# The Science of Raising Courageous Kids

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The Circle of Courage is a holistic approach to reclaiming youth, which is grounded in resilience science and in values of deep respect for the dignity of children and youth. This article identifies the core assumptions of the Circle of Courage model and its research foundation in positive youth development. In order to thrive, all children need the opportunity to be reared in schools and communities that cultivate belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity.

Long before modern science, First Nations peoples of North America used sophisticated, child development strategies designed to nurture caring, respectful, and courageous children. They created communities for rearing children in which underlying value systems supported the process of positive youth development. We have called this child rearing philosophy the Circle of Courage, and it is depicted in the drawing below by Lakota artist George Blue Bird.
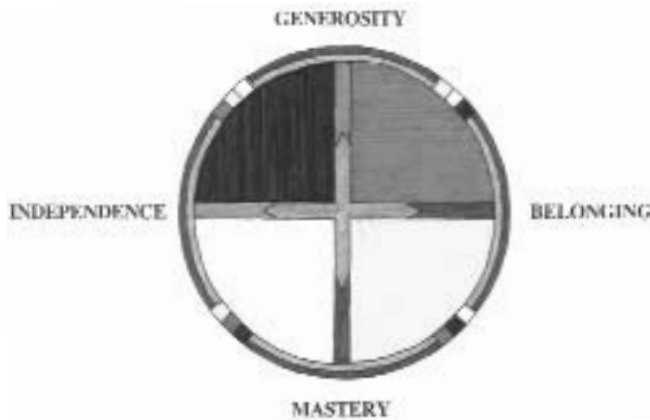
The Circle of Courage grew from an anthropological comparison of child rearing of Western and Native American cultures. At a time when Europeans classed children as property, tribal cultures saw them as spiritual creations. The Lakota Sioux word for child is translated as "sacred being." Similar concepts have been identified in other tribal cultures worldwide. The Maori term for children is translated as "gift of the gods." Herbert Vilakazi (1993), a Zulu professor of sociology, describes his culture's respect for children:

A child is an embodiment and expression of beauty itself. Africans in Southern Africa say, *"Ukuzala un-kuzuelula amathambo."* The mere sight of a child touches the very essence of our humanity. 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." (Vilakazi, 1993, p. 37)

There is strong evidence that the Circle of Courage values apply across time and culture. Unlike many models for education, these concepts come from the traditions and practices of cultures that deeply cherished children and treated them with respect and dignity.

Circle of Courage Values

Europeans conquered Indians of the Americas not only with fire power, but also with schools. Fueled by the doctrine of divine destiny, the motto of colonial education was "Kill the Indian to save the child." Children who had never experienced force with anger from an adult were ripped from their families and sent to boarding schools, where they were beaten if they spoke their native tongue. Similar practices occurred on all continents where Europeans colonized indigenous peoples. Aboriginal Australians call this cultural kidnapping "The Stolen Generation." But it was the Europeans who had backward theories of child development, believing children were evil and needed to be harshly punished into submission. In contrast, many tribal nations had sophisticated child rearing systems designed to teach courage instead of obedience.

The Circle of Courage embodies four core values for nurturing all children in a climate of respect and dignity (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 2002):

1. **The Spirit of Belonging:** The universal longing for human bonds is nurtured by relationships of trust so that the child can say, "I am loved."

2. **The Spirit of Mastery:** The child's inborn thirst for learning is nurtured; learning to cope with the world, the child can say, "I can succeed."

3. **The Spirit of Independence:** The child's free will is nurtured by increased responsibility so that the child can say, "I have power to make decisions."

4. **The Spirit of Generosity:** The child's character is nurtured by concern for others so that the child can say, "I have a purpose for my life."

Child rearing customs vary in different cultures and families, but the developmental needs of children are universal. Philosopher Mortimer Adler (1985) observed that the test for absolute values is that they spring from universal human needs. By this standard, the Circle of Courage values are not optional. For example, belonging is not a privilege to be earned and banishment is not a valid consequence for misbehavior, since it violates a basic human need. Environments that fail to provide opportunities for belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity are toxic to children.

Courage and Resilience Science

In the classic book, *The Courage to Be*, Paul Tillich (1952) notes that without courage no young person can overcome obstacles. On the other hand, young people are unlikely to acquire courage except by surmounting adversity. Thus, children from challenging backgrounds may have an advantage in developing courage of character. Circle of Courage principles have been validated by research on resilience and positive youth development. Beyond basic physical survival needs, all children also have four psychological survival needs, which we call the "4 As:"

- **Attachment:** Healthy infants form bonds to those who care for them, and they smile to communicate happiness and love. These are not just learned behaviors, since they occur even with children who are blind or deaf.

- **Achievement:** All children also have inborn dispositions for mastery in order to learn strategies for coping with life's challenges. Children learn best from persons with whom they have positive bonds.

- **Autonomy:** While seeking to maintain attachments, youth increasingly strive for autonomy, in order to gain independence and self-reliance. Secure attachments provide a base for successful autonomy.

- **Altruism:** Persons reciprocate the care they have received as concern for others. Such generosity strengthens relationships between individuals, in effect, making them relatives.

Each of these 4 As describes a different dimension of positive psychosocial development. When these needs are met, children thrive; when thwarted, unfavorable outcomes are likely. Thus, these crucial dimensions might be referred to, at least metaphorically, as *the human resilience code*. While resilience is related to some additional factors (for example, genes, temperament, good looks, luck), most are beyond our control. To a considerable extent, resilience can be taught or cultivated. In that respect, adults bear direct responsibility for creating environments where positive growth and resilient outcomes can occur. The Circle of Courage describes the major qualities of such environments: creating opportunities for a child to experience belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity.

The 4 As provide a parsimonious way of summarizing the psycho-social strengths and protective factors identified in resilience research. Resilient youth typically form positive attachments to teachers, mentors, or healthy peers. These can compensate for problem relationships in their families. Resilient youth have opportunities for achievement, developing skills to cope with stress, resolve problems, and succeed in school and life. As youth develop autonomy, they refuse to be helpless victims. They shed demeaning labels, are able to resist negative influence, and take responsibility for their lives. Finally, resilient persons are able to better manage adversity and find purpose in their lives through altruism and service to others.

We do not view resilience as a rare achievement of a few super kids. The human race survives because humans are created to leap the hurdles of adversity. Werner and Smith's (1992) classic resiliency studies followed children into adulthood and found that about 60% of youth from any high-risk background will eventually make a positive adjustment, although some mature more slowly than others. Other studies show that even in the case of extreme adversity, such as growing up in the profound deprivation of Romanian orphanages, about 70% of children did not exhibit marked attachment disorders (O'Connor, Rutter, & the English and Romanian Adoptees Study Team, 2000). Given that even grossly pathological care fails to destroy many children, resilience outcomes are a normal human capacity. Of course, not all children have the external supports, internal strengths, and good luck to survive.

When attachment, achievement, autonomy, and altruism are assured, most youth become caring and courageous, even in the face of adversity. When these needs are thwarted, persons are alienated and discouraged and present a host of emotional, behavioral, and learning problems. There is no substantial difference in the basic needs of the most stable or the most troubled child in any neighborhood. The main difference is in whether adults provide opportunities and environments to address these needs.

Courage and Self-Worth

There is a close correspondence between the Circle of Courage and the nutriments of positive self-worth. In his seminal work, *The Antecedents of Self Esteem*, Stanley Coopersmith (1967) conducted extensive experimental and clinical research to study how youth form ideas about their worth as persons. He found youth measure their personal adequacy against these four benchmarks:

1. **Significance:** Am I important to somebody?
2. **Competence:** Am I good at something?
3. **Power:** Can I influence my world?
4. **Virtue:** Am I a good person?

Coopersmith calls these four factors the foundations of self-esteem. Youth vary in the importance they attach to these factors, but each contributes to the development of a sense of self-worth. In contrast to popular conceptions, self-esteem was not related to height and physical attractiveness and only weakly related to social status, material wealth, and academic performance.

There has been much legitimate criticism of the pop-psych movement, where one seeks salvation through self-esteem (Hewitt, 1998). We recall attending a large conference where a self-esteem "trainer" instructed all 600 of us in the audience to shout, "I am great." Then we were to give the nearest stranger a shoulder massage and tell the person how great he or she was. Self-esteem is not superficial, feel-good narcissism. There are no quick fixes, in spite of the promises of psychiatrist David Burns (1993) that ten days of self-esteem therapy will snap you out of depression and reveal the secret joys of living.

Some assume that parents who set strong standards are autocratic and will thwart self-esteem. In fact, clear parental standards enhance self-worth and foster autonomy. Further, permissive parents who smother the child with affection do not necessarily raise children with high self-esteem. Coopersmith's research suggests specific ways adults can nurture self-worth in children:

- **Significance:** Children need the attention and affection of others. Effective caregivers provide the child acceptance without overprotection and discipline without rejection.

- **Competence:** Children need to experience the joy of achievement. Effective caregivers provide positive expectations and opportunities to be creative and to explore, offering encouragement in times of failure.

- **Power:** Children need to be able to influence others and control their destiny. As effective caregivers set limits with respect, youth gain confidence and learn to cope with adversity.

- **Virtue:** Children need to follow a code of moral and ethical standards. Effective caregivers are not permissive or uninvolved, but set standards of conduct which children internalize.

There is a powerful need in all persons to gain a sense of self-worth. If this cannot be gained in legitimate ways, it will be pursued by any means possible. When youth who are failing at home and school become dropouts or gang members, this can increase their tested IQ. Rejection and ridicule are powerful sources of aggression in humans, and, as seen in episodes of school violence, some young persons will even kill to defend a sense of self-worth.

The table below summarizes these concepts. There is robust evidence to suggest that belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity provide the foundation for developing resilience and self-worth. At first glance, the four principles of the Circle of Courage hardly seem debatable. They fit with spiritual and humanistic values, theories of development, and our own experience. However, once these values are given primacy in our programs, their revolutionary quality becomes apparent.

Circle of Courage	Markers of Resilience	Foundations of Self-Worth
Belonging	Attachment	Significance
Mastery	Achievement	Competence
Independence	Autonomy	Power
Generosity	Altruism	Virtue

Broken Circles

Consider these children to have fallen among thieves—the thieves of ignorance and sin and ill fate and loss. Their birthrights were stolen. They have no belongings. (Menninger, 1982)

Many problems of youth that most trouble adults are actually predictable responses of children whose most basic human needs have been denied. Children who don't belong may become angry, guarded, or withdrawn. Children who don't master may develop a failure identity. Lacking independence, a youth may wallow in helplessness or react

with pseudo-independent defiance. Lacking a spirit of generosity, a child is egocentric, selfish, and exploits others.

Children who lack the foundations for self-esteem live in perpetual stress, for their lives are out of balance. They flail out at a world that has not given them respect, or they internalize the message that they are worthless. Seventh-grader Jerome from the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation describes children with broken circles of courage in simple and powerful language:

> I want to be treated with respect and dignity. If you respect me, I will respect you. If you take pride in me, I will take pride in you. But if you treat me bad, I will probably abuse myself by drugs, alcohol, and low self-esteem. This is going to all the parents on Earth. Give us love and attention, listen to us when we have a problem, and talk to us when you have a problem. Because when you ignore us, it makes us feel stupid and mad. It feels bad when we get hurt by bad names, teasing, taunting, and being ignored. So, talk it over with somebody and tell your kids you love them (His Law, p. 3).

Voices of Youth

An old Native American man was down on the ground interacting with a tiny child. His relatives said to him, "Grandfather, what are you doing crawling around on the ground like a little child?" He responded, "I am very old and some time soon I will be going to the spirit world. This child is very young and has just come from the spirit world. I am down here seeing what I can learn from this sacred being."

Students in courage-building schools are not coerced into obedience but participate in partnerships of mutual respect. A number of years ago, we began asking students about how the Circle of Courage values might apply to their schools (Odney & Brendtro, 1992). Many students experience these positive assets, such as belonging, but this was usually incidental rather than a result of intentional interventions. A significant number do not, and these include students of alienation who desperately need a positive school climate (Hyman & Snook, 1999).

Does your school foster a spirit of belonging?

"Most of the faculty really make some effort to get to know you. It makes me feel like I belong when a teacher calls me by my first name, even when I am not in their class. We have a wide spectrum of students, and at least everybody has one friend, and they aren't always from the same socio-economic background." (Michelle)

"Some of the teachers think they are too cool to talk to us. If you are walking down the hall and you don't know a classmate, they will at least acknowledge you. Those teachers will put their heads down and look at the floor and keep walking." (Helen)

Does your school foster a spirit of mastery?

"In many of my classes, I have felt that teachers really care about what they are doing and want us to learn and be successful in life. This makes me feel like I have accomplished something." (Gretchen)

"Some of my teachers really don't care about students like me. All they are interested in are the talented ones." (Rusty)

Does your school foster a spirit of independence?

"I have gained plenty of responsibility. We want to be treated like young adults, and therefore we are given many choices. We are expected to be very decisive. It only benefits us that we are learning to have responsibility." (Kraig)

"This is probably the biggest part of school that I don't like. All through school, kids are herded around like sheep and left with almost nothing to decide upon." (Travis)

Does your school foster a spirit of generosity?

"I would have liked to tutor someone or have been a peer counselor. I have no idea how to get involved with a peer group, and I feel I could have helped someone and benefited from it myself if I had been given the chance to participate." (Sondra)

"I feel that the greatest thing one could give to another student is friendship. For people who come from a negative home life, school is all they can look forward to and count on. I try to be nice to people and talk to people no one else will. I try to make them feel good about themselves. I do it a lot." (Lance)

The insightful comments of these students indicate they have important contributions to make in identifying and solving problems of their schools. In fact, when youth are not in an alliance with adults, they often use their considerable talents in adversarial and defiant behavior. Seita and Brendtro (2002) describe how youth who distrust adults employ sophisticated strategies to attack, avoid, or outwit authority figures. If young people are clever enough to sabotage our educational efforts, they are mature enough to be involved in building positive school communities.

By enlisting youth in improving their schools, we create a climate of mutual respect. This requires valuing the strengths and potentials of all students, even those with broken Circles of Courage. Schools, youth organizations, and communities that fail to nurture the spirit of belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity are inadvertently fostering discouragement. Some might argue that it is not the business of schools to address these more spiritual dimensions. This is a plausible argument only if one assumes that children are not sacred beings.

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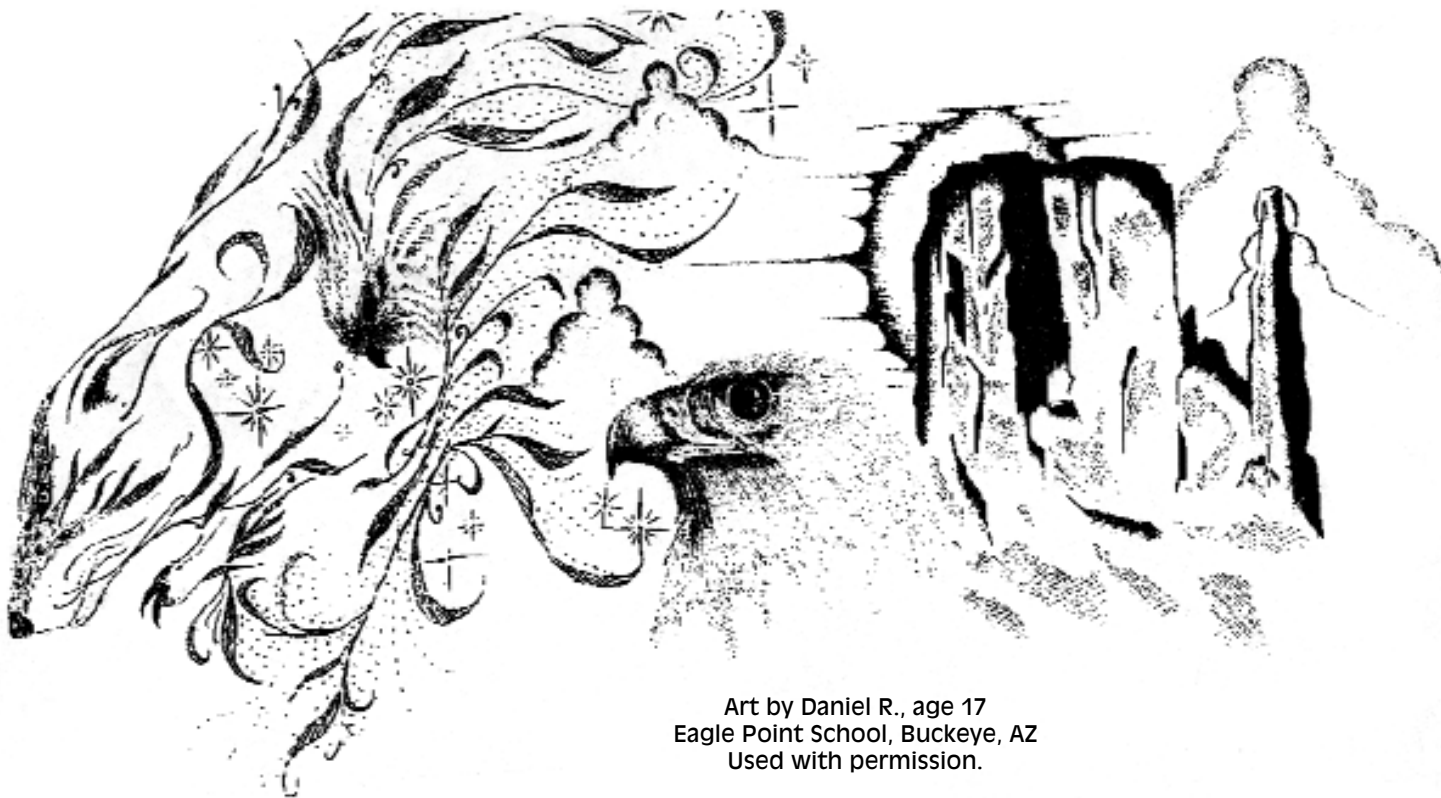
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