

Editors' Note: This is the third in a series of four special issues on the principles of the Circle of Courage. This model is based on Native American and cross-cultural research that indicates that underlying positive development are four universal needs: belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity. Lakota artist George Blue Bird has illustrated these four needs in the cover art for this series and in the accompanying "four-directions medicine wheel." This issue highlights effective practices for helping youth move from rebellion to responsibility.

Raising Respectful Kids

Martin Brokenleg, Steve Van Bockern, and Larry Brendtro

Autonomous children and youth are responsibly independent. In modern cultures, however, large numbers of youth are undisciplined and irresponsible. Some seem powerless to control their lives and display patterns of learned helplessness. Others seek false power by bullying peers and fighting against authority. The authors contend that adults in modern society will be able to raise responsible children only by re-discovering long-understood truths about the deep respect that must exist between elders and youth.

Ours is a culture which systematically deprives children of opportunities for showing responsibility, and then complains about their irresponsibility.

—Ruth Benedict

A responsible child or youth has developed the inner power of *independence*—the third component of the Circle of Courage. This is not just self-sufficiency, but rather the responsibility to engage in actions to make one's life a success. Parents and teachers who respect children will carefully discipline them by providing opportunities for taking responsibility for decisions. Teens who have been disciplined respectfully display the confidence that comes from a growing maturity. By the time they reach adulthood, such persons have a personal power that is tempered by graciousness. They demonstrate a deep respect for themselves, for others, and for all creation.

The Problem of Disrespect

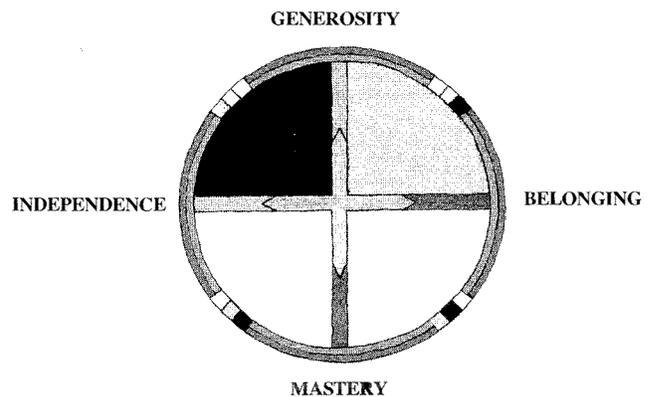
Children are not born with inherent responsibility; they must learn it from persons with greater maturity and wisdom. Unfortunately, U.S. culture today is one in which adults and youth are blatantly disrespectful—and even worse—toward one another. In a typical year in the United States, 3 million adults are investigated for abusing their children, and 3 million youth are arrested for breaking the law. We have created a "culture of disrespect." Disrespect toward children is so commonplace we seldom question it.

A young, upwardly mobile couple can be easily recognized by their clothing and trendy haircuts. Between them walks their child, who is 4 or 5 years old.

As they walk down the mall hallway, it is clear the child is tired and bored with all the shopping. Watching the parents is educational. The mother sometimes speaks to the child but just as often jerks on the lagging child's arm. At other times, she may direct the child's movement by pulling on an arm. It is obvious that the mother does not take the child's interests seriously. When the child wants to look in a shop window longer, the mother jerks him away. The child's requests to "look over there" are ignored or fully opposed.

One wonders if the mother uses these kinds of pulling and shoving with her work colleagues. If not, why does she use them on her own child? Is it because this child is *hers*, as though he or she is some kind of property or possession? Perhaps the father is also disrespectful:

Farther down the mall, the father stoops down so his face is inches from his child's. In a too loud voice, the



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father shocks the child: "If you don't stop that whining, I'll give you something to cry about!" The father's face is contorted with anger.

Does the man regularly use that tone of voice with his co-workers and friends? And if he does not, why does he use it with his own child? Perhaps the father's attitude is somewhat like the following: "This is *only* a child—not a human being and certainly not an adult or a real person! It isn't as though he or she has feelings or memory."

This may seem outlandish, but it is not. The same kind of scene happens daily all across society, and what it shows is an inherited cultural devaluation of children, a devaluation that is such a part of Western society we don't even notice it. It is part of a deeply embedded value—or our "cultural tail"—that we drag behind us, a thousand years long.

Cultures of Respect

It would be a major mistake to assume that a culture that is advanced in one area would necessarily be advanced in other areas. An example of this dynamic is the Aborigines of Australia. To function socially, Aborigines must know more than 500 kinship terms, which shows the social development and complexity of Aboriginal society. Their technological level, on the other hand, could be considered to be "Stone Age." By contrast, the United States has an advanced technological culture but—I believe—lags in spiritual development.

For example, the Lakota (Sioux) language has many more words for spiritual, emotional, and intellectual states than does English. Lakota society requires a more advanced social intelligence than does U.S. society. Traditional Native American culture placed a high value on individual freedom. In contrast to obedience models of discipline, the goal was to build respect by teaching inner discipline. Children were encouraged to make decisions, solve problems, and show personal responsibility. In turn, adults shared stories, modeled values, and provided guidance if children erred. In this environment, children learned to make responsible choices without coercion.

This pattern of mutual respect permeated Native cultures. Children and elders held each other in awe. In the Lakota language, children are "sacred beings." The term "old man," which is often used pejoratively in English, is rendered in Lakota as "real man." Women also had power. For example, in many tribes, the grandmothers decided who was worthy of becoming a chief. Their selection depended on how a boy had treated others as he was growing up, because the worst possible leader would be one who might try to impose his will on others. Chiefs would never ask others to do what they would not do themselves.

Respect and Power

To Europeans, respect was based on power. Thus, principles of leadership among social equals were strange ideas to status-conscious European colonists. It was in the encounter between the European and Native civilizations that democracy was born. With the advent of democracy, old systems of education inevitably were challenged. In the early 19th century, the leading U.S. reformer of education was Horace Mann, who declared that democracy would revolutionize the way adults exercised their power in dealing with children. Schooling in a democracy would be an "apprenticeship in responsibility." Similar themes were expounded by progressive educators and youth workers worldwide.

In 1911, Janusz Korczak established an orphanage for Polish street children where discipline was based on student self-governance. He predicted that "fifty years from now, every school in a democracy will have student self-governance." These pioneers underestimated the difficulty of changing behavior and thought. Korczak, for example, noted that although the world was finally recognizing and trying to eliminate oppression of racial groups, women, and the poor, children remained "underdogs." "Don't call them future citizens," he said. "They are citizens in embryo."

Blueprint for a Disrespectful School

Even adults who don't want to be dictators get drawn into coercive roles. We need to move beyond philosophical considerations about respect and disrespect and use sound principles to reshape practice. What follows are some common attitudes and strategies rooted in adult fear of losing control of young people. We have heard these kinds of statements in many schools:

- Let's impose a system-wide discipline policy so kids know who really runs this place. If they need to feel some power, we can give them a token student government game to play so they won't challenge our control of really important issues. We should make examples of troublemakers by announcing detention lists on the intercom. We have zero tolerance for any violence, so we need to come down hard on any bullies and let them know who is boss.
- We need to keep students on task and following the prescribed curriculum. Some just want to get into discussions about current events and dodge real learning. Teachers should pace the room like panthers to let students know they won't get away with anything. Keep students at their desks and quiet. We need to post rules and get more bite for the consequences. If any-

body violates rules, put his or her name on the board. We need surprise locker searches, and maybe we should have those “drug dogs” come in and sniff around.

- We can use computers to schedule students, because they probably just want to choose classes with their friends. The only teachers they will remember years later are those who don’t take any crap. We should prescribe the curriculum because they are too immature to decide what they need. I think it’s time for another of those assertive discipline seminars; I felt so good after the last one, being reassured that this was my class and I rule it.

Travis is a thoughtful high school student in our city. He summed up his view of school in these terms: “All through school, kids are herded around like sheep and are left with almost nothing to decide upon.” Some kids accept this role. Some fight back through passive aggression—by shutting down and refusing to learn. Others—like the young man described in the next section—refuse to be a “sheep” and decide to bite the shepherd.

Kids Who Fight Us

Even when strong-willed kids are deprived of power, they will find ways of getting it. Such was the case with Theo, an African American boy reared in a hotbed of disrespect. Abused as a child, he entered school with the mind-set that people had always been messing with him and that he was going to fight back. When Theo entered an all-White school, he encountered additional problems with his peers. Recalling first grade, he said, “I told the teacher to make the kids quit making fun of my skin and calling me niggerish.” By 11, he was thin-skinned as well, anticipating rejection everywhere. He kept a short bat in his book bag in case he was “dissed” by the other kids. He and his middle school teachers had little respect for each other, as shown in this report from his school files:

I confronted Theo and asked him why he wasn’t participating in his group and why he wasn’t doing the assigned activity. He responded that his group didn’t want him to. I said that wasn’t true and it didn’t matter if they did or not. He should participate. Later, he stood up and confronted another student by saying, “Are you gonna make me?” I stepped in and said, “Yes, I am going to make you sit down.” I told him that he wasn’t going to start anything in my class. He said he’d do anything he pleased; he didn’t need us or this class. Theo got angrier and angrier while I tried to get him to sit down.

Theo then erupted and told me, “F— you!” I then grabbed him to sit him down. He in turn pushed me

and put his fists up and wanted to fight. He said that no one “f—en” touches me and started calling me out to fight. He said he would kick my ass and wanted to go. I told him to get into my office. He kept refusing and swearing at me and asking me to fight.

Beginning to get very upset, I grabbed for him to push him into my office. He again pushed me away and said not to touch him and continued to try to get me to fight. He slowly made his way to my office, where I told him to sit down. Theo continued to yell and swear at me and kept trying to get me to fight. At this time, he said he was going to get a gun and shoot me! He promised that he would get me somehow, some way.

Finally he sat down. I called Mr. S. to come and take him away. Theo was still yelling and swearing at me while I was on the phone. When Mr. S. arrived, I told him the story, and I also told him I didn’t want Theo back in my class. At this time, Mr. S. took Theo and left. From the time Theo said, “F— you!” until Mr. S. arrived in my class, he continued to yell at me, swear extensively (especially f—), and ask me to fight because he was going to kick my ass.

Disrespect is a perversion of power. Adults who are disrespectful abuse and belittle children. When these kids get big enough to fight back, they battle authority and bully peers. This draws more adult retaliation, and the conflict cycle is joined. Nobody wins.

Building Respect

In many tribal cultures, it is a custom to tell a story that embodies every central truth. At the end of the story, the adult seldom announces the moral, for this would impose his or her view on the listener. The same idea can be applied to independence. To really understand it, each of us needs to find our own meaning. Ponder the following four stories as you begin thinking about how we can best develop independence, autonomy, and respect in our children and ourselves.

The Power of Consensus

In the Western tradition, power is a zero-sum game: I win—you lose. Only cultures rooted in respect can ensure autonomy for all. Thus, the power of true independence happens best in the context of community. To make any important decisions, Lakota people use a consensus process. Virtually all North American Native people believe that this format allows each person’s power and responsibility to be employed. Time undoubtedly would be saved by using majority rule, but the cost would be the loss of power of those in the minority. The unresolved conflict created by majority rule is also costly.

When Noah Brokenleg was 89 and lay gravely ill due to a stroke, his children and grandchildren gathered around. [First Author's Note: Fortunately our hospitals have learned to redefine "immediate family" to accommodate tribal kinship systems.] Noah had often instructed his family that he did not want heroic measures taken if it became clear he would not recover. Although the family members had told the medical staff their wishes, on entering his room one morning they found a number of life-lengthening devices hooked to their grandfather. The family head asked the 25 to 30 Lakota people standing in the room if they remembered the grandfather's wishes. He then asked if everyone agreed that the additional tubes should be removed. (One person—even if it was the youngest—was powerful enough to stop the decision by not agreeing with it. Consensus doesn't mean liking the decision; it means only that one agrees to go along with the decision.) In the case of this Lakota grandfather, his wishes were kept and he lived his final days and nights without mechanical life support, surrounded by his relatives.

The Power of a Child

In obedience cultures, respect is owed to those in authority. Youth pioneers like Maria Montessori and Janusz Korczak spent a lifetime trying to create schools and institutions where respect was not "age graded." An example of an institution going against the obedience culture is Irving Alternative School in Sioux Falls, which was built on a philosophy of respecting children and using conflict resolution and mediation training. For example, one morning a first grader who was on hall duty was responsible for safety and smooth operation in the hallway. In all the commotion before class began, a sixth grader set a stack of books in the middle of the hallway while he put his coat in his locker. The first grader approached him but with a bit of hesitancy.

FIRST GRADER: "You can't leave books in the way like that."

SIXTH GRADER: "Why not?"

FIRST GRADER: "Someone could trip over them."

SIXTH GRADER: "Well, what if I put them over here by my locker?"

FIRST GRADER: "They'll be out of the way, and no one would trip then. I'll help you move them."

The Power to Solve Problems

Canadian television once did a report on Immaculate Heart of Mary and St. Luke's School, an elementary school in Toronto. We cannot recall the principal's name, so we will use "Sister Mary Elizabeth" for the purposes of this story. The children had complained that they were not getting lunch recess on some days. Having just read a book on total quality management, Sister Mary Elizabeth told the

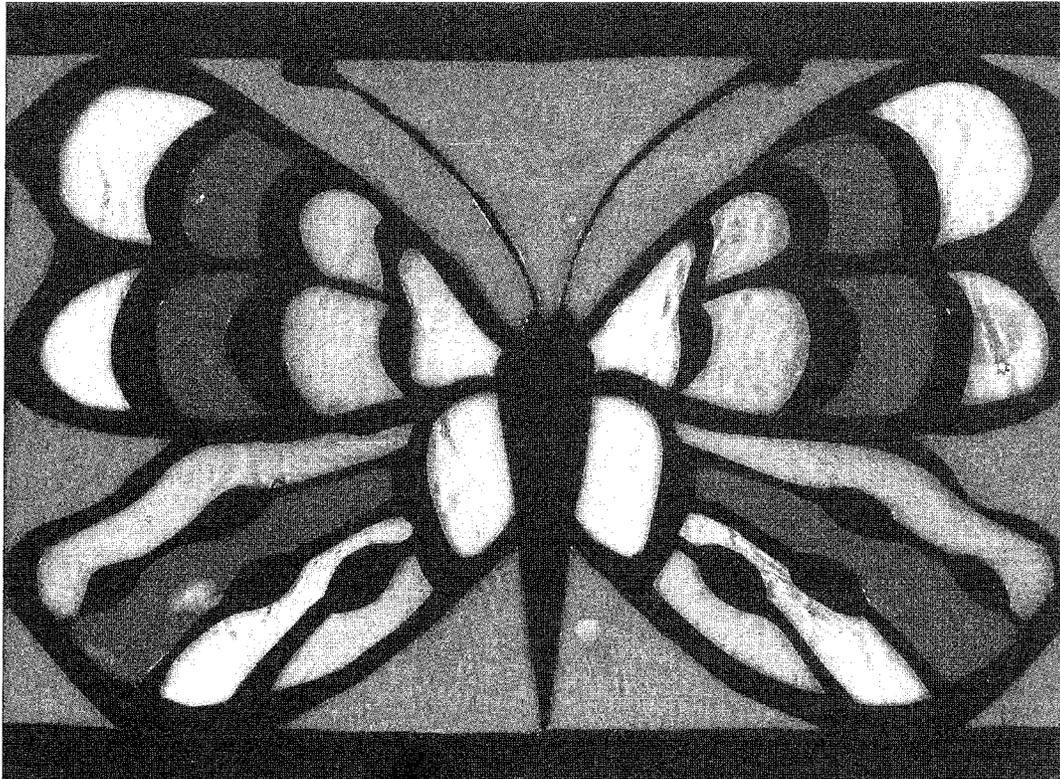
children they would have to figure out what the problem was and suggest a solution to her. The students organized a committee and set a schedule for lunchroom monitors. They reported that the problem was on hot dog day, when it took a long time for all the students to squeeze the catsup and mustard at the condiments table. The students suggested that squeeze bottles be set on every table in the lunchroom. The principal informed them that there was no money available for that kind of purchase. According to the television report, the students raised the funds and now had condiment squeeze bottles on every table. The reporter asked a 10-year-old if this had taken care of all the problems at Immaculate Heart of Mary and St. Luke's School. He replied, "I don't know about that, but I know if I've got a problem I can fix it."

Respect for the Disrespectful

The Nisgaa' nation from the north coast of British Columbia have restored a ceremony for young people who commit serious offenses in the community. An offender will be taken to a deserted island and left with a tent and food and water for a year. Predictably, the young person (in this example, a boy) blames everyone else for his predicament. After a time, he acknowledges his own responsibility to care for himself and get over this mistake. Each week, men bring more food and water. There is no conversation, and they do not stay any longer than needed to drop off the supplies. At the end of the year, the youth is collected and brought to a long house where the community is gathered. One by one, the victim of the crime and any family members talk about what this crime did to their lives. Other members of the community may also speak to the youth. Finally, the young man has to speak to the community to express his regret. When this is completed, he is undressed and bathed, new ceremonial clothing is put on him, and he is given a new name. The leader of the nation tells him that the community will take him back because they need him, but he must understand his responsibility to lead a good life from now on. The leader then blows goose down into the air. When the down hits the ground, the young man is restored to a new life. Afterwards, there is dancing and feasting to welcome him back. In the memory of the Nisgaa' nation, this ceremony has never had to be repeated for an offender.

Conclusion

Across centuries of Western culture, adults tried to rear respectful kids by training them to be obedient. Even if children overtly obey elders, it is quite another matter to honor them as mandated by the Ten Commandments. Measured by a standard of respect, adults who demand obedience may be setting very low expectations. Virtually any animal can be trained to be obedient through system-



"Butterfly" by Allen B., age 14, a student at Lawrence Hall Youth Services in Chicago. Used with permission.

atic application of rewards or punishments. Only humans can develop self-discipline and character, becoming autonomous beings who make responsible decisions.

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College, where he currently directs a research project on delinquency in collaboration with Reclaiming Youth International and the Kellogg Foundation. He has 25 years of experience as a teacher, principal, and developer of programs for students at risk. Larry Brendtro, PhD, is president of Reclaiming Youth International and co-editor of this journal. The training, research, and service activities of this nonprofit organization are described at their Web site, www.reclaiming.com. The authors can be contacted at: Reclaiming Youth International, PO Box 57, Lennox, SD 57039.

Courage Through Art

The cover art is the third in a series of four illustrations by Lakota artist George Blue Bird. 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; phone: 888/647-2532 or 605/647-2532.