

Humanized Youth Work

Martin Brokenleg



The author reflects on the history of the Circle of Courage model in creating resilient children in a world where virtually all young people can be considered to be *at risk*.

The year 1990 saw Nelson Mandela released from prison in South Africa. Also that year, the first McDonald's restaurant opened in Moscow, *Driving Miss Daisy* won best picture, and the Americans with Disabilities Act was signed into law. The tunnel connecting England and France was completed and Leonard Bernstein conducted his final concert. In 1990, Tim Berners created the very first webpage on the very first web server. And 1990 was the year we published our "little green book."

How did the years pass so quickly? When we published the first edition of *Reclaiming Youth at Risk*, Larry Brendtro, Steve Van Bockern, and I were all professors at Augustana College in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. We certainly were a lot younger. Our own children were at home or were just beginning to venture out on their own. None of us had grandchildren then. An entire generation has watched our work in promoting the Circle of Courage as a resiliency model for creating strong children.

In 1990, The Search Institute published *The Troubled Journey: A Portrait of 6th-12th Grade Youth*. Peter Benson and his associates documented the major deficits that pulled kids into lives that were not successful. Risk Markers, the red flags indicating trouble in the life of youth, emerged from the study as well. The Institute found a high number of risk factors for most youth, and adults were stunned when they saw how common the risk factors were. This was long before we heard of dramatic developments such as the mass school shootings that would occur in the next decade. The deficits affecting the most children included watching television, coming home to an empty apartment, experiencing stress, or having few or no friends. The number of deficits was high for more than half of all youth. The world for youth was filled with risks. In this context, *Reclaiming Youth at Risk* was a comprehensive philosophy, striving to make youth "Our Hope for the Future," the subtitle of our book.

Risk factors have increased in the past two decades. Weapons are frequently found in the lives of youth. The amount of time youth watch television has

increased significantly. Economic hardships push parents to spend more time working and crunching schedules to cope with the necessities of life. This requires time taken from somewhere and that time is all too often taken from family life and family time. Moreover, we have all increased the number of technological gadgets we use. Computer time has increased and the smartphone has dramatically influenced the concentration and energy we spend on technology. Primary teachers report to me a noticeable drop in children's ability to use their face in communicating with adults and peers.

This is probably due to the amount of time spent in front of screens. Twenty years ago we said some youth were at risk. Today we see that all youth are at risk due to cultural and social factors that are accepted as normative for ourselves in our times.

A serious source of risk for youth depends on the schedules of adults. Time spent at work or tending to family needs may mean time away from social interaction. North American fascination with technology is fed by the invention of lap-ware programs that allow infants to generate colors and sounds when they hit the keys on a computer. Yet, we know that a child's brain is designed to respond to the eyes of adults rather than a computer screen. What are stressed parents to do with so many work and household activities that need tending? Adults have power to make their own careful choices.

When my children were young, we acquired our first phone answering machine after various persons complained that they would call and no one answered. That was part of the plan to protect our family from outside intrusion. We parents had rules about our priorities. We were all to eat breakfast and dinner together, although lunch was often away from home at school or the office. The prime mealtimes were family time. The TV was not on during meals nor was the phone answered. Imagine the conflicts that arose in the middle school and high school years when the phone would ring. Years later, my now-adult son was reconsidering the logic behind those rules when he became a father. After recalling the rules, my son said, "When I was in junior high school, I thought you were just being mean. Now I see that if you don't have those kinds of rules, you won't have any family time." I am grateful that he now understands our choices and sees the importance of making a careful choice based on what a parent thinks is important.

When we connect with a child, we have the power to change that child's life.

When I was a student studying psychology, the professor asked us to focus on early memories. My earliest recollection was mainly a visual scene. I was sitting in what seemed like a high chair at a large table at my grandparents' farmhouse. Many aunts, uncles, and cousins were also at the table. I recalled lots of laughter and smiling faces. Something in my hair amused everyone. At my grandfather's suggestion, I had put some of my oatmeal in my hair. My mother later said I was two when that gathering occurred. What I remember the most deeply of that experience is the happiness and warmth that comes from family.

I grew up in a different era when family gatherings were common and we lived near one another. This is no longer the life-experience of most youth. Families have accepted transfers and job offers from far-away locations. Grandparents may live at great distances from their grandchildren. Family schedules may not allow for gatherings except for high-stress holidays. The increasing social isolation of nuclear families has an impact on a child's view of the world as well as the child's life experience. We know from resiliency research that interpersonal contact is a valuable asset, particularly in the middle of stressful situations. If there is little social contact throughout life, a child assumes this is normal.

In a course I taught on end-of-life issues, a graduate student talked about "the medicalization of death." She was referring to the way families in our time have relinquished most matters relating to dying to a medical institution and its personnel. When a family member comes near the end of life, most families assume the doctors and nurses are the professional directors at this critical time. This is not to say that professional personnel should not be involved. But death is, above all, a family affair. The medicalization of death is a recent development which includes viewing death as defeat.

Not long ago—and still today in some parts of the world—death was a social event. When I was young and someone was approaching death, relatives were contacted and they came to say goodbye. I have memories of a person on a bed in a large room with many family members sitting in quiet conversation. Occasionally there were spiritual activities and certainly there was time for food and more animated conversation. Still, the main focus of the gathering was to be present while the person died. The group would then share their sorrow and grief. The mindset of those present was that this person was someone for whom they cared, and the social value of being present during this important time was vital. This is the "humanization of death."

For over two decades, the work of Reclaiming Youth has been the humanization of youth care. Our focus has been to create real hope in youth and in the adults who care about youth. For centuries, adults placed high hopes on youth. Pessimism about youth was alien to every traditional society. The Circle of Courage is a model for creating hope for a child to become a strong youth and responsible adult. The Circle of Courage philosophy empowers adults to create resiliency. A resilient youth is able to resist deficits and rise again if knocked down. The Circle of Courage philosophy makes innate human hope a reality.

Adults who build resiliency know the power of social connection. When we connect with a child, we have the power to change that child's life. In all previous ages, adults have valued social connections with youth. In our time of the nuclearization of families, we see isolation of parents and their children. Segregated by age, youth are isolated from adults, particularly from elders. Natural human social connections are powerful assets for youth. Connected adults can guide and clarify youth through periods of uncertainty. Successful youth work relies on social connections.

Those of us in the Reclaiming Youth movement are in the business of humanizing youth work and childcare. We continue to call adults back to the most basic of human values: compassion for children, loving care for all youth, reliance on hope, and encouragement of strong young people. Our generation-long goal has been to tap the human spirit in creating strong human beings. The Circle of Courage uses the best in humankind to enable children to become who they are meant to be.

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