

# Understanding the Circle of Courage

Kym Brown

---

## Introduction

In a seminar held at Flinders University in 2005, Professor Richard Whitfield, a consultant in holistic human development from the United Kingdom, claimed that fifty per cent of three year old children in the western world do not know that anyone loves them. Professor Whitfield contends that 'we are all nobodies without committed somebodies' and that without trusted adults to guide their development, many of these young people will provide their communities with enormous challenges in coming years. In this scenario, a great deal of energy will be expended, particularly by educators and law enforcement services, trying to cope with their behaviour.

The standard response in these situations is to toughen up and crack down on children and youth who do not toe the behavioural line expected of young people. Many jurisdictions have taken a 'zero tolerance' approach in recent times and prosecuting juvenile law breakers in adult courts is a response rapidly gaining popularity. According to many traditionalists, we must send a strong message to deter anti-social behaviour and nothing does this as well as a decent dose of punishment.

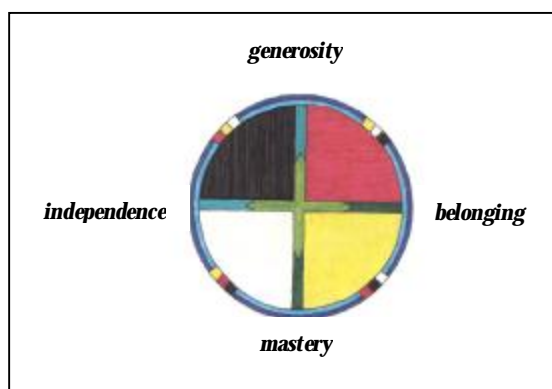
When we analyse this view of the world, the underlying theory is that children and youth are not the social equals of adults in their community. Children in most indigenous cultures, on the other hand, are considered to be just as important as their elders. For the Lakota people of North America, for example, the word 'child' translates to be 'sacred being', while the Maori consider a child as 'a gift of the Gods'. Australian Aboriginal languages have over 500 kinship terms.

One only has to watch the television news or browse the daily paper to know that the problems associated with disconnected young people (and people in general) are growing. Schools bear much of the brunt with children and students becoming increasingly disengaged from learning (when they turn up at school) and teachers having to endure greater levels of non-compliance and student aggression.

What we need is an alternative viewpoint, one that provides a way of understanding the links between wellbeing, behaviour and learning and enables us to be proactive rather than reactive in our work with learners. This can only happen if we move our focus from deficits to strengths.

## The Origins of the Circle of Courage

In 1988, Doctors Larry Brendtro, Steve Van Bockern and Martin Brokenleg were asked by the Child Welfare League of America to make a presentation on Native American child development principles to an international conference in Washington. They called the synthesis of this research the Circle of Courage and it has since become the basis of the work of the Reclaiming Youth Network.



The Circle of Courage

The Circle of Courage is a medicine wheel, which for tribal people in North America represents the need for all things to be in balance and harmony. The four colours symbolise the different races and their equality, while on the four points of the cross are the crucial developmental needs of children: belonging, mastery, independence and generosity.

Many thousands of people world-wide have been introduced to the Circle of Courage through the various publications and training programs of the Reclaiming Youth Network. People find it easy to understand and virtually all aspects of teaching and learning can be related to it. What is required, however, is a change of headset.

Central to this shift is the need to view learners as partners in the process of learning and development. This is the approach taken by youth work pioneers in the early 1900s, such as Dr Karl Wilker and Maria Montessori. They achieved great success in building the strengths of young people and reclaiming them as needed citizens. In tribal and kinship cultures, natural social relationships made sure that the growth needs of the young would be met. In today's go-it-alone society, however, the child and youth development infrastructure has collapsed (Benson, in Brendtro et al, 2005, p131). Many of today's young people have what the Reclaiming Youth Network call 'broken circles'.

### The Critical Importance of Belonging

To examine the Circle of Courage, we begin in the east. Belonging is as fundamental to people as air, water, food and shelter. Dr Bruce Perry (2004) argues that attachment is the basis of belonging and is an essential core strength that 'vaccinates' young people against many social problems. In traditional kinship systems, children would have many mothers and fathers and anyone with grey hair was a grandparent. Dr Martin Brokenleg, a Lakota elder, suggests that the ultimate test of kinship is behavioural rather than genetic: in Lakota culture you belong as a relative if you act like you belong. Treating others as kin forges powerful human bonds that draw everyone into a network of relationships based on mutual respect.

Many of today's young people have not experienced true attachment and belonging. Micro-nuclear families, domestic conflict, unfriendly preschools/schools, rejecting peers and antagonistic neighbours have all contributed to the sense of alienation and rejection felt by so many of our disconnected children and youth. Children estranged from positive, supportive adults and peers remain emotionally and (often) morally adrift.



We are all born to connect

Lack of belonging is toxic to the nervous system of a developing child or youth. It prevents the brain from wiring as nature intended and affects not only the limbic system (the part of the brain responsible for most of our emotional functioning) but our pre-frontal cortex as well. This is the brain's reasoning centre. It drives our ethical and moral behaviour and contributes to our social performance.

Without healthy attachment and belonging, our ability to control our impulses, join in with others, develop empathy, accept and celebrate differences in others and behave respectfully towards ourselves and those we come into contact with is severely impaired.

Children know when they belong – when they are accepted by others. Dr Larry Brendtro tells the story of a boy in his teens who had been through multiple foster placements and had attended many schools, without much success. He said to Larry on one occasion, "I really want to go to school. Could you find me a school where the teachers are not trained to kick me out?"

Can children succeed in a preschool/school in which they do not feel they belong? Beck and Malley (1998, p133) argue that most children fail in school not because they lack the necessary cognitive skills, but because they feel detached and isolated from others and the educational process. When children feel rejected by others, they either internalise the rejection and learn to hate themselves (in which case a lot of their resulting behaviour will be self-defeating) or externalise the rejection and learn to hate others.

Our brains have inbuilt sociometers that help us recognise when we are being accepted or rejected. This helps children decide whether other people are friends or foes. When they attach to a trusted adult, there is no need to use any avoidance behaviour. The adult becomes a key part of that child's social ecology. Norton (1995) listed the usual responses of children who fail to attach to their teachers and find themselves being taught by adversaries:

- They become *resentful* and withdraw
- They become *resistive* of additional efforts to gain their trust
- They become *rebellious* and refuse to cooperate

- They *retreat* by becoming truant, by dropping out, or by turning to substances
- They become *reluctant* to do anything
- They become *revengeful* and engage in overt activities designed to 'get even'

What can we be doing then to enhance feelings of *genuine* belonging for every child and youth in our preschools and schools?

Effective strategies might include:

- Making sure learners are greeted with smiles and reminders that they are wanted at preschool/school
- Continuous acts of kindness, even in the face of difficult behaviour
- Appropriate self-disclosure – this a way of sharing a common sense of humanity with children and students
- Spending time with learners – quantity matters
- Model positive communication – give eye contact, square off, use minimal encouragers (signs that you are following what they are saying)
- Providing opportunities for every learner to work with a partner and in other collaborative group situations
- Addressing their concerns when they are feeling uncomfortable or 'out of it'.

Belonging is so important that unless children have a genuine sense of it, their ability to engage in learning activities and pro-social behaviour will be impaired. Resilience is built into our DNA but is significantly enhanced when we feel cared for, protected from threat, encouraged to take responsible risks during the learning process and recognised as equals within our social circle.

### Why Mastery is Vital

Throughout our existence, humans have used their intellectual capacity to manage and improve their immediate environment. Notwithstanding that some of our intelligent thinking can be misguided towards anti-social outcomes, people nevertheless have the capacity to learn anything they believe is meaningful and relevant to them.

In indigenous cultures, mastery developed as children, mentored by elders and skilled peers, gained competence in social, physical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual domains. Tribal people

used their oral traditions to pass on highly sophisticated wisdom – stories, observation by elders, personal creativity and competition in a non-adversarial spirit of shared adventure were used to teach children.

A major block to children and youth in their quest for mastery in our modern education system is the win-lose mentality promoted by competitive assessment and subsequent student labelling. When acceptance is more available to those highly competent in the most valued curriculum areas and activities, we end up with a large underclass of young people who accept the tag of 'losers'.

This is not to suggest that competition is a bad thing. Striving to do better is an inbuilt human trait. In Native American culture, competing with others (not against others) built a spirit of camaraderie and mutual respect. Mastery was not about being the best and building your ego. Children were taught to listen to and honour elders and other adults and peers who had skills or knowledge in a particular area. Someone who was 'better' in some area was seen not as an adversary but as a model and even a mentor.

It is easy to see how important parents, teachers and other educators are to the lives of children. Every child needs trusted adults in their lives to help them to build the necessary understanding and capability to manage their life. Humans have one of the longest maturity continuums of any species – the human brain is not emotionally mature until the mid 20s – and so adult guidance and support is needed for a lot longer than it is in the animal kingdom.

Learning is what the brain does naturally. People were learning long before schools were invented. Dr Martin Brokenleg (1999a p196) argues that 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.

When a young person sees an adult not as a friend but as a foe, it is unlikely that they will learn from them. As a result, learning flourishes best in communities where children are securely bonded to adults. Children who are alienated from adults have severe problems in developing competence and achievement.

This is where our theories and practices of engagement and learning are so vital. Cognitive neuroscience has enhanced our understanding of the learning process and highlighted how important modelling and repetition are for retention of information and know-how. The way we relate to a young person will in large part determine how successfully they learn through us. Protecting them from adverse consequences when risks taken during learning don't come off, is crucial to whether or not they are prepared to persist and do the hard yards often required.

One really interesting approach to mastery is Tony Buzan's (2005) TEFCAS model:

- T stands for try-al – before attempting a new skill or understanding, we must be committed to the learning, have the correct model or information and set reasonable goals
- E stands for event – when we try to recall and use what we have learned
- F stands for feedback – this is our perception of how we did, based on information from our own senses and from anyone observing or mentoring us.
- C stands for check - If things don't work out, this is the point when we need reminding that we are still learning and not getting it right is a just part of the process. The important thing is to compare what happened with the correct model.
- A stands for adjust – after we have checked what happened, we adjust and try-al again.
- S stands for success – we may celebrate here, or set new goals. Transferring what we have learned to novel situations will take our learning to another level.

Some other strategies to promote mastery might include:

- Involving learners in peer coaching – teaching someone else is a powerful way to build your own learning and learning from a peer provides another view of the information/problem
- Teaching learners the skills to effectively self-assess their products and progress
- Having learners set goals and challenges for themselves

We know that the human brain seeks to reproduce events that meet the body's needs. Mastery promotes feelings of belonging, self-worth and wellbeing.

### From Dependence to Independence

Ruth Benedict once said, 'Ours is a culture that systematically deprives children of opportunities for showing responsibility and then complains about their irresponsibility'.

Independence is not just self-sufficiency but rather the responsibility to engage in actions to make one's life a success. Martin Brokenleg (1999b, p2) believes that parents and teachers who respect children and youth will carefully discipline them by providing opportunities to take responsibility for decisions. Young people who have been disciplined respectfully display the confidence that comes from a growing maturity and by the time they reach adulthood, demonstrate a deep respect for themselves, for others and for the environment they are part of.

Very dependent children can be a strain on the adults in their lives. They usually need reminding about basic responsibilities and even then, often have adults running around after them organising things that are really within their capacity to do. It is always fascinating to watch young children in a school or preschool who have their well-intentioned parents come into the learning space and unpack their bags for them and arrange their possessions so they can take part in the day's activities. If the parents thought in terms of how this reinforced their child's dependence, they would no doubt back off and teach them how to do these things for themselves.

One of the barriers to building independence in learners is the belief that children and youth are too young to know what's good for them and that it is the responsibility of adults to make all the decisions regarding what will be learnt, when and how. This is not to advocate putting children in charge of running our schools and preschools. Rather, it is about ensuring that they have opportunities to take some responsibility for what they learn, how they learn it and how they can demonstrate their growing competence.

Even in the area of behaviour management, imposing a system-wide discipline policy without

the input and agreement of learners is likely to elicit responses ranging from ritual acceptance to passive aggression to outright rebellion.

In the words of African-American educator, W.E DuBois, only responsibility teaches responsibility. A school or preschool that promotes independence for learners will have a process in place whereby learner voices can be heard and treated with respect. They would work on key principles such as:

- the power of consensus – any important decisions that affect learners are worked through with learners before any action is taken. Decisions that fall within the mandated legal responsibilities of staff and site leaders are obviously made by those people, however learners (and their caregivers) are always kept well informed.
- the power of individual children and youth – learners are given responsibilities across the site. In some schools, students are given opportunities to help out in the office, in the canteen, in the library and so on. Where young people have the opportunity to exercise responsibility for themselves and their community, their independence grows.
- the power to solve problems – having learners involved in helping to solve problems for the entire site is very empowering. Some sites even involve their learners in behaviour management by having them sit on ‘student fairness committees’ and the like. Here they learn significant lessons in compassion and democracy.
- respect for the disrespectful – this is not easy, because the human brain is designed to mirror the treatment we receive from others. Over-riding the tit-for-tat impulse is an important demonstration to a disrespectful child that while their behaviour is inappropriate (and self-defeating), they still have value as a human being and will be treated accordingly. Respect is not something we are born with – it is learned from our experiences with wise and trusted adults. Every time to treat a disrespectful child with respect, their

brain ‘wires’ that response and adds to their repertoire of behaviour.

Martin Brokenleg (1999b, p6) reminds us that across centuries of western culture, adults have tried to rear respectful kids by training them to be obedient. This may, however, be setting very low expectations. Virtually any animal can be trained to be obedient through the systematic application of rewards and punishments. Only humans can develop self-discipline and character, becoming autonomous beings who make responsible decisions.

### The Healing Power of Generosity

The Lakota have a belief that if something good comes your way, it should be passed on quickly to see how far the good can spread.

Martin Brokenleg tells the story of a teacher he met in Canada who taught her first grade students about the Circle of Courage. In her class, one enthusiastic learner was constantly blurting out answers to questions and dominating the air space. The teacher took him aside and kindly explained that he would have to learn to give other classmates their turn to respond. “Oh, it’s a generosity thing!” he exclaimed. Even small children can understand this wisdom (from Brendtro, et al, 2005, p131).

Generosity is closely linked with respect. Understanding that other people have the right to the same freedom and social resources as you is fundamental to respectful behaviour. Moreover, to help another person and make a contribution to their wellbeing not only demonstrates high respect, but enriches our own sense of self-worth and positive identity. When generosity occurs, the recipient feels nurtured and their feelings of belonging are enhanced.

Generosity is also a powerful healer. In a highly-individualistic culture, young people can become socially remote from one another. Excessive materialism can result in counterfeit connections where children and youth become reliant on gadgets, screens and on-line communication. Self-centred thinking and the inability to delay gratification can produce very selfish young people who find it hard to feel empathy towards others. Contribution to others is often a foreign concept. Without sufficient belonging, kids

experience an emptiness that can only be filled by contact with others and the feeling that their life has purpose beyond what they currently know.

Behavioural scientists are now discovering principals of generosity that tribal peoples have known for thousands of years. Altruism is inborn and the rudiments of empathy are apparent even in a newborn. What happens when a child in a hospital nursery begins to cry? The child next to him or her starts to cry as well (Brokenleg, 1999c, p67). Judge Keith Leenhouts founded *Volunteers in Probation*. He would tell his volunteers this story about the generosity of a young child:

*A 9 year old girl returning late home from school explained that she stopped to help her friend who had broken her doll. 'Oh, did you fix the doll?' asked her parent. 'No', she replied, 'I don't know how to fix dolls. I just helped her cry'.*

Selfish behaviour manifests in our preschools and schools in the form of interrupting or ignoring others, picking on relief teachers, teasing, put downs, harassment, bullying, cyber bullying, exclusion from groups, greed, vandalism, stealing and dishonesty. Providing opportunities to contribute to others is an antidote to these issues.

Martin Brokenleg (ibid p67) points out that generosity comes in many forms. You can see it every day in simple human behaviours such as giving compliments and showing respect. These small kindnesses are part of the therapeutic process for unloved, distrustful children. They also underpin all genuine teacher-learner interactions. To be patient, to listen, to share a smile, a joke or even a tear are powerful gifts in a culture where abrasiveness, ridicule and poor manners are becoming increasingly common.

One challenge for educators of teens in particular, is to make caring fashionable. For many boys, in particular, caring is not seen as 'cool' behaviour and so re-badging acts of kindness and service as 'mature' or 'very cool' may encourage those with high-testosterone levels or anti-social 'private logic' to see it in a positive light.

Strategies to promote generosity in a school or preschool might include:

- providing opportunities for learners to work in peer coaching programs with younger or older people
- setting up programs where learners work with older people (e.g. teaching an older person some IT skills at the school; visiting aged-care facilities and sharing stories or interviewing older folk for information about their lives and history; having retired volunteers work with learners on site ...)
- involving learners in community and environmental projects
- encouraging learners to organise activities in the site for others to be involved in
- working with local councils to enable learners to be involved in volunteer programs
- encouraging learners to find out about and support children living in third world countries .....

Children and youth will not readily show generosity unless they have opportunities to collaborate with, help and care for others. They will also find generosity hard if it is not shown to them on a consistent basis. In an increasingly busy and de-personalised society, preschools and schools have a fundamental role to play in building identity and character through altruism.

## Conclusion

Growing children and youth have many needs. The Circle of Courage describes the four most fundamental of these. It provides us with a model to understand the importance to a young person's wellbeing of having these met. It also helps us recognise where needs are not being met, causing broken circles.

Restoring children and youth to a state of harmony requires a balancing act. We must help them meet their need to belong, without making them dependent upon us. As we support them to become more independent, we need to watch that they still have boundaries and don't become independent by being irresponsible.

Similarly, we want them to develop as skilled problem-solvers and a lot of their learning will be driven by the desire to constantly improve. Competition, however, can drive out generosity and breed a selfish desire to be the best for the

sake of one's ego. By displaying and encouraging acts of kindness and generosity, we can help young people to maintain balance and see their growing mastery as an asset to others as well.

We are sitting on the edge of an exciting evolution in education and in the broader society. Using the Circle of Courage as a compass, we have the chance to turn the tide towards a healthier and more respectful community.

#### References

Beck, M and Malley, J (1998), *The Pedagogy of Belonging, Reclaiming Children and Youth*, Pro-Ed Journals, Volume 7 Number 3

Brendtro, L, Brokenleg, M and Van Bockern, S (2005), *The Circle of Courage and Positive Psychology, Reclaiming Children and Youth (The Journal of Strength-Based Interventions)*, Compassion Publishing, Volume 14, Number 3

Brokenleg, M (1999a), *Native American Perspectives on Mastery, Reclaiming Children and Youth*, Pro-Ed Journals, Volume 7 Number 4

Brokenleg, M (1999b), *Raising Respectful Kids, Reclaiming Children and Youth*, Pro-Ed Journals, Volume 8 Number 1

Brokenleg, M (1999c), *Native American Perspectives on Generosity, Reclaiming Children and Youth*, Pro-Ed Journals, Volume 8 Number 2

Buzan, T (2005), *Buzan's Think, Learn and Create*, Buzan Centres Ltd

Norton, R (1995), *The Quality Classroom Manager*, Baywood Publishing

Perry, B (2005), *Keeping the Cool in School: Promoting Non-Violent Behaviour in Children*, [www.scholastic.com](http://www.scholastic.com)

#### Want to know more? Why not book into the Response Ability Pathways Course.

Response Ability Pathways (RAP) provides essential skills for all who work with children and youth and in particular, young people who need our support to overcome challenges and change self-defeating behaviour. The training develops abilities to *respond to needs* instead of reacting to problems so that young people take *pathways to responsibility*.

RAP applies resilience science to meet the growth needs of all young persons. It combines the child-rearing philosophies of the Lakota, a first nations group from North America with the latest research evidence on resilience, brain science and positive child and youth development. The training counters current punitive approaches that lock adults into conflict with young people and provides alternative strategies that enlist children and youth as responsible agents in positive change.

The two-day course focuses on three basic human capacities: *connect, clarify and restore*. These are normal abilities hard-wired into the human brain so that in challenging times, we look to connect to trusted others for support, to clarify problems and issues and to restore harmony and respect. This training is highly experiential and enlivened by videos and small group practice. Participants gain specific competencies so they can disengage from adversarial encounters, connect with adult-wary young people and restore bonds of respect.

RAP is useful to all professionals and people who work with and support children and youth.

For more information about booking into a RAP course, or arranging your own, contact:

Kym Brown

É 8641 0469

È 0412 596562

: [kymandkell@bigpond.com](mailto:kymandkell@bigpond.com)