, *get tough* dictatorial adults who demand absolute obedience are equally ineffective. The art is to navigate between these extremes, able to nurture *and* set high expectations. This involves demanding responsibility instead of obedience.

Youth who are presenting problems need to accept responsibility for their own behavior. Psychologists call this *self-efficacy*, and it means taking control of one's life and one's actions. But many youth (and adults) are accustomed to blaming their own difficulties on others or to retreating in helplessness.

The tendency to shift responsibility elsewhere for one's problems is a fine art with many. Blaming parents or principals or police eliminates motivation to honestly face up to problems and change the course of one's life. When youth are skillful at putting off responsibility, mentors must be more adept at *reversing responsibility*. This is done with simple verbal interactions like these:

***Youth shifts responsibility:*** *Why should I care? Nobody cares about me.*

***Mentor reverses responsibility:*** *Then it seems you are in charge of your life.*

Reversing responsibility can also be done in a group setting which can strengthen the norm of responsibility among all members of the group:

***Youth shifts responsibility:*** *What do you expect? My parents are both drunks.*

***Mentor reverses responsibility:*** *Is Tony trying to tell the group that everybody with alcoholic parents decides to abuse alcohol?*

The goal is not to become embroiled in an argument, but rather to communicate in a simple, respectful way that we believe the youth is mature enough to assume responsibility. Certainly, we can express empathy for a youth who has been hurt, but we do not encourage a victim status.

As the technique of reversing responsibility is modelled, young people will begin to use it with irresponsible peers. Reversal is a special case of respectful confrontation. As one youth said of this technique, "It's like they hold up a mirror; whatever the problem is, you find the answer to it somewhere inside of yourself!"

## Confronting with Concern

The word *confront* can be confusing since it has two possible definitions. It can mean to attack, as to confront in battle. It also means to face something directly, like confronting a problem. The latter definition applies to this discussion.

Any behaviors that pose harm to self and others are problems needing solution. Persons who are comfortable with harmful behavior are unlikely to change unless the reality of what they are doing becomes clear. Many suffer not from excess guilt, but from a lack of it. Only when they understand how they have hurt themselves and others will they be motivated to change.

Confrontation that conveys dislike or indifference will backfire. In fact, hostile, demeaning confrontation (attacking the person, not the behavior) will quickly destroy positive bonds. On the other hand, there is no more powerful method of discipline than to be kindly confronted by persons who deeply care about you.

Young people cannot benefit from criticism unless it is balanced with positive encouragement. There should be a high ratio of support to criticism. One useful way of delivering correction is to "sandwich" a constructive critique between two supportive messages. For example:

**Support:** *Maria, the other girls look up to you.*

**Correction:** *When you make fun of our new student, she won't feel she belongs.*

**Support:** *If you help her feel welcome, others will follow your example.*

Youth also need to learn to communicate with someone who is angry without either shrinking or counterattacking. Role playing, particularly with youth who lack assertive skills, is another means of learning to receive criticism and to express complaints. Youth learn to listen openly and actively, to express understanding of the other person's feeling and thinking, and to acknowledge areas of agreement and honest disagreement.

When negative behavior is justified or distorted, these *thinking errors* can be challenged through a process of relabeling. For example, delinquent or destructive behavior may seem strong, cool, smart, or sophisticated. Mentors can relabel this so bad behavior is seen as immature while helping others shows maturity. Instead of attacking an individual's show of strength, e.g., "You aren't as tough as you think," the mentor links strength to helping: "A person as strong as you will really be able to become a positive leader." By pairing positive statements that recognize the dignity of a person with frank statements about behavior, we communicate powerfully without fueling resistance.

## The Spirit of Service

Caring is not fashionable among many young people. This requires replacing a self-centered worldview with care and concern for others. A person with little empathy has an immature character and displays behavior that is selfish, disloyal, and narcissistic.

Many young people lack positive relationships and caring role models. Some seek out other outcast peers and engage in *deviance training*, supporting one another in anti-social thinking and behavior.<sup>224</sup> Destructive peer influence can be a challenge when problem youth are segregated from those who are more stable, as in residential care or alternative schools. The way to reverse this process is to get young people hooked on helping.

Urie Bronfenbrenner observes that modern youth can become 18 years of age without ever having contributed to others.<sup>225</sup> He calls for instituting a *curriculum for caring* which does not involve *teaching about caring* but direct *experience in caring*. This can be achieved by tapping the idealism of youth and involving them in service-learning.

Students in Positive Peer Culture carry out frequent community service projects—not as a sentence for wrongdoing but to contribute to prosocial roles. Some service projects are short-term while others may last months. Service-learning weds the innate need to be of value to others and the pressing needs of our society. Adolescents have much to contribute if we can unleash the spirit of helping. Here are examples of successful service-learning projects:

- Serving as teacher aides at a community day care center
- Volunteering in summer recreation programs for neighborhood children
- Assisting in staffing Special Olympic events
- Befriending lonely senior citizens in nursing homes
- Working with disabled children in a horse-back riding program
- Raising funds to provide food for a needy family
- Painting houses for elderly citizens

Many youth today feel that their presence makes little difference in the world, that they have little to contribute. Their irresponsibility is closely related to feelings of being helpless victims of luck, fate, or the whims of powerful others. Involvement in service-learning challenges these assumptions that they are worthless and that their actions do not matter.

Still, service-learning programs must surmount a formidable obstacle. Youth who most need to develop concern for others are notoriously self-centered. They may ridicule values of service or giving of self to others. Instead, they place a premium on toughness, autonomy, daring, and the ability to exploit others. Always needing to appear strong, they are vulnerable to criticism from peers if they should show their gentler, more positive side. To overcome egocentrism, youth must be committed to something beyond themselves.

Service-learning captures the commitment of troubled teenagers by appealing to their positive potentials. For example, many are receptive to approaches that reinforce their maturity, e.g., *these kids really need your help*. Helping others must be seen as challenging. And the most effective service projects involve interpersonal contact so youth can see the joy their actions brings to the lives of others.

Service projects can be cast as exciting and spontaneous rather than routine and regimented. Pioneer social worker Jane Addams observed that many youth get into trouble because of strong appetites for excitement and adventure.<sup>226</sup> Highly adventurous projects may be rare, but it is possible to avoid repetitive, non-challenging helping projects. Through meaningful service, young people make positive contributions to the world.

## Lives of Purpose and Hope

From an early age, young people in tribal societies contributed to their family and community. But many of today's youth lack purpose in their lives. When committed to prosocial roles, this can spark a soul-searching transformation. They begin to ask questions of an existential nature: What kind of person do I want to be? What impact do I want to have on others and the world? What do I want my life to amount to? Here is an entry from a journal written by seventeen-year-old Tyrone. Locked in a detention facility, he wrote this during a period of serious reflection about the meaning of his life:

A lot of times I think I'm dead. You might as well say I am. The only difference in being dead is I feel I would be a lot better off at times. Not having to worry about going out and hurting someone. Getting into trouble, even to the point of getting locked up. A lot of time I don't even know why God put me on the earth. I don't feel like I've accomplished anything but hurting people.

Reacting to inner pain, young people such as Tyrone are in desperate need of opportunities to discover purpose in life. The hunger to be of value to others is seen in this final notation in Tyrone's journal. Now, no longer preoccupied with his own pain, he is starting to reach out to help others and reconstruct his life:

Something I would like to do is to be able to go and talk to young kids who want to run around with gangs and guns, steal, disobey their parents, or just skip school. I would like to talk to some of the kids before it gets too late and they end up where I am right now. I feel I can do a lot for them.

Young persons need to break free from self-preoccupation and restore damaged relationships. Their natural motivation to help others can flower in environments where all treat one another with respect. By reaching out to others, young people find proof of their worth, for they are now of value.

Too often, preoccupation with problems has blinded us to strengths and potentials in young people. In the face of today's difficulties, we can reclaim timeless wisdom. Over the millenniums, people in cultures of respect created networks of human connections to rear courageous, responsible youth. Now modern research has validated this traditional wisdom. We can get back to basics by restoring bonds of respect and living in harmony with all who share our small world.

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- <sup>60</sup> See Philadelphia ACE Project at <https://www.philadelphiaaces.org/philadelphia-ace-survey>
- <sup>61</sup> Masten, 2014.
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- <sup>82</sup> See [search-institute.org](http://search-institute.org)
- <sup>83</sup> Brendtro & Longhurst, 2006, p. 82.
- <sup>84</sup> For a full discussion, see Bath & Seita, 2018.



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- <sup>91</sup> Bath & Seita, 2018.
- <sup>92</sup> Pleuss & Belsky, 2015.
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- <sup>96</sup> Gone et al., 2019.
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- <sup>101</sup> Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 2019.
- <sup>102</sup> James & Lunday, 2014.
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- <sup>105</sup> Deloria, 1944, p. 48.
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- <sup>108</sup> Brokenleg, 2020.
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- <sup>110</sup> Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991.
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- <sup>112</sup> Gottman, 2011.
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- <sup>146</sup> Larson & Brendtro, 2000.
- <sup>147</sup> Gone, 2015.
- <sup>148</sup> Brokenleg, 2019, p. 135.
- <sup>149</sup> Jackson, 2014.
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- <sup>157</sup> Brokenleg, 2005, p. 85.
- <sup>158</sup> Bronfenbrenner, 1986.
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- <sup>168</sup> Seligman, 2018.
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<sup>178</sup> Key, 1900, p. 115.

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<sup>188</sup> Murphy & Moriarty, 1976.

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<sup>201</sup> Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 26.

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<sup>204</sup> LeDoux, 2015.

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<sup>208</sup> Chambers & Freado, 2009.

<sup>209</sup> Long et al., 2014.

<sup>210</sup> Toch & Adams, 2002.

<sup>211</sup> Lay, 2000 excerpts.

<sup>212</sup> Mandela, 2003, p. 418.

<sup>213</sup> Mandela, 2003, p. 421.

<sup>214</sup> Sroufe et al., 2005.

<sup>215</sup> Bronfenbrenner, 2005.

<sup>216</sup> <https://www.search-institute.org/our-research/development-assets/>

<sup>217</sup> Brokenleg, 2020.

<sup>218</sup> Tutu, 1997.

<sup>219</sup> Aichhorn, 1935, p. 150.

<sup>220</sup> King, Jr., 1958.

<sup>221</sup> Hadley, 2001.

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