

Native American Perspectives on Mastery

Martin Brokenleg

This issue is the second in a four-part series on the universal needs of children and youth for belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity. The issue focuses on an important concern in all cultures: the development of mastery and competence in children. The author introduces us to tribal concepts of achievement, which are now being validated by developmental research.

A Pedagogy for Sacred Beings

In European languages, to say to a person, "You are acting childish," would be an insult. However, in my native Lakota, the corresponding phrase would be translated as "You are acting like a sacred being." With such a respectful term as *sacred being* for *childhood*, it was not surprising that Native Americans exercised great care in nurturing the sacred little ones in our midst. Children were quite literally the purpose of life. One encounters similar concepts about the sanctity of children in other "primitive" cultures, such as among the Maori in New Zealand or indigenous Africans. In fact, many of the world's tribal societies had highly developed and sophisticated systems for educating and nurturing children. In contrast, throughout most of the recorded history of Western civilization, children were considered chattel or property.

In the materialistic European view, raising children did not differ much from domesticating wild animals: One simply used obedience training involving punishments and rewards. Few people questioned the right of an adult to strike a child or a beast—as long as the adult didn't damage the "goods." When Europeans moved into uncharted continents, they brought along their coercive systems of child management and imposed them on aboriginal peoples. Children were taken away from their traditional cultures and educated in militaristic boarding schools. The

well-meant attempts by Europeans to acculturate these children resulted in youth who were culturally marginalized and unable to function in society. These are "the stolen generations," to use a term coined in the political struggle of today's Australian Aboriginals. Today we are struggling to recover our cultural birthrights. Central to this struggle is reclaiming our traditional values and practices regarding childcare and education.

For hundreds of years, educational reformers in Europe sought to break free from simplistic and coercive systems of education and child development. During this same time, tribal people used their oral traditions to pass on highly sophisticated wisdom about childcare and learning. This alternate knowledge base of psychology and pedagogy was developed over the centuries as elders pondered how best to raise sacred beings. Instead of harsh punishments, stories, observation of elders, personal creativity, and competition in a nonadversarial spirit of shared adventure were used to teach children.

The Circle of Courage

Ten years ago, my colleagues and I began to reclaim traditional Native American tribal wisdom concerning child development (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 1990). Our research indicated that tribal cultures created environments that served to cultivate courage and responsi-

bility in youth. Various tribes differed in many respects, but four common values appeared to exist in the precolonial histories of most tribal peoples. These four values—belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity—are shown in the “Circle of Courage” by Native American artist George Blue Bird.

Belonging was ensured as children were surrounded by caring adults and peers in an extended kinship system that treated all significant others as relatives.

Mastery developed as children, mentored by elders and skilled peers, gained competence in social, physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual domains.

Independence developed naturally as children who were anchored in the values, knowledge, and skills of their culture developed a strong sense of autonomy and power over their own lives.

Generosity, the highest expression of courage, was attained when children learned to show compassion for others and to give a higher priority to relationships rather than possessions.

Modern psychology has validated these traditional values.

They are expressions of the universal need for attachment, achievement, autonomy, and altruism, which are common to persons in all cultures. They constitute a veritable “human wellness” code of immutable building blocks for the development of healthy personalities, families, and communities. When the Circle of Courage is broken, children are unable to cope with their world and display a host of problems. In this issue of *Reclaiming Children and Youth*, we take a closer look at the Circle’s second part: mastery.

The Quest for Mastery

The art on the cover of this journal is by Lakota artist George Blue Bird, who depicts his grandfather teaching him to use the bow and arrow. This youth was not competing against anyone; he was trying to master the challenge of performing well a task valued by himself and significant others. We should not assume, however, that traditional tribal children are not competitive, for striving to do better is an inborn human trait. Still, this is an appreciably different type of competition than the European

game where there are only winners and losers. The more sophisticated tribal form of *competing with others*, not *against others*, grows out of a spirit of camaraderie and mutual respect.

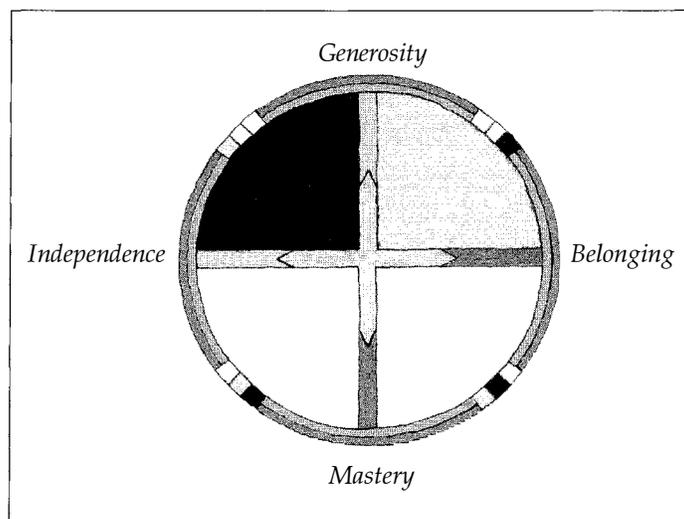
From earliest days, Native American children were taught to listen to and honor elders and other adults and peers who had skills or knowledge in a particular area. I recall as a tiny child being trained to sit silently and listen carefully to a revered old man who would tell stories that captivated me and other children. I would also look to older people as models for how to behave. As I matured, it was expected that I would pass on talents I might have acquired to any youngsters who might want to learn what I could share. If I achieved excellence in some endeavor, I must never be arrogant. To this day, the modern American image of athletes waving their “We’re Number 1” fingers in the air seems haughty and egotistic to persons from my culture.

The “I win–you lose” mentality is deeply engrained in the Western educational system. The effect is to create an elite group of individuals who have a shaky and inflated sense of their own importance and who reign over a large underclass of “losers.”

In contrast, Native American children have been taught that someone who is “better” in some area than one’s self is not an adversary, but a model. At the end of a contest involving Native Americans, all people would celebrate with the victor, and the victor would share his or her success with them. A few years ago, Tim Gigo, a nationally prominent Native American newspaper author and publisher, won the prestigious H. L. Mencken award for journalism. When during an interview it was stated that

he must be proud of his achievement, he responded by saying that the Lakota people were honored by this award.

Many behavioral scientists contend that the quest for competence and mastery is the central theme in the development of children and youth. Psychologist Robert White (1964) calls this drive “competence motivation”; others prefer terms such as *need for achievement*, *effectance motivation*, or, simply, *mastery*. Alfred Adler of Austria saw the quest for “superiority” in mastering human challenges as central to human motivation. Italy’s Maria Montessori talked of the “absorbent mind,” and Russian psychologist



The Circle of Courage

Bliuma Zeigarnik documented the human need to work on solving new problems. Susan Ashton-Warner of New Zealand found that when the need for creativity was blocked, aggression ensued. Linguists in the tradition of Noam Chomsky contended that the human brain is pre-programmed to make sensible patterns out of the chaos that constitutes language, even in the absence of formal instruction. Learning is what the brain does naturally, and the human child was learning well long before schools were invented.

In the normal course of experience, children learn their most important lessons from individuals who are their attachment figures, which was originally necessary for survival. In fact, children who are not attached to adults are not likely to learn from them, a reality that caused Johann Pestalozzi to contend that love—not teaching—was the essence of education. Thus, in cultures and communities where adults are securely bonded to children, learning flourishes. Children who are alienated from adults have major problems in developing competence and achievement.

If Native American concepts of learning were honored in schools, children would be captivated by stories rather than bored by lectures. Song, dance, art, and creativity would be valued as much as traditional academic subjects or sports. Children would help one another to achieve rather than seeking to mock the “slow” child or make fun

of the gifted youngster. Attention would be given to active, searching minds rather than to “disability.” Every person with a talent or skill would feel an obligation to share it with others. The traditional knowledge passed on from elders would be revered rather than ignored. Spiritual truths would be valued as well. Children would learn how to “fail courageously” rather than retreat in futility. They would be taught how to handle fear and express compassion. Learning would be cross-generational, and children would have a core group of adult mentors who could name them and claim them and whose relationship with them would transcend time and curriculum. Cultural diversity would be celebrated. Such principles are not just vestiges of another time or culture—they represent a revolutionary new strategy for our time.

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Courage Through Art

The cover art is the second in a series of four illustrations by Lakota artist George Bluebird. This art is now available as a 19" × 28" full-color print. Surrounding the Circle of Courage™ are Native American children representing the values of Belonging, Mastery, Independence, and Generosity. The artist is a former youth at risk confined in prison. A legal defense fund, which has been established to work for his release, is supported by royalties from sales of this art. For more information on the Circle of Courage™ print, contact: Circle of Courage, Inc., PO Box 57, Lennox, SD 57039; phone: 888/647-2532 or 605/647-2532.