

# The Circle of Courage: Developing Resilience and Capacity in Youth

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## Abstract

This article highlights the value of creating an educational climate that fosters resilience, motivation, and capacity building among learners who have been marginalized. Drawing on First Nations' teachings that encourage a holistic and affirming perspective of culturally diverse learners, the Circle of Courage model details the way the four foundations of self-esteem (significance, competence, power, and virtue) can be applied in different contexts. Connecting with troubled youth in positive ways to help them build emotional and social efficacy in addition to strategies that would improve teacher-student relationships are presented.

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**Keywords:** Circle of Courage Model; marginalized youth; building resilience; student achievement; motivation and social efficacy; effective teaching.

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

With the explosion of knowledge in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, one must be cautious that what is most important in life is not obscured. Supporting our youth as they grow into adulthood should be uppermost in our minds. The Circle of Courage, is a model of youth empowerment that identifies the four vital signs for positively guiding youth through *belonging*, *mastery*, *independence*, and *generosity*. These growth needs are essential for well-being, being innate and a natural part of human development. In the simplest of terms, in order to thrive, young people must have opportunities to experience each of these aspects of the circle. It is within the community that these beliefs are enshrined and where the benefits of such a model will enrich the lives of all members.



**Figure 1:** The Circle of Courage Model.

Research for our book *Reclaiming Children and Youth*, was drawn from both modern scientific thinking and the wisdom of indigenous cultures (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern 1990). Prior to colonization, Native Americans were able to raise respectful, responsible children without resorting to any form of harsh punishment. Through our research, we soon recognized that the principles of the Circle of Courage transcended cultural boundaries and further investigation revealed a congruence

with Stanley Coopersmith's (1967) four foundations of self-esteem—*significance*, *competence*, *power*, and *virtue*. Each of Coopersmith's markers for self-esteem can be paired with the values of the Circle of Courage. *First, significance is assured by belonging*, where children are accepted by caring adults and surrounded by positive peer interactions. In this environment, all members of a community are valued. *Competence is gained by opportunities to achieve mastery* in personal growth. However, the desire to achieve is never to better others, but to grow in knowledge and better one's self. Those with talents become models and mentors to support the learning of others. *Power is implicated in becoming independent*. Children are given opportunities to learn self-control, participate in decision-making, and develop power to resist negative peer influence. *Virtue is reflected in generosity*. Children are encouraged to help others and befriend those in need, which in turn fosters empathy, prosocial values, and proof of one's worth.

The Circle of Courage principles, portrayed by Lakota artist George Bluebird, were first presented in 1988 at an international conference of the Child Welfare League of America. The model entered the professional literature in our book *Reclaiming Children and Youth: Our Hope for the Future* (1990) and in the journal *Reclaiming Children and Youth* with the inaugural issue in 1992 by Nicholas Long and Larry Brendtro. Training in the Circle of Courage is now provided through Reclaiming Youth International, a division of the Starr Global Learning Network. The remainder of this article highlights the research and application of the Circle of Courage.

### **Consilience: The Search for Truth**

Amidst calls for evidence-based practice, how do we sort out what works from a mass of competing claims? We believe that the ultimate standard of truth exists in the construct of *consilience*, a time-tested principle from the philosophy of science (Whewell, 1847; Cory, 2000). Consilience brings together findings from diverse fields that converge to show powerful simple truths. Harvard socio-biologist E. O. Wilson (1998) calls for testing theories against knowledge drawn from the natural sciences, social sciences, practical experience, and ethical values. We put forth that the Circle of Courage is grounded in consilience being triangulated within three knowledge traditions: the vision of pioneers in reclaiming youth, child-rearing practices in cultures of respect, and modern research. These are described below:

#### ***Pioneers in Reclaiming Youth***

Early leaders in education and youth work were incurable optimists who turned problems into learning opportunities. They embraced emerging democratic ideals and battled autocratic practices. Most notable was Johann Pestalozzi (1746-1827) of Switzerland. He created schools for street children traumatized by war, believing their hidden talents would flourish in a climate of kindness. Foreshadowing modern brain research, he saw that neither physical nor intellectual powers would develop without a loving and caring environment. This required meeting the needs of the whole child by teachings that addressed the head, heart, and hands. Practical strategies built character strengths of sympathy, gratitude, and joy. These were not little lectures about virtue but the hard work of putting love into practice (Brühlmeier, 2010).

By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, this reclaiming ethos had spread world-wide. August Aichhorn [1878-1949] of Austria saw the behavior of wayward youth as an unmet need for love and belonging. Maria Montessori [1870-1952] showed that children from the slums of Rome had highly absorbent minds and could be motivated to mastery without punishments or prizes. Janusz Korczak [1878-1942] of Poland established self-governing schools with street children to nurture responsibility and independence. In Germany, Kurt Hahn [1886-1974] tapped the spirit of service in the belief that every young person needed some *grande passion*.

Under Hitler, progressive approaches to reclaiming youth ended. In a twist of history, many youth experts emigrated to North America and found fertile soil for their ideas. For example, Fritz Redl, trained in Austria by August Aichhorn, brought the reclaiming ethos to the University of Michigan Fresh Air Camp which became a laboratory for training leaders working with troubled youth (Redl & Wineman, 1951; Morse, 2008). In the same vein, German social psychologist Kurt Lewin showed how democratic leadership creates *positive peer cultures* in children's groups (Lewin & Lippitt, 1938).

### *Cultures of Respect*

The bleak history of childhood in Western society (Aries, 1962), stands in contrast to tribal cultures that revered the young. Cultural psychologist Barbara Rogoff (2003) noted in her work that children are more strongly bonded to elders in traditional cultures, while at the same time they are given more opportunities to develop genuine independence. The Maori designation of child evokes images of “the face of god.” Zulu sociologist Herbert Viliakazi (1993) described traditional African elders as virtual child psychologists who were astute about the needs of children.

Canadian anthropologist Inge Bolin (2006) has spent 30 years studying the culture of child-rearing in a pastoral “culture of respect” high in the Andes. She describes the children of Chillihuani as radiantly happy, respectful of authority, and kind to their peers. When they trek down their mountain in the Peruvian Andes to attend school with students from the low-land they achieve at the top of their class. The child-raising practices of this culture are an example of how meeting the growth needs throughout childhood is a precursor to flourishing in any culture.

Martin Brokenleg (2005) notes that for centuries, adults in Western culture have tried to rear respectful youth by training them to be obedient. However, measured against the true meaning of respect, it is clear that demanding obedience is setting very low expectations. Children need loving, caring, committed, and consistent adults if they are to blossom. Brokenleg urges communities and schools to rebuild the extended family of relatives who once surrounded every child.

### *The Science of Reclaiming*

It is notable that two of the most renowned developmental theorists, Erikson and Aichhorn, were strongly influenced by their field studies of tribal peoples. Erik Erikson (1987), who was trained by August Aichhorn in Austria, wrote at length about his experiences observing the Lakota Sioux and the Yurok tribes. He proposed that basic needs, particularly trust, must be met if children are to reach their fullest potential.

Abraham Maslow studied child-rearing among the Blackfoot in Alberta, which impacted his hierarchy of human needs (1970). Maslow’s higher levels of development overlap with the Circle of Courage growth needs belongingness, self-esteem, self-actualization, and self-transcendence. The latter, synonymous with the generosity principle, was suggested by Victor Frankl (1966) which Maslow later identified as the capstone of his hierarchy of needs. Unfortunately, Maslow died before this addition became widely known (Koltko-Rivera, 2006).

Resilience research also supports Circle of Courage principles (Brendtro & Larson, 2006). The premiere resilience researcher is Emmy Werner whose studies of children born in Kauai have been continuing for over fifty years (Werner & Smith, 2001). In a recent publication, Werner (2012) identifies all four principles of the Circle of Courage as central factors in resilient life outcomes.

Until recently, most theories of learning and behavior ignored the brain. But resilience requires that our approaches be informed by exciting new findings from neuroscience. Of particular importance is the new field of epigenetics, which is the study of how environmental events alter gene expression (Francis, 2011). This is a profound discovery, given that half of the human genes affect the brain. Further, adverse life experiences cause epigenetic changes that can be passed on for up to four generations. This relates to historic cultural trauma of indigenous populations whose traditions were devastated by colonial subjugation (Brokenleg, 2012).

For several years, we have been working to connect Circle of Courage principles with research in brain science (Brendtro & Longhurst, 2006; Brendtro, Mitchell, & McCall, 2009). There is now clear evidence that the brain has innate dispositions for these universal growth needs. In psychological terms, these naturally occurring tendencies are attachment, achievement, autonomy, and altruism, and each is linked to brain processes. Following is a brief description of the connections we have developed between the Circle of Courage principles and current findings in brain research.

*Attachment:* Children have brain-based motivation to bond with caregivers. Epigenetic research by Michael Meaney (2001) found that nurturing builds resilient brains, but lack of nurturing locks the stress reaction system into a mode of permanent alarm.

*Achievement:* Eric Kandel (2007) won the Nobel Prize by showing how long-term learning builds new pathways to store memories. We recall events that are repeated and those that are emotionally charged.

*Autonomy.* Albert Bandura (1977, 1997) described self-efficacy as the belief that one can exercise control in order to meet some desired goal. But expectation for failure or social rejection can create learned helplessness (Peterson, Maier, & Seligman, 1993). This pessimistic mindset is related to brain-based reactions of social defeat.

*Altruism.* Hans Selye (1978) first proposed that the antidote to stress was altruism or showing concern for others. New brain science shows that empathy and caring behavior are essential for human well being and happiness (Perry & Szalavitz, 2011).

These four elements are the focus of Positive Psychology. In an address to a Reclaiming Youth Conference, Chris Peterson (2012) noted that factor analysis of character strengths produces four dimensions parallel to the Circle of Courage. He labeled these as: *others* (belonging), *self* (independence), *mind* (mastery), and *heart* (generosity). The underlying premise of positive psychology is that while problems are real, the best remedy is to focus on one's strengths.

### **Building Circles of Courage**

The Circle of Courage applies universally across age, setting, and culture. Here are a few examples of the wide range of programs that are applications of this model:

#### ***Positive Youth Development***

The largest youth development organization is the century old 4-H Club which now operates world-wide. Rooted in experiential learning, the name 4-H comes from adding Health to Pestalozzi's triad of Head, Heart, and Hands (Subramaniam, 2002). Cathann Kress identified essential elements of 4-H programs as belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity (National 4-H Council, 2009). Researchers from the University of California (Heck & Subramaniam, 2009) note that these simple Circle of Courage concepts explain what other theories describe in more complicated and redundant terms. These essential elements have been applied to a full range of programs from violence prevention to character and talent development.

Research over the last decade has informed our understanding of the effects of family and social influences on the developing child. Through the work of Bronfenbrenner (1986), the problems of youth are now viewed as a disruption in the ecology of family, peer group, school and community. Parents as the life-span experts of their children can be a powerful force in positive youth development (Garfat & Van Bockern, 2010). Youth are strongly influenced by peers who can be a destructive process.

Edmondson and Zeman (2011) studied school bully prevention policies in 37 states and proposed that the Circle of Courage be the standard for creating safe and respectful school climates. John Hoover views bullying at its core as a moral issue (Hoover & Oliver, 2008) and John Gibbs (2009) proposes that prosocial values can be developed through peer helping. Erik Laursen and Tom Tate (2012) have researched Positive Peer Culture programs as recognized evidence-based practices (James, 2011). Scott Larson is using Circle of Courage principles to transform troubled lives in faith-based youth work in justice settings (Larson & Brendtro, 2000). Professionals who themselves overcame troubled backgrounds offer unique insights into resilience and positive youth development (Seita, Mitchell, & Ameen, 1993; Brown & Seita, 2009).

#### ***Strength Based Interventions.***

While problems are often seen as deficits and disorders in the young person, strength based philosophy views these challenges as learning opportunities (Long, Wood, & Fecser, 2001). Nicholas Hobbs (1982) pioneered the REED ecological model which focuses on building supportive relationships through stimulating activities (Doncaster, 2011; Shepard & Freado, 2012). Children who have experienced trauma and loss need trust-building interventions (Bath, 2013; Steele & Malchiodi, 2011). The Circle of Courage offers a relationship-based alternative in lieu of programs that rely on excessive use of medications (Foltz, 2012).

*Response Ability Pathways* (RAP) provides practical training in the Circle of Courage model (Brendtro & du Toit, 2005). Individuals who work with children need to respond to their needs instead of react to their problems. There are three key goals of RAP training: 1) *Connect* – RAP teaches practical strategies to build trust, even with relationship-wary students. 2) *Clarify* – Problem-solving events offer opportunities for brief teaching moments to identify the private logic and goals behind behavior. 3) *Restore* – The focus is on building strengths and meeting needs by strengthening belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity.

To change the culture of a school, all who interact with youth should be provided with RAP training. RAP also gives parents and caregivers strategies to build and restore bonds of respect.

*The Developmental Audit*<sup>®</sup> is a specialized Circle of Courage training providing strength based assessment (Brendtro, Mitchell, Freado, & du Toit, 2012). The Audit is used by schools, courts, and treatment programs to develop positive plans for growth. Unlike deficit driven diagnosis, the Audit highlights strengths. The youth is the leading expert on his or her life and is enlisted in developing growth plans. Assessment is ecological in scope, encompassing relationships with family, school, peer group and community. The Audit addresses these two crucial questions: How do we best understand this behavior? And what is needed to produce positive outcomes?

#### **Circle of Courage Schools.**

Educational researchers Steve Van Bockern from the United States and Tim McDonald from Australia provide a blueprint for

building Circle of Courage schools (2012). These principles are currently transforming public and private schools and leading the creation of specialized alternative programs. The model is being used in diverse cultural settings ranging from Native Americans (James, Brant, & Renville, 2012) to Maori and Pacific Islanders (Espiner & Guild, 2010). Since all children have the same growth needs, the Circle of Courage has universal applicability, whether the children are well-adjusted or struggling in high risk environments. Two recent studies describe the impact of Circle of Courage training in schools.

#### **Improving Teacher-Student Relationships.**

Pennsylvania State University researchers studied the effect of RAP training in a largely rural school district. They compared RAP-trained teachers with colleagues who had not taken RAP (Forthun & McCombie, 2007). Following RAP training, teachers had less negative beliefs about student misbehavior, used fewer restrictive disciplinary interventions, and were more committed to creating an environment of mutual respect and trust.

**Connecting with Troubled Students.** Shields, Milstein, and Posner (2010) studied RAP training with staff serving students with emotional disability in Maryland's largest and most diverse school district. Students had high levels of life crisis and hospitalization and low graduation rates. Two years after RAP training, hospitalizations and alternative placements had been reduced by nearly half. The proportion of students who failed to graduate was cut in half, and incidents of harming self or others dropped 36%. A survey found that virtually all staff believed that RAP had provided practical ways to connect with challenging students and ways to better understand children in pain.

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Whether gifted or academically challenged, children who feel unworthy and excluded are primed for failure. Many schools struggle valiantly to raise test scores but ignore the more potent force that Albert Bandura and colleagues call *social efficacy* (Bandura, Pastorelli, Barbaranelli, & Caprara, 1999; Caprara, Barbaranelli, Pastorelli, Bandura, & Zimbardo, 2000). Framed in terms of modern science, *prosocial behavior is the strongest predictor of academic success*. Specifically, this involves cooperating, helping, sharing, and consoling. This is the transformational power of the Circle of Courage school as described by Van Bockern and McDonald (2012):

**Belonging:** The universal longing for human attachment is met through relationships of trust and respect so that the child can say, "I am loved."

**Mastery:** The inborn thirst for achievement is nurtured and the child learns to cope with challenges and discovers "I can succeed."

Independence: The need for autonomy is nurtured by increased self-control and responsibility so that the child can say, “I have power to make decisions.”

Generosity: The sense of altruism is nurtured by concern for others so that the child can say, “I have a purpose for my life.”

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