



RECLAIMING YOUTH  
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**Connecting with Kids Who Outwit Adults**  
Larry Brendtro

A digital copy of this presentation is available at  
[reclaimingyouth.org/handouts](https://reclaimingyouth.org/handouts)

A person wearing a dark hoodie and a baseball cap is seen from behind, sitting on a rocky outcrop. They are looking out over a vast mountain range under a soft, hazy sky, likely at sunrise or sunset. The mountains are layered, creating a sense of depth and scale. The overall mood is contemplative and serene.

**Connecting with Kids Who Outwit Adults**  
**Larry Brendtro**

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# Connecting with Kids Who Outwit Adults

Trauma

Resilience

Conflict



Connecting

Clarifying

Restoring



# Trauma







**ALFRED ADLER** THE PROBLEM CHILD

## VOICES OF PIONEERS

We shall have great difficulty in treating children brought up in an atmosphere without love.

They will look on us as they look upon all others who hurt them.

ALFRED ADLER



Childhood emotional and behavioral problems result from facing stressful life events without adequate support.

ALAN SROUFE



# The Path to Trauma



Adverse Events

Lack of Support

Toxic Stress

**Trauma**





# Adverse Childhood Experiences



Kaiser Permanente and Center for Disease Control

## Household Stress

1. Divorce or separation
2. Substance abuse
3. Domestic violence
4. Criminal behavior
5. Mental illness

## Abuse and Neglect

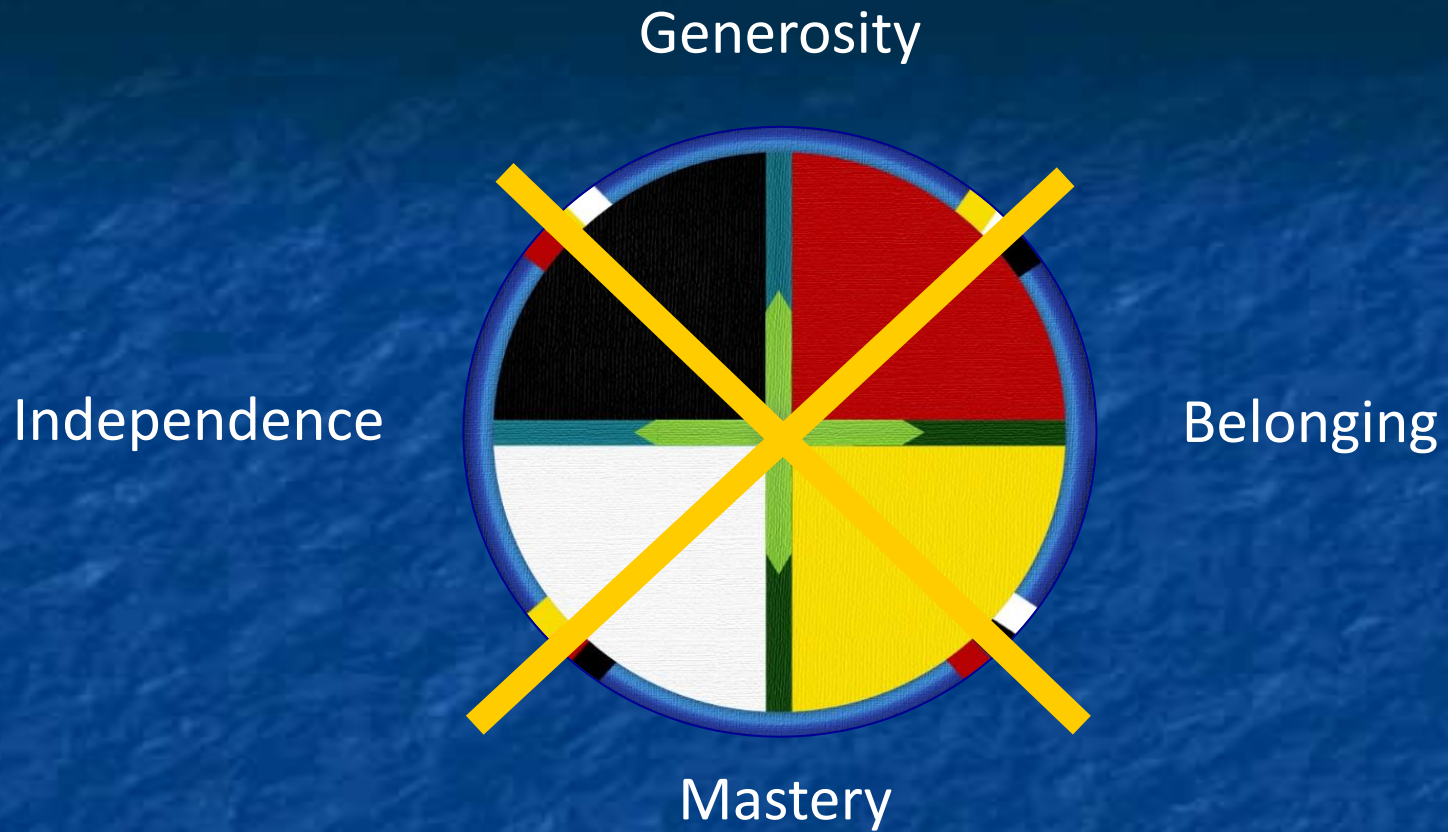
6. Psychological abuse
7. Physical Abuse
8. Sexual Abuse
9. Physical Neglect
10. Emotional Neglect

## Childhood Experiences vs. Adult Alcoholism



There are many such correlations of the ACEs score with poorer physical and mental health.

But resilience usually is the most likely outcome.



When does adversity become toxic?

When these experiences interfere with developmental needs.



Most problem behavior results from unmet needs.  
Meeting developmental needs is the pathway to growth.

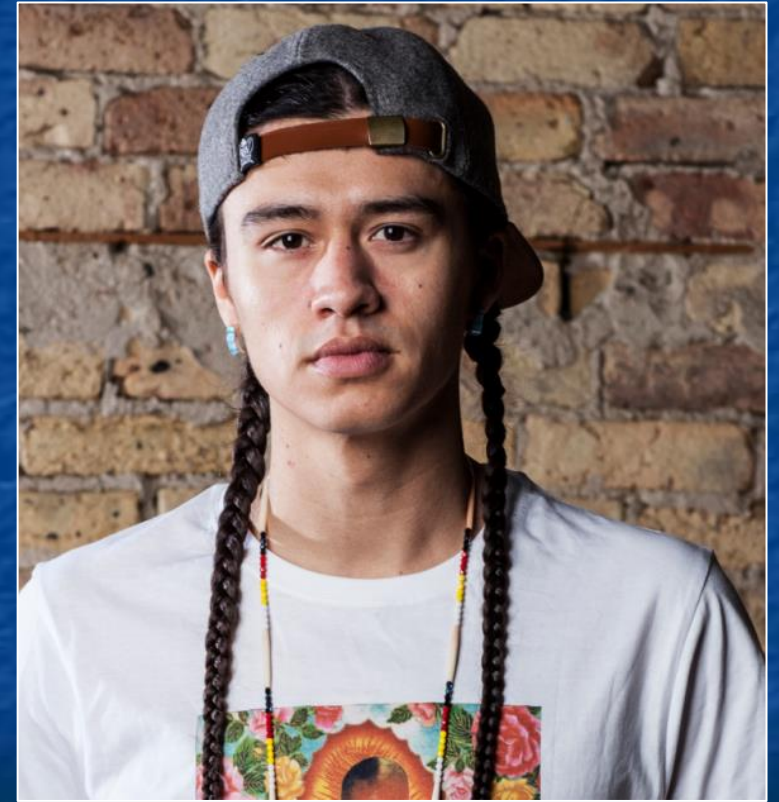
ABRAHAM MASLOW



Preventing Problems



Healing Trauma



Building Strengths





## Simple Trauma

One overwhelming  
traumatic event



## Complex Trauma

Multiple highly  
stressful events





## Developmental Trauma (AKA Relational Trauma)

Multiple, prolonged, adverse events, often beginning in early childhood relationships.

Includes physical, emotional, and educational neglect and maltreatment.

BESSEL VAN DER KOLK



Traumatized youth show painful emotions and pain-based behavior.

JAMES ANGLIN



Terror → Fear



Loss → Grief



Hate → Rage



## Numbing The Pain

I didn't want no one to love any more. I had been hurt too many times. So I began to learn the art of blocking out all emotions and shut out the rest of the world. The door would open to no one.

RICHARD CARDINAL

*Cry from the Diary of a Métis Child*



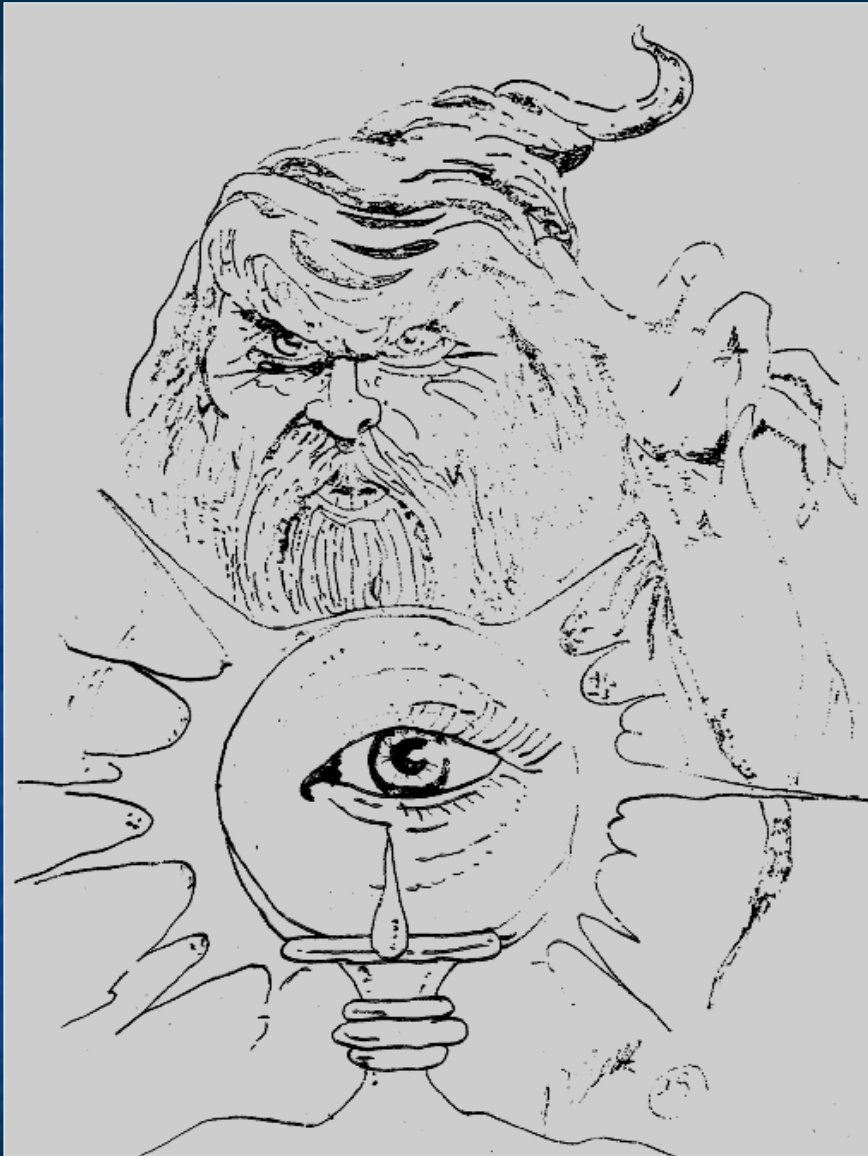


**Medications** blunt sensations instead of teaching the person how to deal with distress.

**Human touch** provides support and healing but is prohibited in many therapeutic settings.

BESSEL VAN DER KOLK





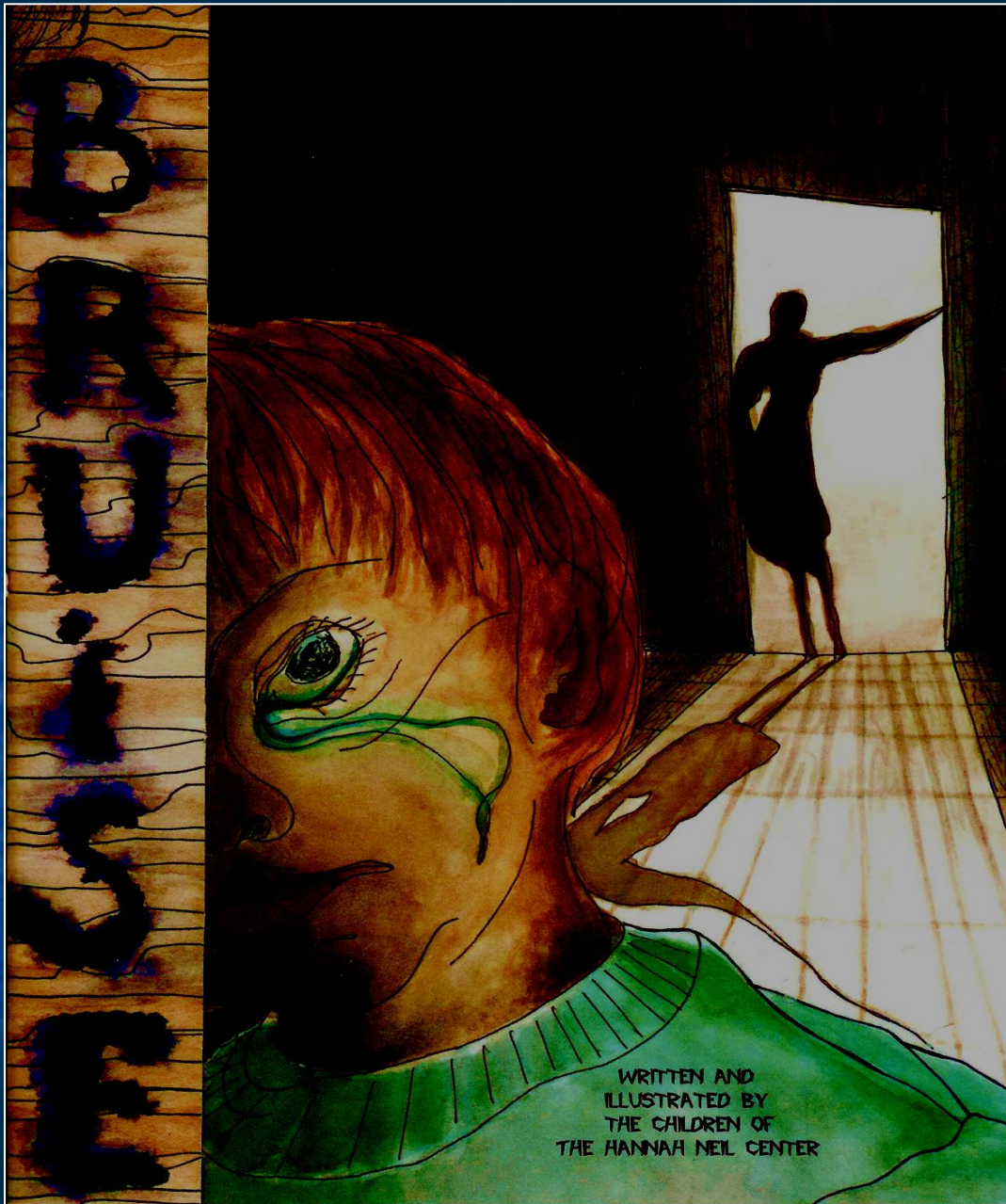
## Pain-Based Discipline

Seldom did adults respond to a young person's inner world.

Instead, they would react with controlling demands like "Get a grip on yourself" or "Watch your language" and warn of possible consequences.

JAMES ANGLIN

Art by Aboriginal teen in prison.



WRITTEN AND  
ILLUSTRATED BY  
THE CHILDREN OF  
THE HANNAH NEIL CENTER

*Punishment* comes from the Latin *poena* meaning *pain*.

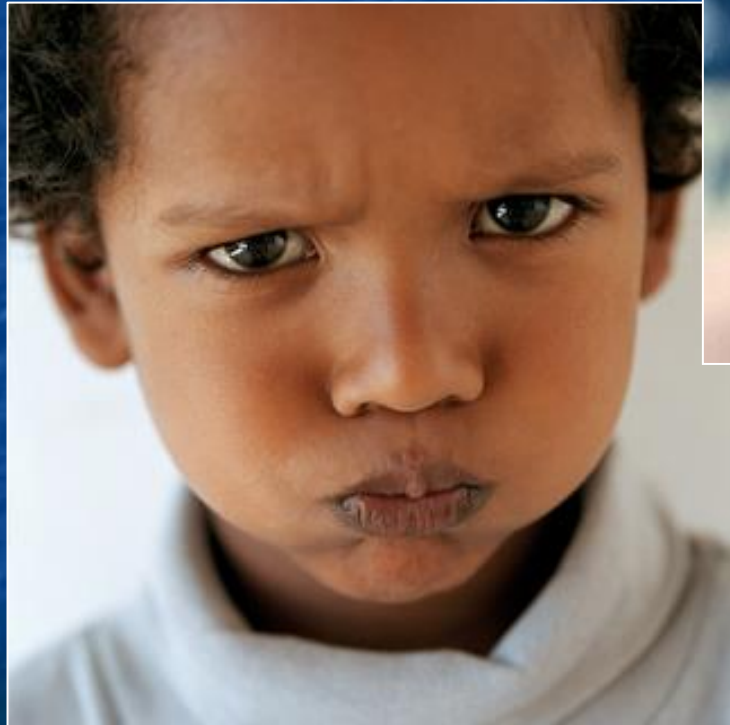
Punishment inflicts pain for behavior control or abuse.



What is our natural response to this pain-based behavior?







Or to this type of  
Pain-Based Behavior?



What is the primary effect of relational trauma?



- a. Impaired Trust
- b. Impaired Learning
- c. Emotional Numbing
- d. Emotional Dysregulation



Dysregulation:

The inability to control fear, anger, and impulsive behavior

BESSEL VAN DER KOLK





Distrust = Unsafe

A child refusing offers of emotional connection is feeling unsafe.

FRANCINE COURNOIS



## Historic Distrust

Youth from dominated groups initially may not trust helpers of a different race.

MARTIN BROKENLEG





## Historical Trauma

Cultural oppression results in  
cumulative emotional wounds  
across generations.

MARIA YELLOW HORSE BRAVE HEART

# Cultural and Racial Trauma

KENNETH HARDY

## Overt Symptoms

Acting Out

Withdrawal

Helplessness

Hopelessness

Substance Abuse



## Hidden Wounds

Disrespect

Voicelessness

Wounds of Rage

Wounded Self-Worth





The most powerful tool of an oppressor is the mind of the oppressed.

If someone can convince us that we are not good enough, not smart enough, and not capable enough, then oppression becomes permanent inside our heads.

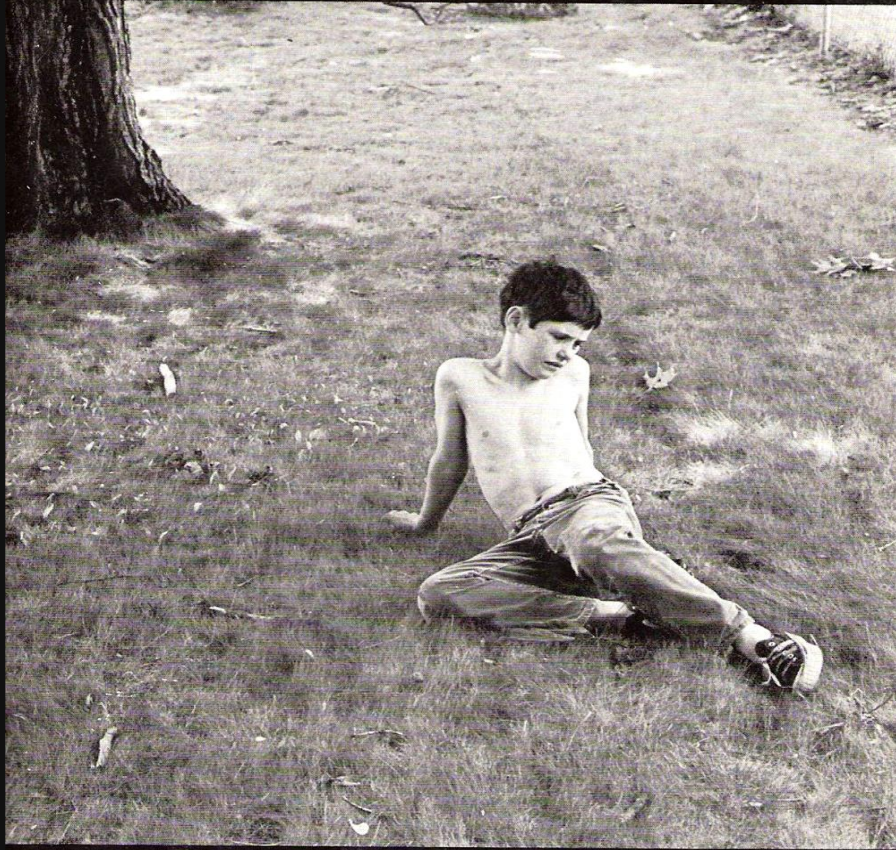
MARTIN BROKENLEG



# The other 23 hours

Albert E. Trieschman  
James K. Whittaker  
Larry K. Brendtro

foreword by  
David Wineman



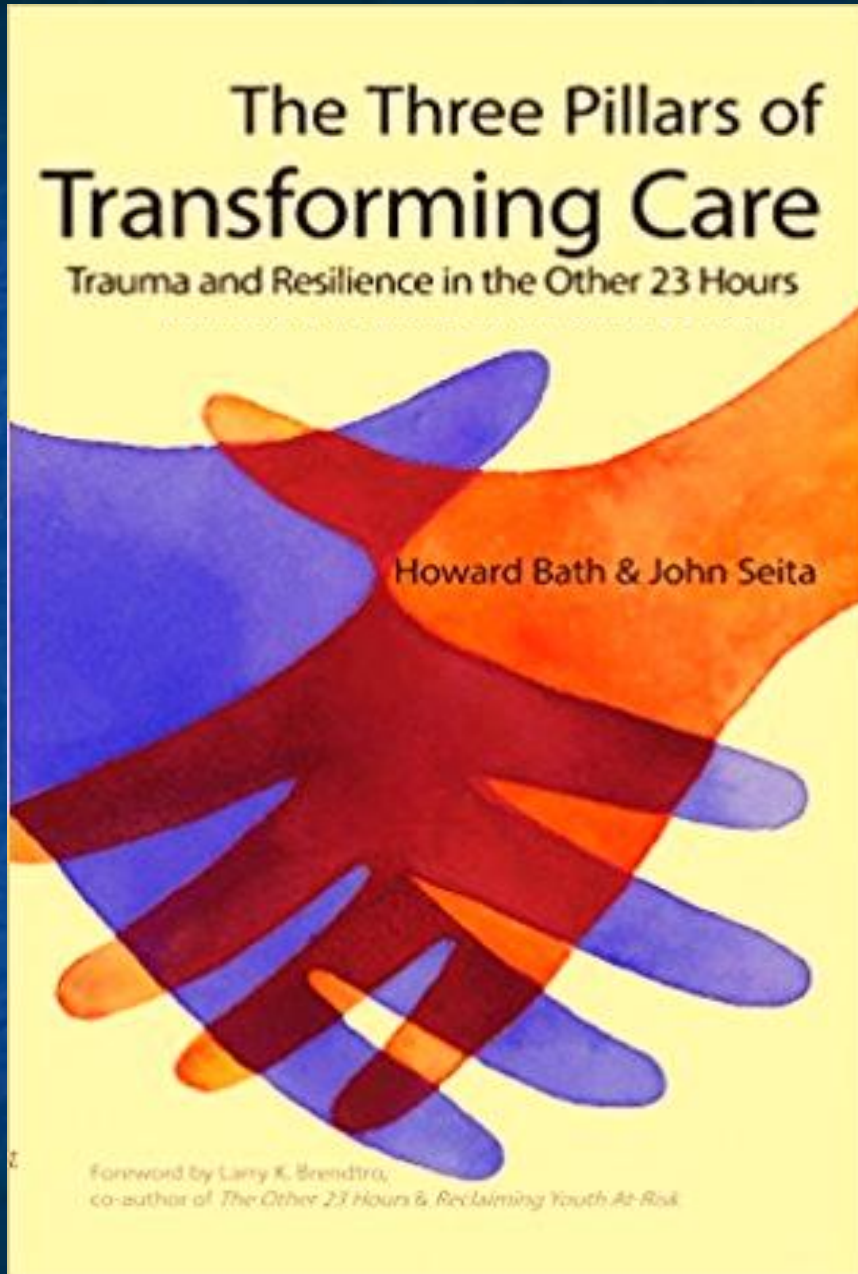
therapeutic relationships in the life space

## Trauma and Resilience in the Other 23 Hours

Parents, counselors, teachers,  
coaches, direct-care workers,  
case managers, and others are all  
in a position to help a child heal.

RICKY GREENWALD  
*Child Trauma handbook*





Trauma

Resilience

Danger

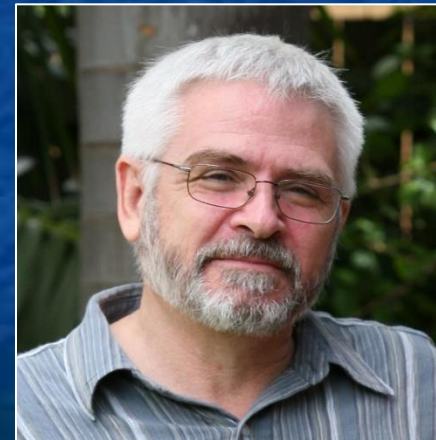
Safety

Disconnection

Connecting

Dysregulation

Coping

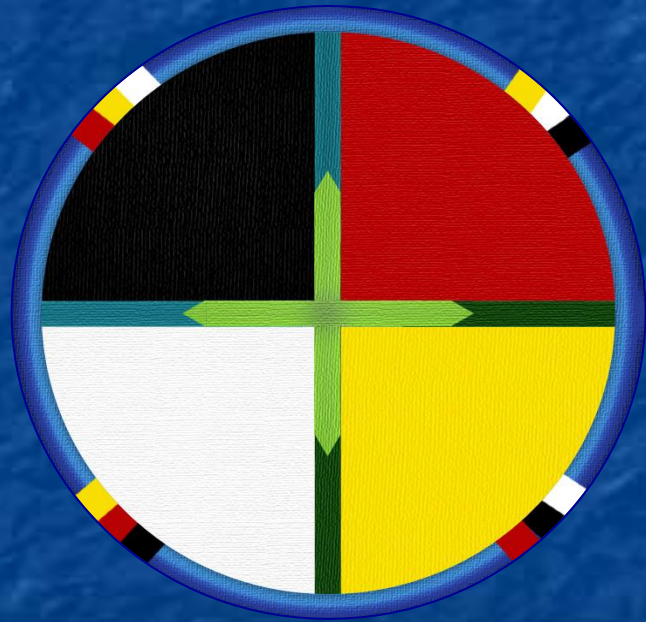


HOWARD BATH



JOHN SEITA

# Resilience







## What is Resilience?

Re-sil-i-ence: from Latin *resilire*, “to leap back.”  
It means bouncing back from difficult life events.



## The Deficit Model

Problems are *symptoms* of disease or disorder.

**Interventions focus on drugs and behavior control.**





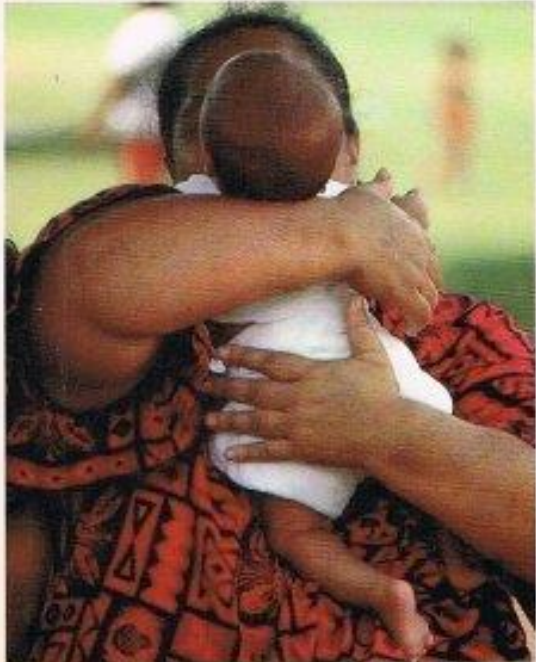
## The Resilience Model

*Problems are attempts to cope with challenge.*  
**Interventions focus on meeting growth needs.**



# VULNERABLE BUT INVINCIBLE

*A Study of Resilient Children*



EMMY E. WERNER • RUTH S. SMITH  
FOREWORD BY NORMAN GARMEZY

## The Kauai Resilience Study





# Roots of Resiliency

Resilient children were loved despite their behavior, intelligence, or attractiveness.



Youth who received positive responses were stress resistant.



Youth who received negative responses were vulnerable.



## Grit: Passion and Perseverance

IQ and “natural talent” do not drive success. Rather, persons who develop interest in some area and engage in serious practice reach high levels of excellence.

ANGELA DUCKWORTH



# Overcoming the Odds

*High Risk  
Children  
from Birth  
to Adulthood*



Emmy E. Werner and Ruth S. Smith

By age 30, nearly two thirds of individuals in the Kauai resilience study were achieving positive life outcomes, regardless of their original risk condition.





## The Self-righting Effect

Motivation to restore balance fosters positive development.

Protective factors have greater impact than risk or trauma.

EMMY WERNER & RUTH SMITH  
*Overcoming the Odds*





## **The Steeling Effect**

Surmounting challenge builds coping strengths.

MICHAEL RUTTER

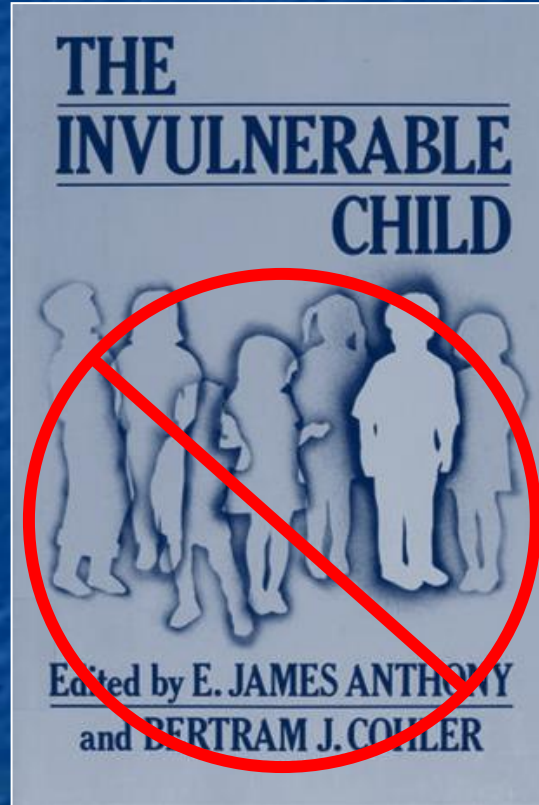


With positive connections, a majority can surmount almost any risk.

EMMY WERNER



True False Resilience is a personality trait of invulnerability.





Risk and resilience are universal.



The world breaks everyone and, afterward, many are strong at the broken places.

ERNEST HEMINGWAY, *A Farewell to Arms*





Resilience is not a personality trait, but persons with attractive personal qualities are better able to recruit relational support.

# The Path to Resilience



Inner Strengths

Relational Support

Adverse Events





Resilience rests fundamentally on relationships.

SUNIYA LUTHAR

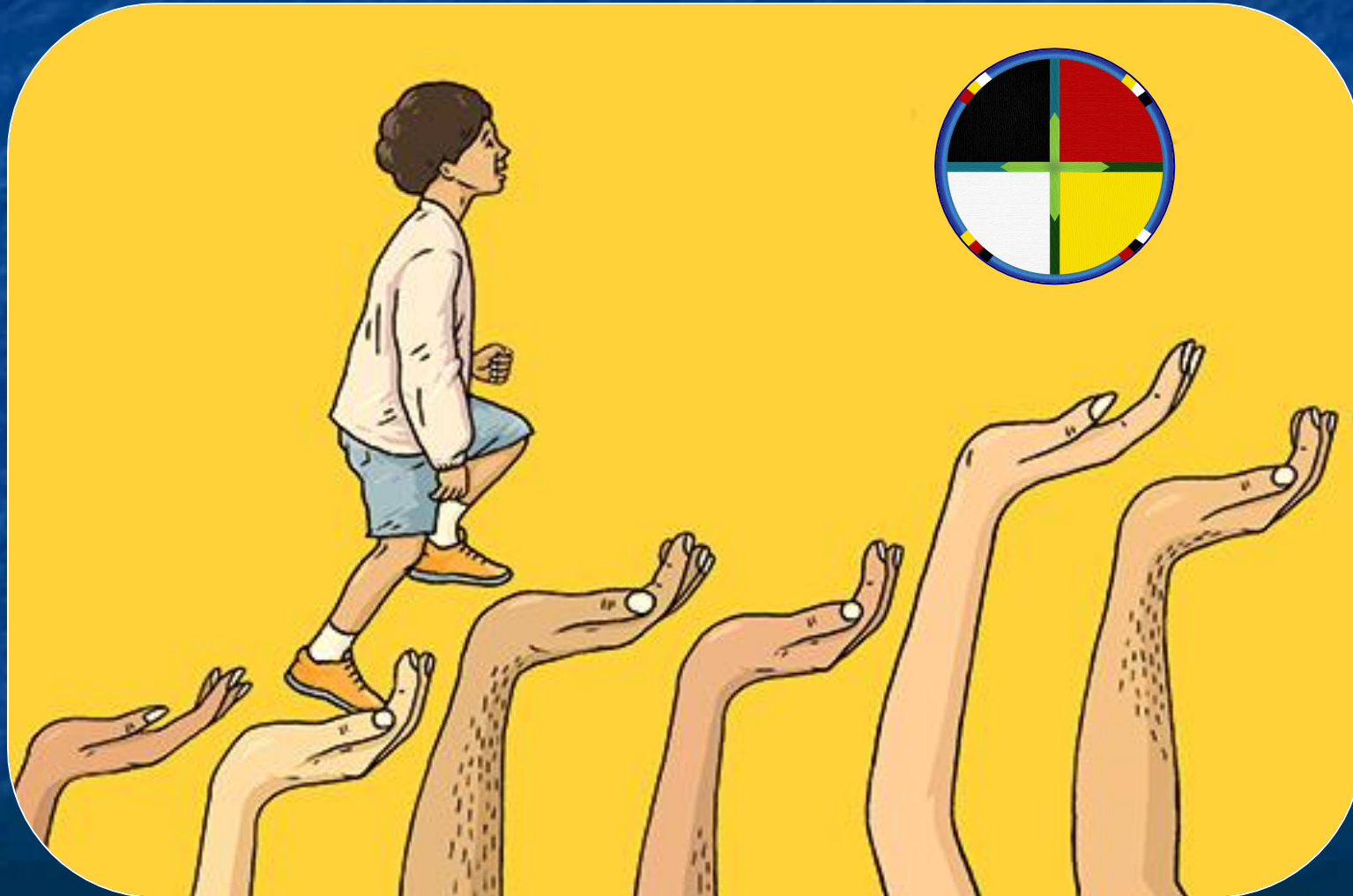


Illustration by Scott Menchin



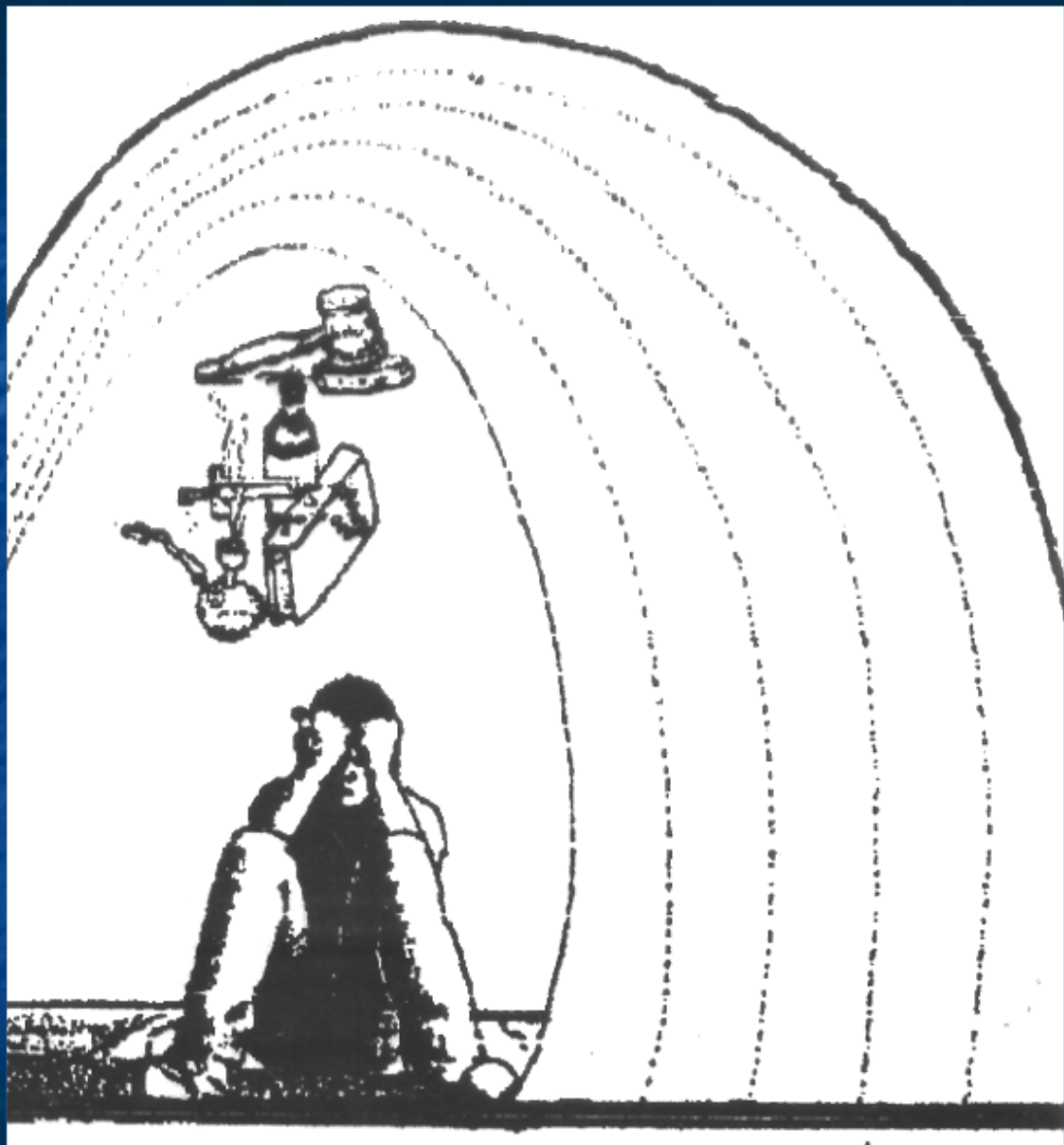
# The Circle of Courage and Resilience Science

EMMY WERNER



# Conflict





What are the conflicts in the life of this First Nations youth?

Canadian Youth in Care Network





## VOICES OF YOUTH

I have to put up a front when I meet people because I am afraid if I open up, then they're going to hurt me.

– A Canadian Youth in Care



Adult-Wary Kids





Substitute  
Belongings





Peer  
Deviancy  
Training?





Or Elder  
Deficit  
Disorder?



## VOICES OF YOUTH

- What matters most is our diagnosis of the adult.
- Understand our problems but help us have hope.

SIBYLLE ARTZ  
University of Victoria, Canada





Angry and Adult-Wary

John Seita

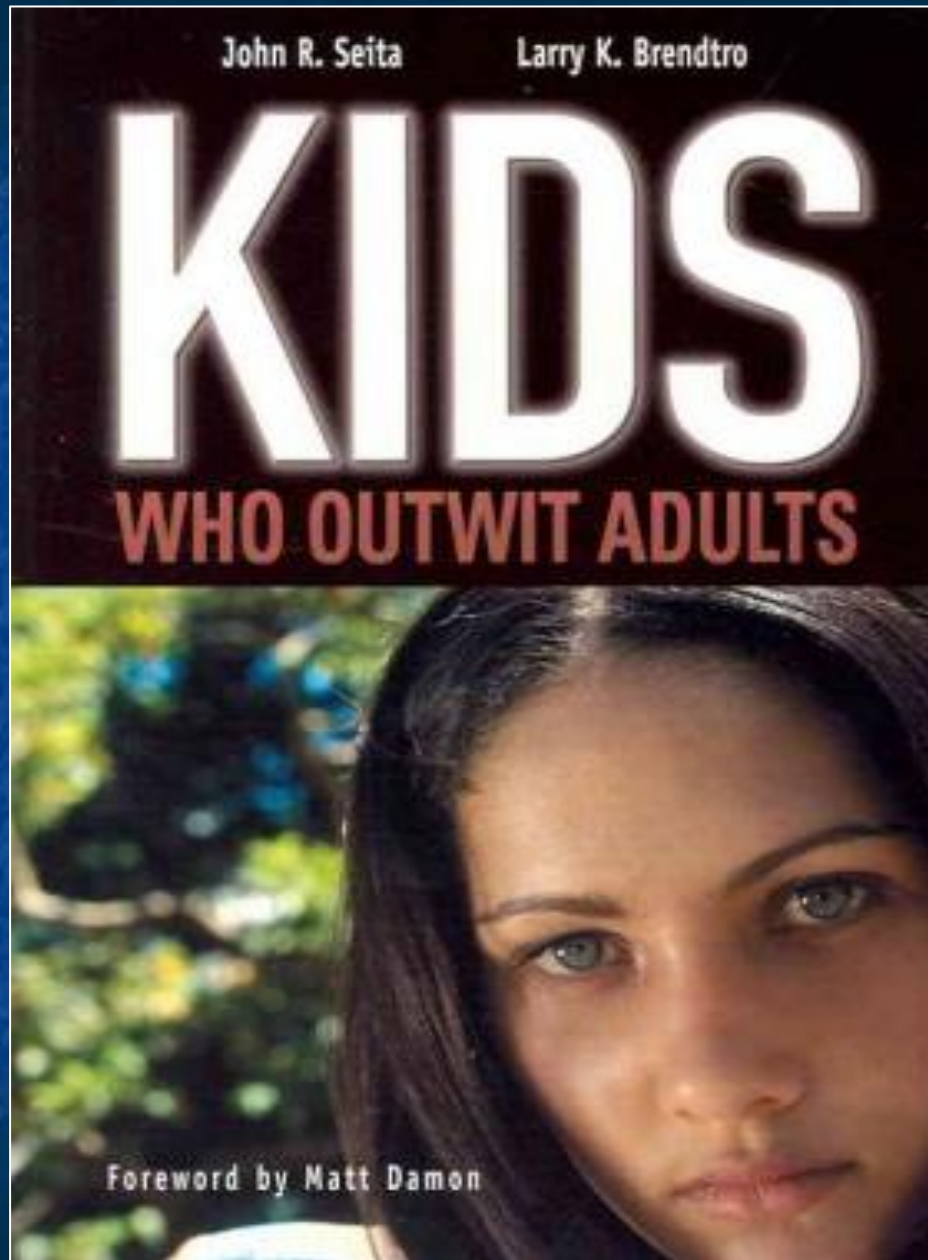
15 court placements by age 12





Dr. John Seita  
and Family





## Coping Styles of Adult-wary Kids

- Fight
- Flight
- Fool





## **FIGHT**

Private Logic:  
*Hurt or be Hurt*



# FLIGHT

Private Logic:

*Hide or be Hurt*





**FOOL**

Private Logic:

*Outsmart the enemy*



## FIGHT

*Hurt or be hurt*



Threaten – *I am dangerous*  
Power Play – *I am the boss*  
Payback – *You will suffer*

## FLIGHT

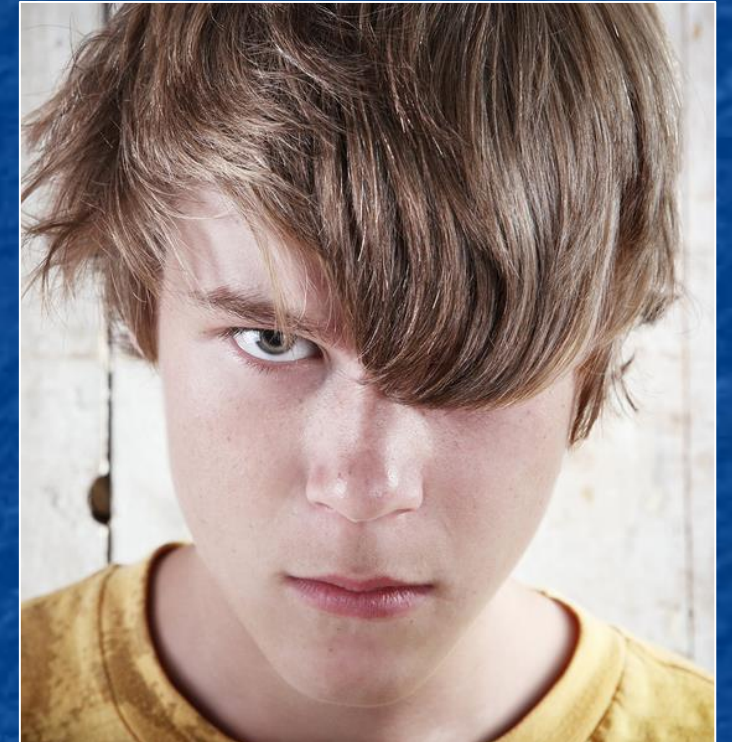
*Hide or be hurt*



Isolate – *Shut people out*  
Retreat – *Shut out the pain*  
Escape – *I can't take any more*

## FOOL

*Outsmart the enemy*



Deceiving – *Charm and disarm*  
Diversion – *Act dumb or crazy*  
Mind Game – *Insult or provoke*



## FIGHT

*Hurt or be hurt*



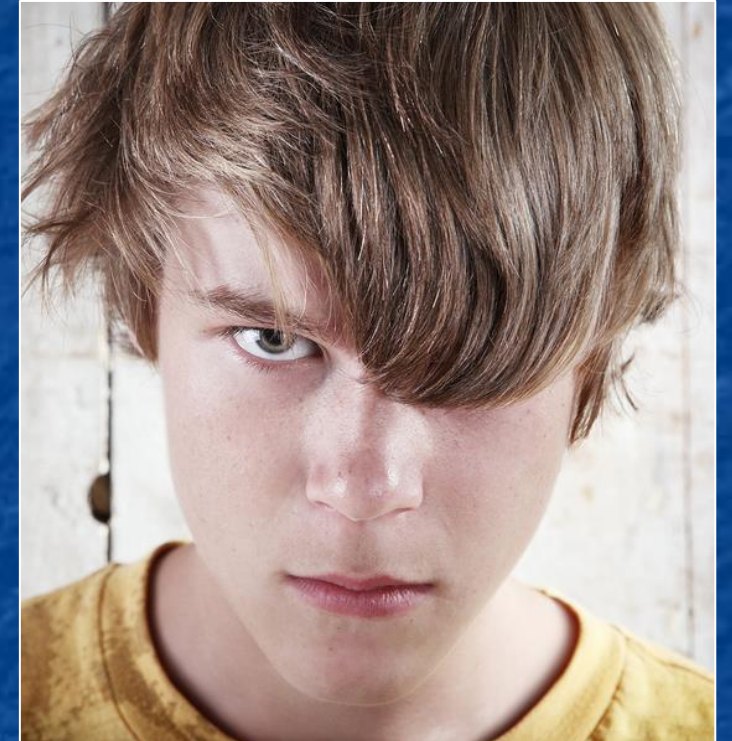
## FLIGHT

*Hide or be hurt*



## FOOL

*Outsmart the enemy*



Think of an example of a youth who uses one of these tactics.

What methods do and do not work with these youth?



# BREAKING

DOWN

# OUR WALLS

What attitudes and behaviors may get in the way of you forming or maintaining quality relationships?

- low self-esteem (including "false pride")
- addictions, compulsions, illness (mental and physical)
- prioritizing work over relationships
- alienating or isolating tendencies
- super-independence from others
- overdependence on others or co-dependency (with addicts)
- worrying too much
- social anxiety or shyness
- feeling "different" from others
- fear of rejection, abandonment or being alone
- fear of failure
- fear of criticism, confrontation or anger
- oversensitivity (including defensiveness)
- excessive feelings of guilt
- martyrdom or "victim syndrome"
- frequently comparing self to others
- unrealistic expectations toward self or others
- perfectionism
- taking life or self too seriously, difficulty having fun
- rigidity, inflexibility or controlling tendencies
- chaotic or overflexible tendencies
- not being able to take things seriously enough
- procrastination or indecisiveness
- extreme loyalty to others
- people-pleasing or approval-seeking tendencies
- non-assertiveness (passivity or passive-aggressiveness)
- ignoring or not expressing self and own needs and feelings
- caretaking or super-responsibility for others
- stereotyping people
- aggressiveness or resentment (holding grudges)
- jealousy or envy
- super-irresponsibility or not keeping agreements
- nondisclosure of self (including fear of "being found out")
- dishonesty or manipulative tendencies
- avoidance of commitments (includes fear of feeling "trapped")
- overuse of defense mechanisms (e.g., denial, blame)
- other \_\_\_\_\_

Focusing on developing healthy relationships is an important life skill!

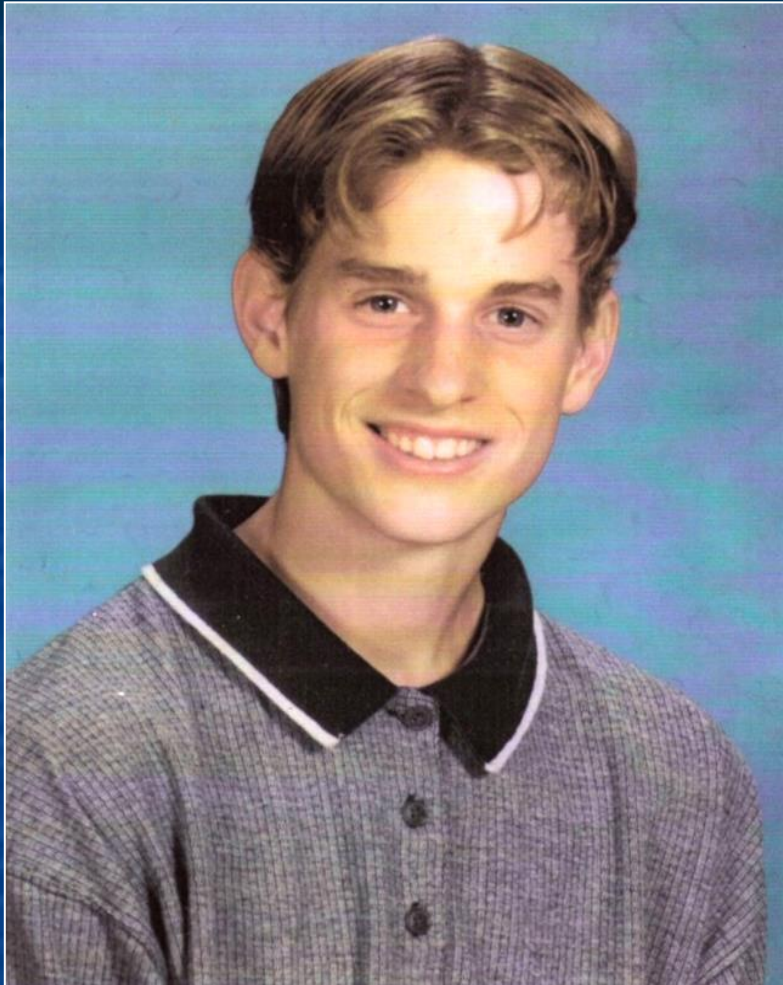
use for  
exam



*Staff at the psych hospital gave me this list of symptoms of mental disorder and said they use it to observe my behavior.*

*So, each day I picked a few problems to act out. When they try to mess with my mind, I mess with theirs.*





JONATHAN LAY  
Alberta, Canada

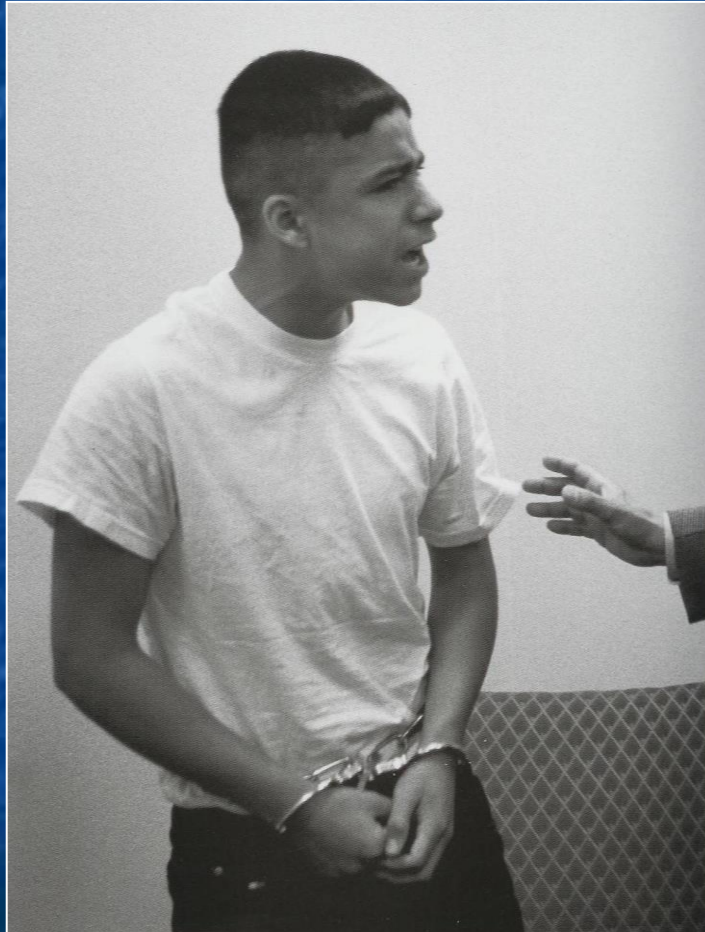
## VOICES OF YOUTH

I check out people very carefully.  
I am good at reading people.  
Sometimes I use reverse  
psychology. Like if a counselor is  
getting too close, then I ask him  
about his life, his problems, and  
it scares him away.

# Reacting to Problems or Responding to Needs?

## ~~Reacting~~

- Controlling the person
- Harsh aggressive tone
- Retaliating to hostility
- Punishing problems



## Responding

- Calming the person
- Concerned assured tone
- Defusing hostility
- Solving problems



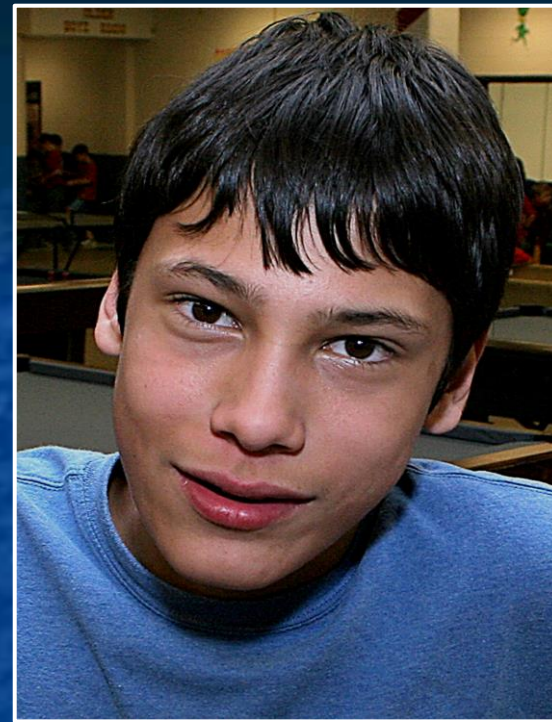


## Adversarial Encounters

**Distrust.** Youth believes adult won't care, understand, or help.

**Antagonism.** Youth and adult are in conflict and power struggles.

**Alienation.** Rancor produces aggression or avoidance.



## Respectful Alliances

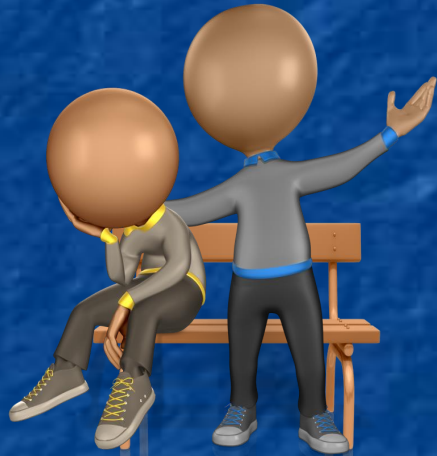
**Trust.** Youth believes the adult cares, understands, and can help.

**Cooperation.** Youth and adult work together to solve a problem.

**Attachment.** Mutual respect develops from working together.

# Restorative Action Plans — RAP

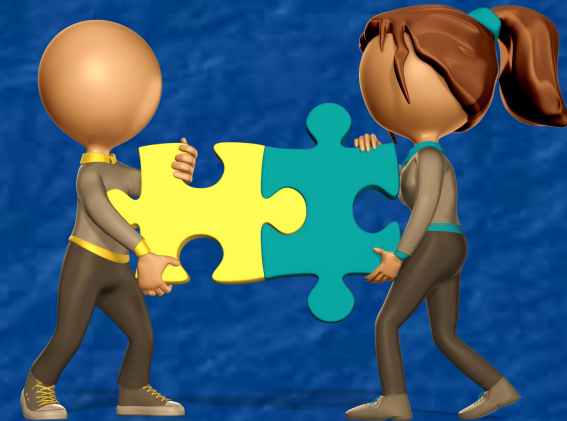
*Our Brain's Natural Helping Process*



**CONNECT**  
for support



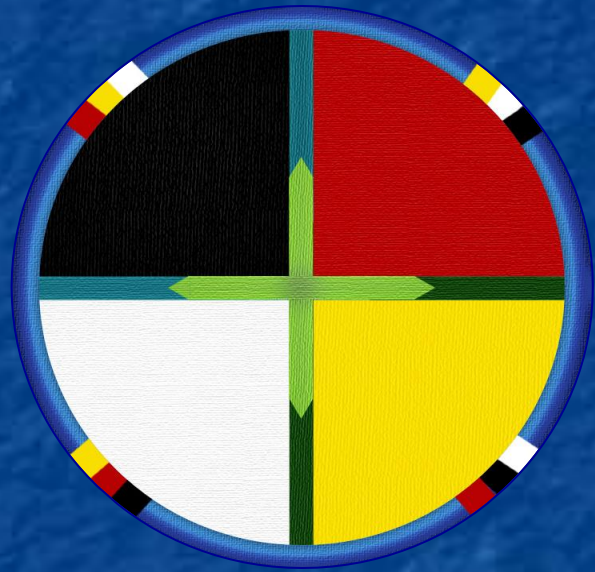
**CLARIFY**  
challenges



**RESTORE**  
respect



# Connecting



# Goals for Connecting



## Person Receiving Help

Find someone safe I can trust.

Be willing to share my concerns.

## Person Giving Help

**Create Safety** by building trust.

**Show Empathy** by responding to needs.





CONNECT



## Create Safety

Being able to feel safe with other people is probably the single most important aspect of mental health.

BESSEL VAN DER KOLK



CONNECT

“You have to watch your back.”



***Felt safety*** is in the eye of the beholder.

KAREN PURVIS





CONNECT



Calming and connecting in moments of crisis.



## Rapid Trust: Friend or Foe

The brain makes instant decisions about whom to trust—even with those we have just met. This is the first step to a social bond.

STEVEN PORGES  
*The Polyvagal Theory*





CONNECT



## Show Empathy

I do not ask the wounded person how he feels. I become the wounded person.

WALT WHITMAN



CONNECT



Empathy enables persons to be open without fear of being criticized or rejected.

DAVID LEVINE





CONNECT



Antwone Fisher



CONNECT







CONNECT



VOICES OF YOUTH

What matters most is  
our diagnosis of the adult.

SIBYLLE ARTZ  
University of Victoria, Canada

# Connecting with Adult-Wary Kids







Use problems as learning opportunities.

*“Please coach me, don’t scold me.”*





Provide fail-safe relationships.

*“Don’t give up on me.”*







Increase dosages of nurturance.  
*“I need to know you really care.”*



Don't crowd.

*"If you get too close, I will back away."*





Decode the meaning of behavior.

*“I try to hide what I really think.”*



Model respect to the disrespectful.

*“Your respect helps build mine.”*





Touch in small ways.

*"I am watching you very carefully."*



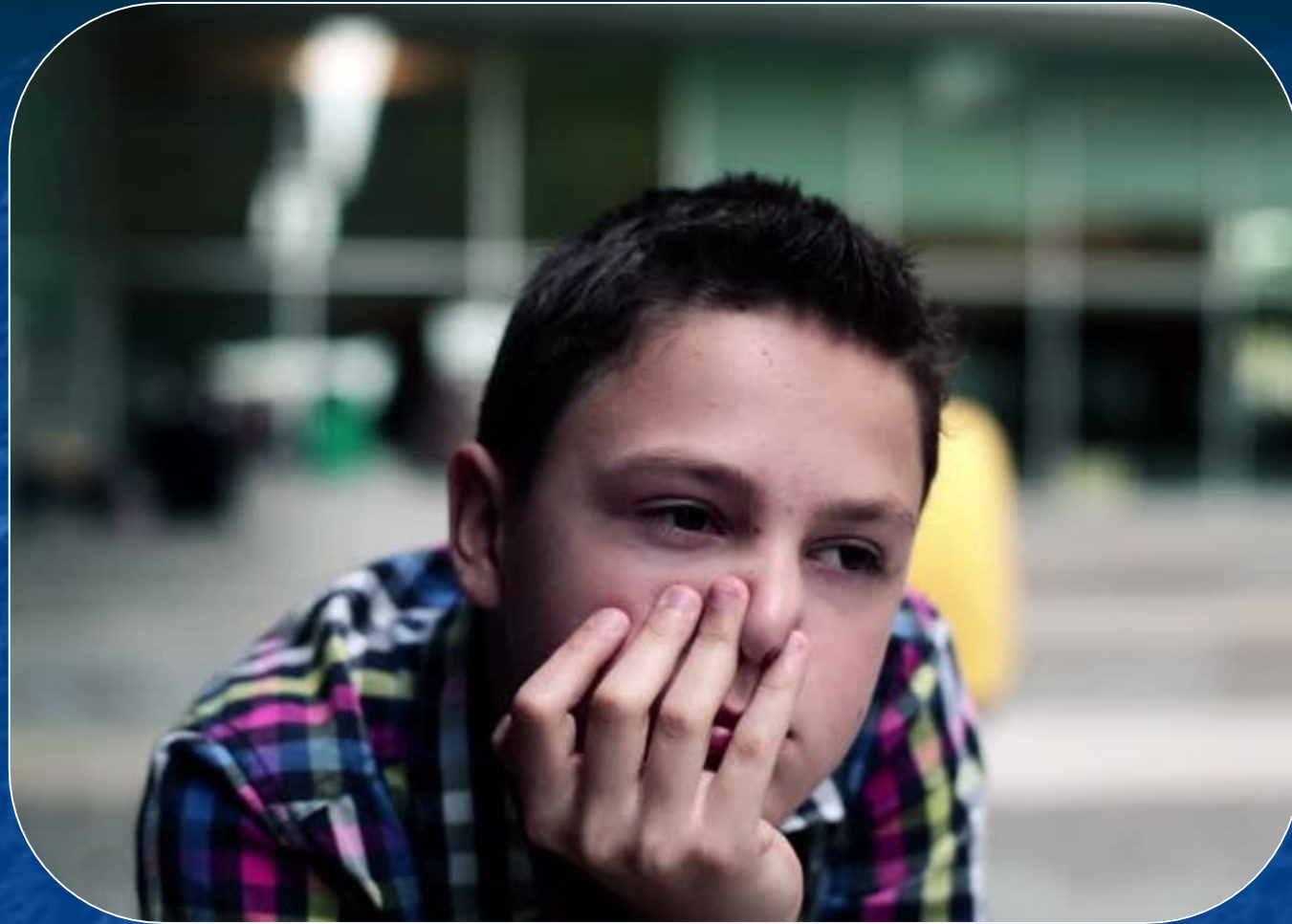




Enlist youth as colleagues.

*“I am the only real expert on me.”*





Give seeds time to grow.

*"I am still learning."*



Strengthen cultural and spiritual roots.

*“I need to find a purpose for my life.”*





## VOICES OF YOUTH

You need to set up a comfort zone. Don't just dive in.

I avoid adults who act superior to us: "Do what I say or else!"

You've gotta let the kids connect with you, not force it.

# Clarifying





# Goals for Clarifying



## Person Receiving Help

Share challenging life events.

Understand oneself and others.

## Person Giving Help

**Explore Timelines** of key life events.

**Gain Insight** into strengths and needs.



## Exploring Timelines

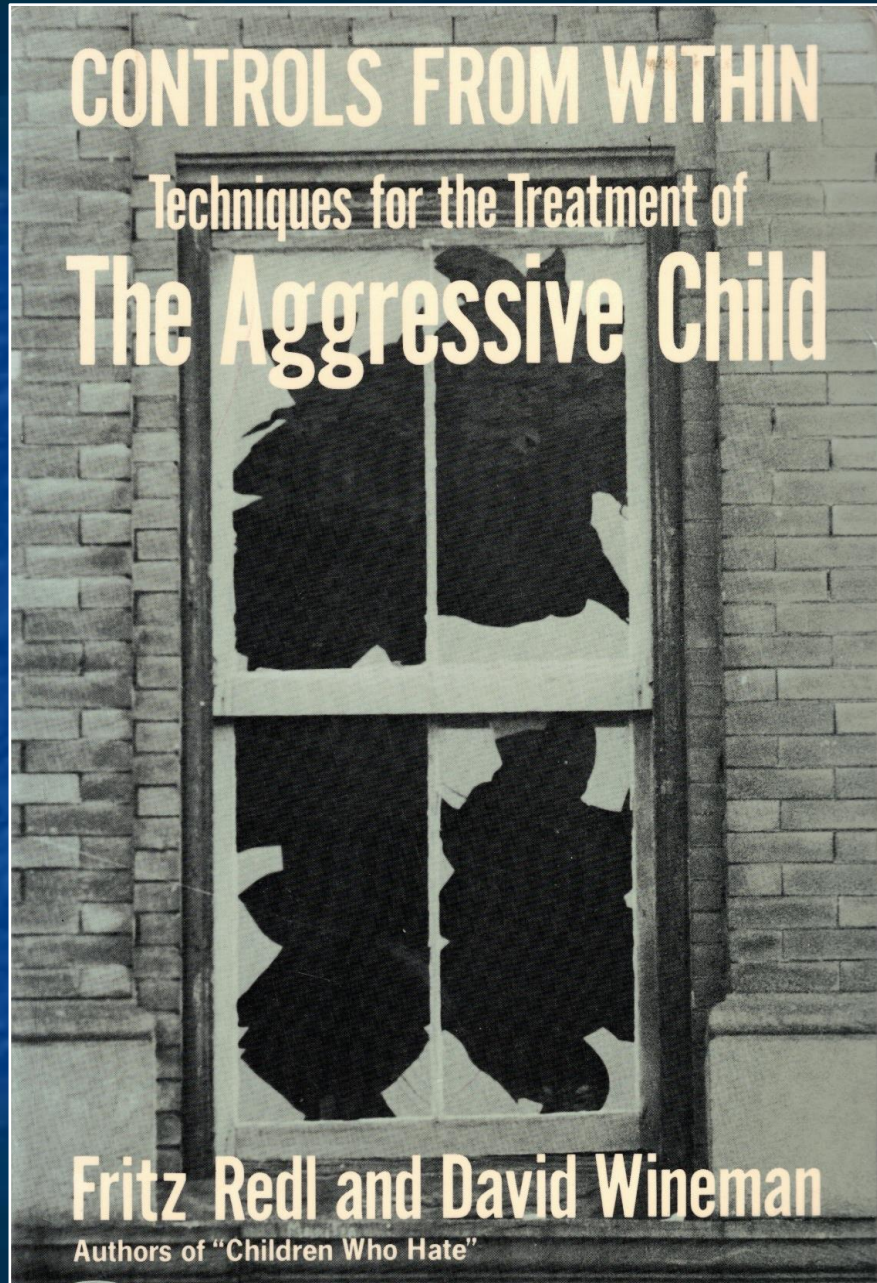
Discussions of life events to promote growth, development, and learning.

MARK SMITH, University of Edinburgh





CLARIFY



Exploring behavioral events is the most effective way to understand the thinking and motivation beneath behavior.

FRITZ REDL    DAVID WINEMAN





CLARIFY



A life event is best understood how it was experienced and interpreted.

MIHALY CSIKSZENTMIHALYI





CLARIFY



## Focus on Here and Now Challenges

Most persons find it easiest to talk about immediate issues. Thus, we begin with any event a person is willing to discuss.



CLARIFY

# Private Logic



I am ... bad, worthless, stupid, helpless.  
Others are ... mean, don't care, don't understand.





Window Words  
are verbal bids for  
further discussion.

*“I was smart  
until second grade.”*



Nonverbal Windows  
signal discussion has  
touched deep feelings.





CLARIFY

# CLEAR Solutions

## The Problem-Solving Brain



### Challenge

What triggered the event?

### Logic

What was the person thinking?

### Emotions

What was the person feeling?

### Action

What was the specific behavior?

### Response

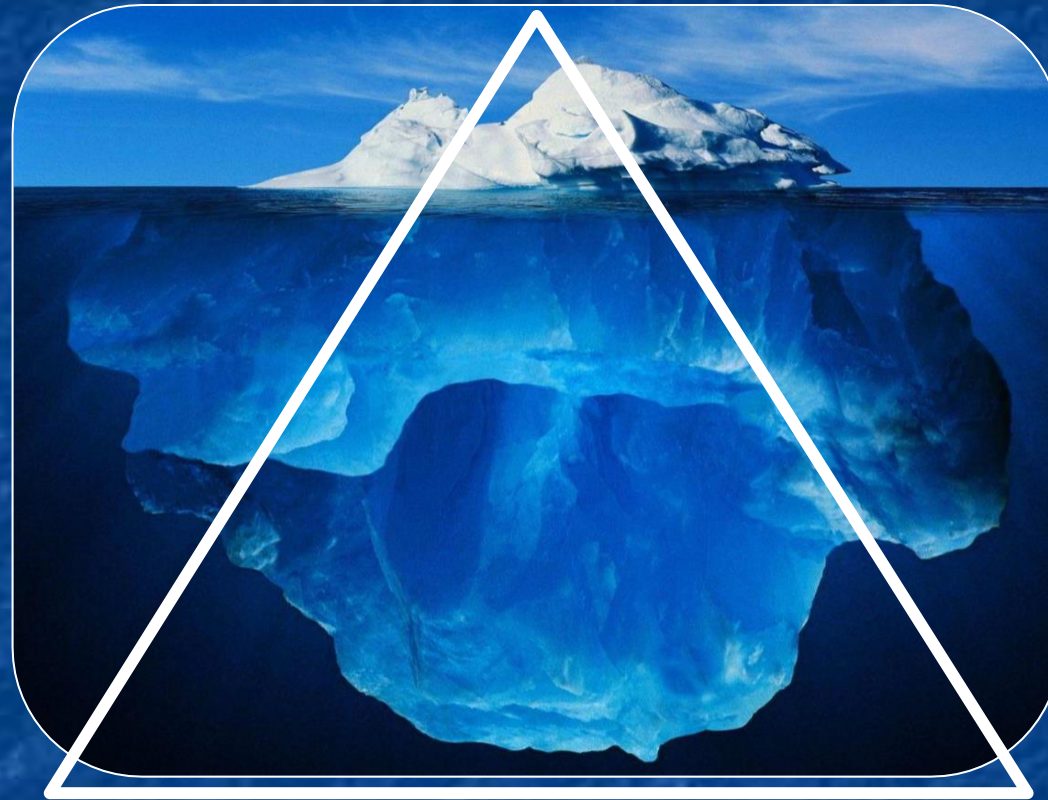
What was the outcome?



CLARIFY

# The Outside Kid

**Behavior**



**Logic**

**Emotions**

The Inside Kid





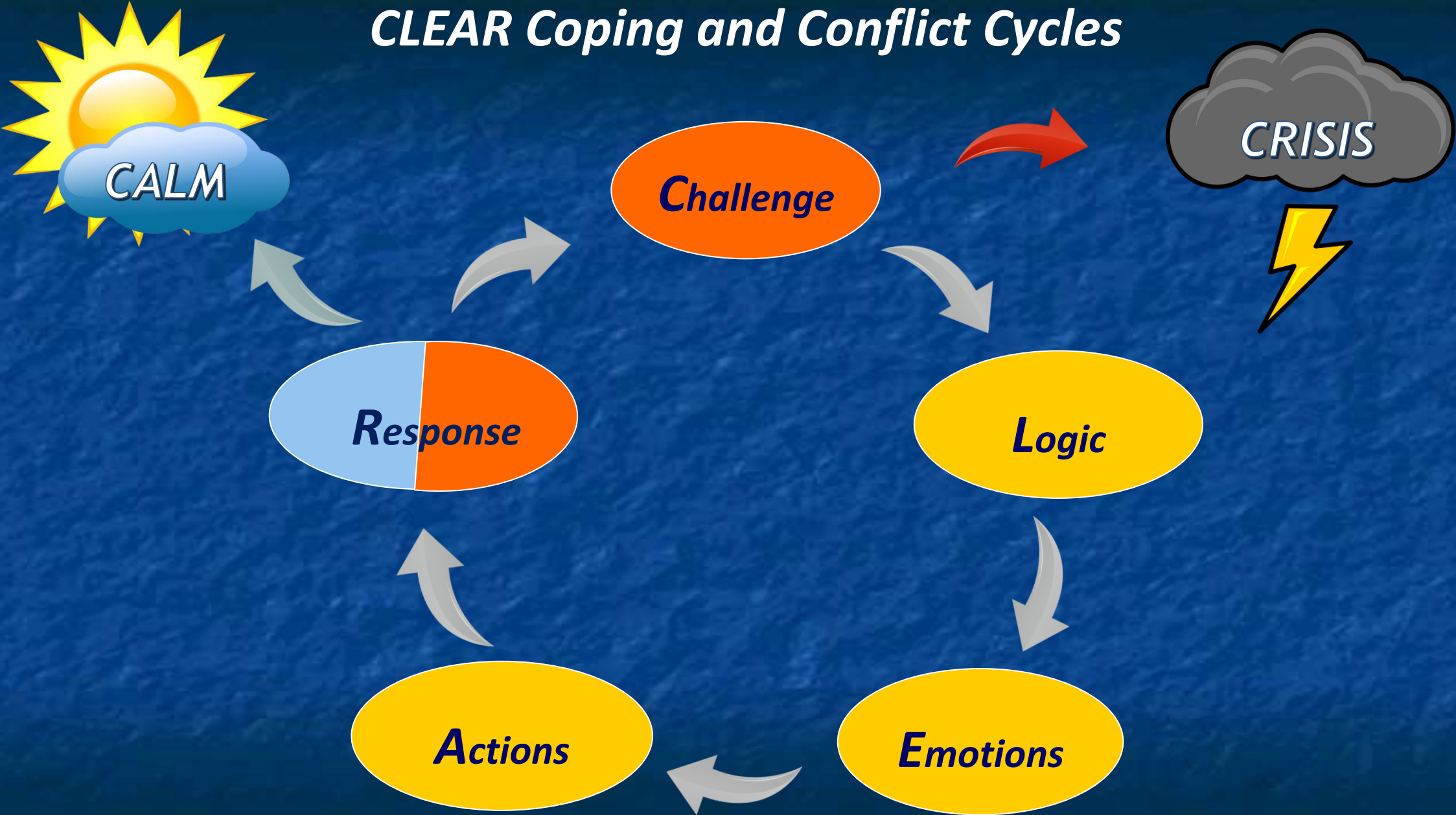
CLARIFY

## Gain Insight



Exploring life events event gives a window into “inside kid.”

# CLEAR Coping and Conflict Cycles

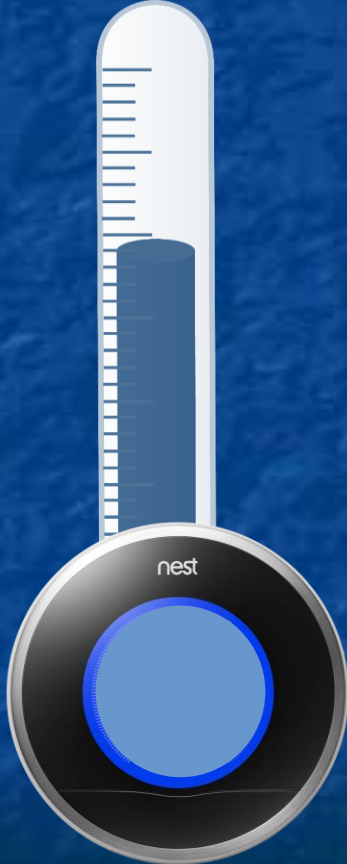




# Reacting as a Thermometer



# Responding as a Thermostat





CLARIFY

# Active Listening



Pay attention.

Avoid preaching.

Listen to feelings.





CLARIFY

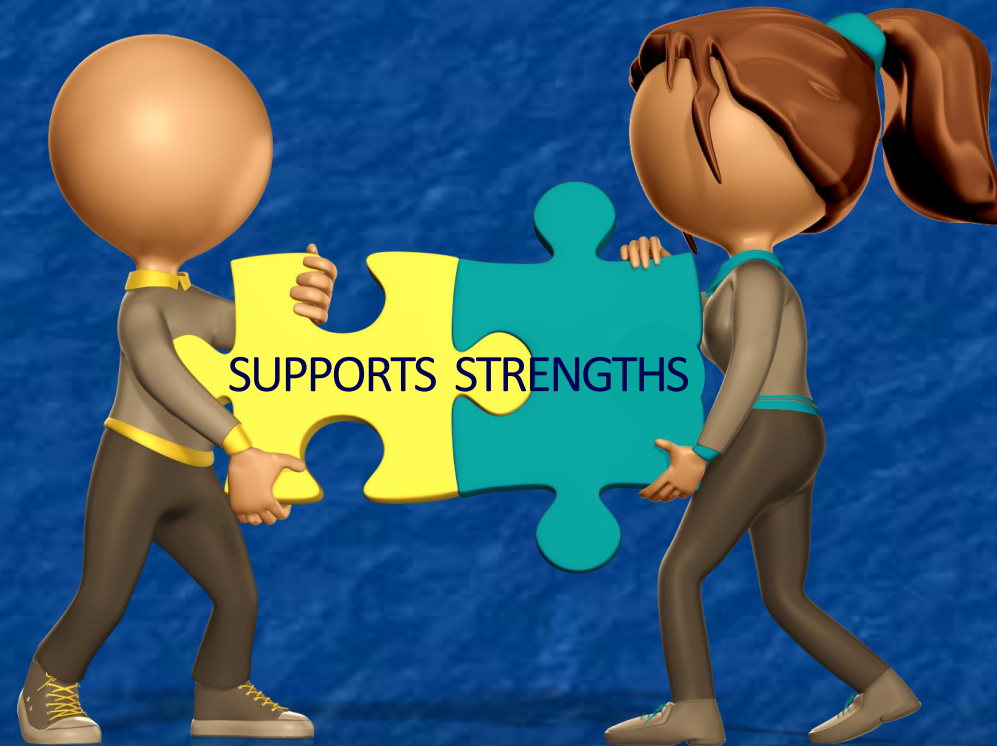


## Clarifying Thinking

*It's my fault. I deserve to be locked in prison.*

Andy, age 15

# Restoring





# Goals for Restoring



## Person Receiving Help

Accept supports and take responsibility.

Build strengths by meeting growth needs.

## Person Giving Help

**Provide Supports** and build responsibility.

**Develop Strengths** that build resilience.

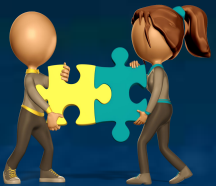
# Provide Supports



Most emotional and behavior problems come from facing stressful life events without adequate support.

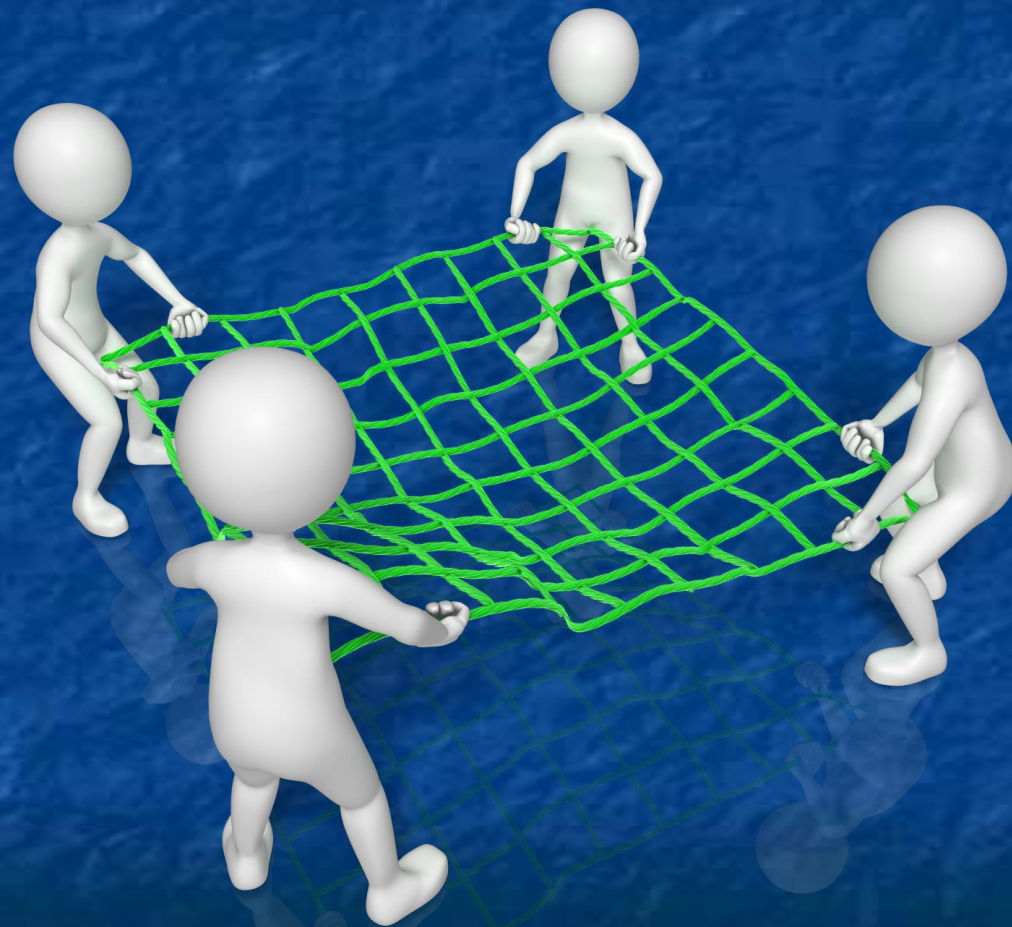
ALAN SROUFE

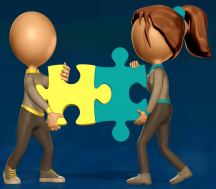




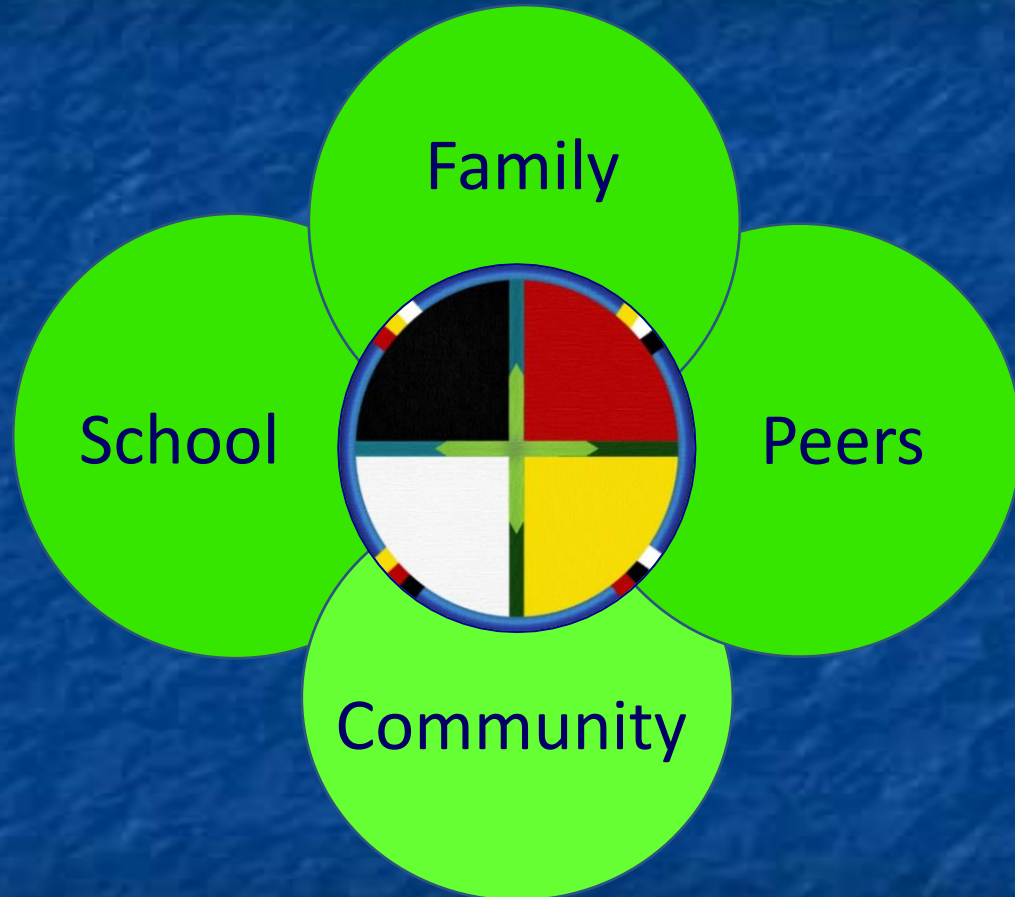
RESTORE

# Positive Relational Supports





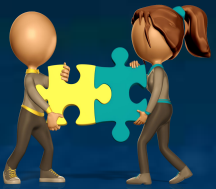
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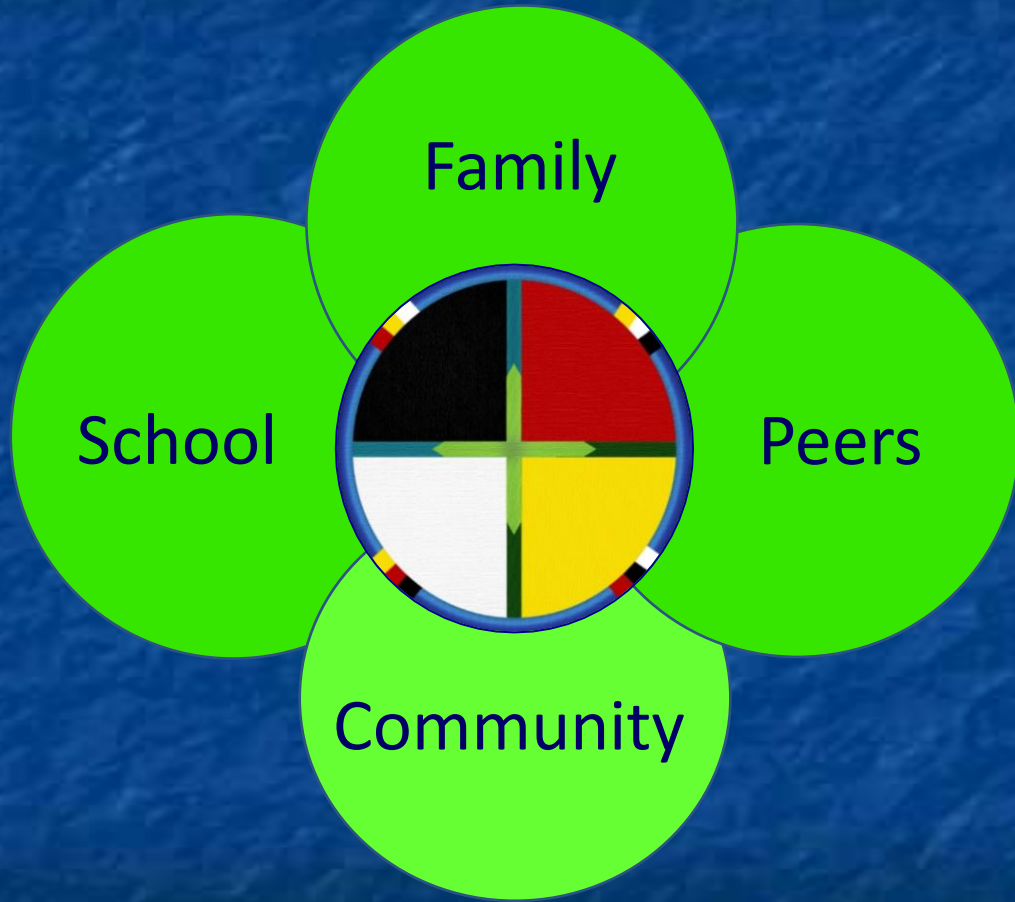
## BELONGING

*Develop trusting relationships.*



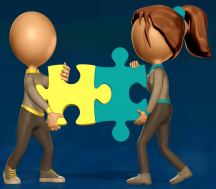


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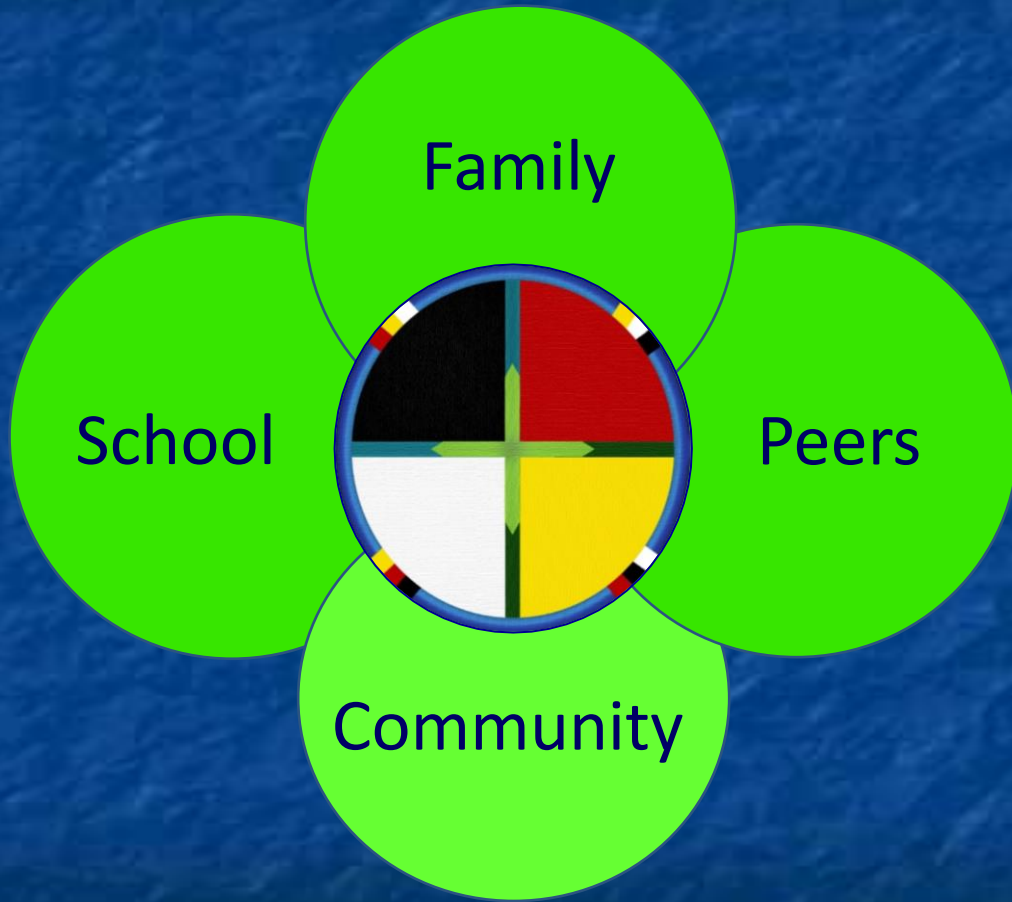


Mastery

*Develop strengths and talents.*



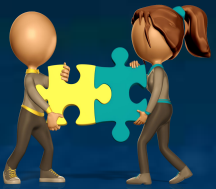
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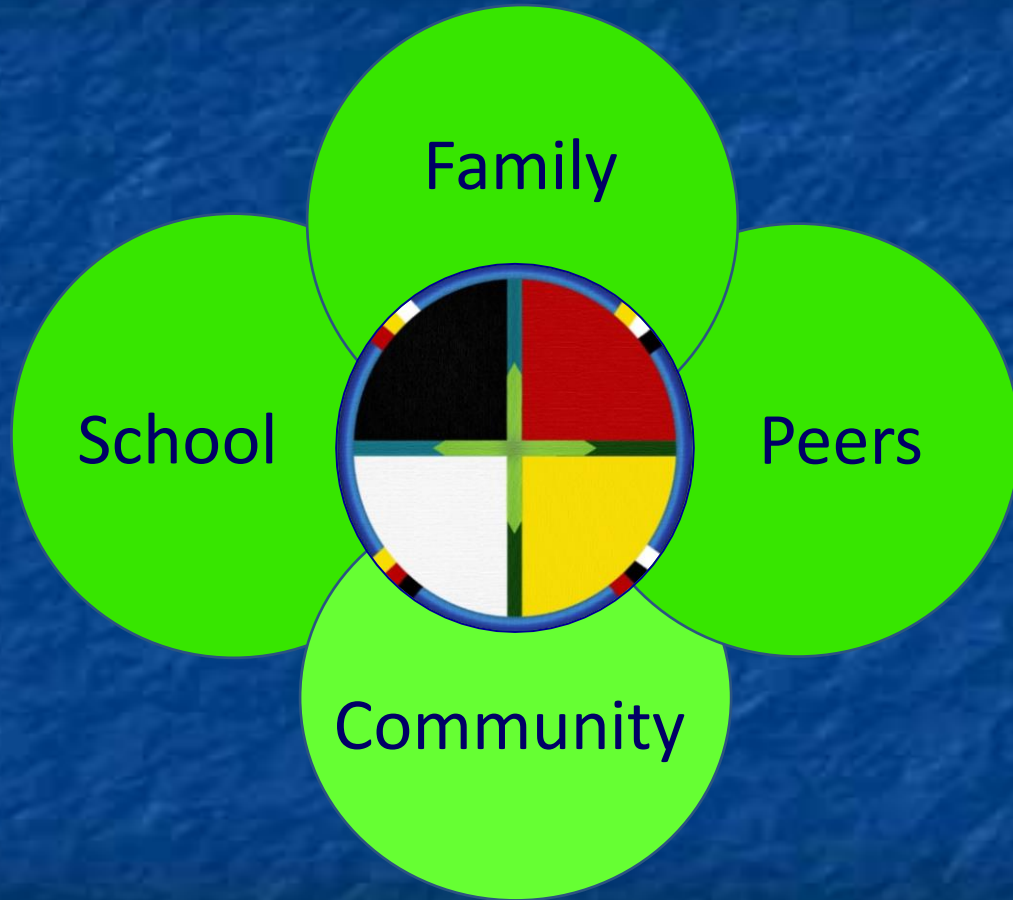
**INDEPENDENCE**

*Develop responsibility.*



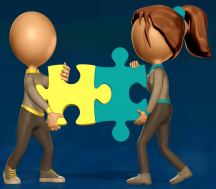


RESTORE



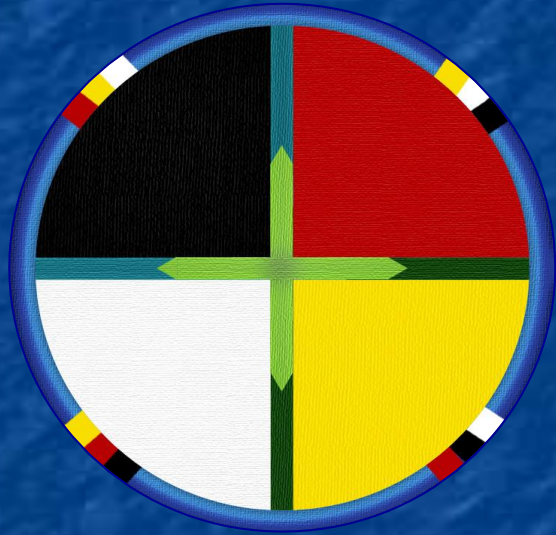
## GENEROSITY

*Develop care and concern.*



RESTORE

# Building Strengths

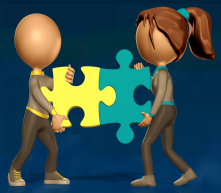


The Pathology Question:  
*What is wrong with you?*

The Trauma Question:  
*What has happened to you?*

The Resilience Question:  
*What is strong with you?*





RESTORE

# From Surviving to Thriving



The strengths perspective encourages us to search for positive potential, even in very challenging youth.

ERIK LAURSEN

# Solving Problems



## Problems

### ~~BELONGING~~

1. Disconnection
2. Conflict Cycles

### ~~MASTERY~~

3. School Difficulty
4. Social Difficulty

### ~~INDEPENDENCE~~

5. Easily Misled
6. Easily Angered

### ~~GENEROSITY~~

7. Self-Centered
8. Misleading Others

## Strengths

### BELONGING

- Inclusion
- Cooperation

### MASTERY

- School Success
- Social Skills

### INDEPENDENCE

- Responsibility
- Self-Control

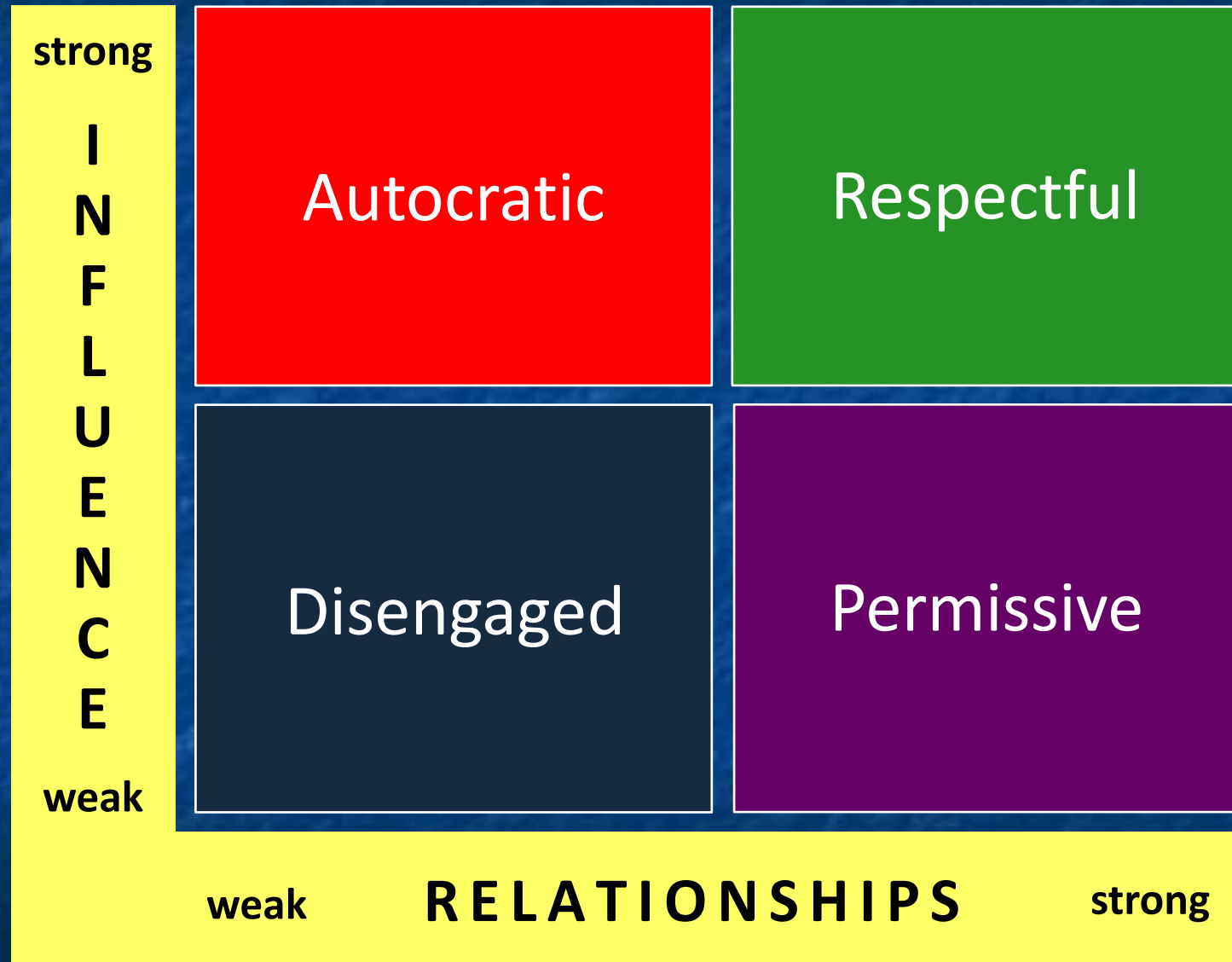
### GENEROSITY

- Showing Concern
- Helping Others

# Builds Strengths



# Relationship Profiles



Autocratic

## OBEDIENCE TRAINING





Autocratic

## POWER STRUGGLES



Autocratic

FLAW FIXING





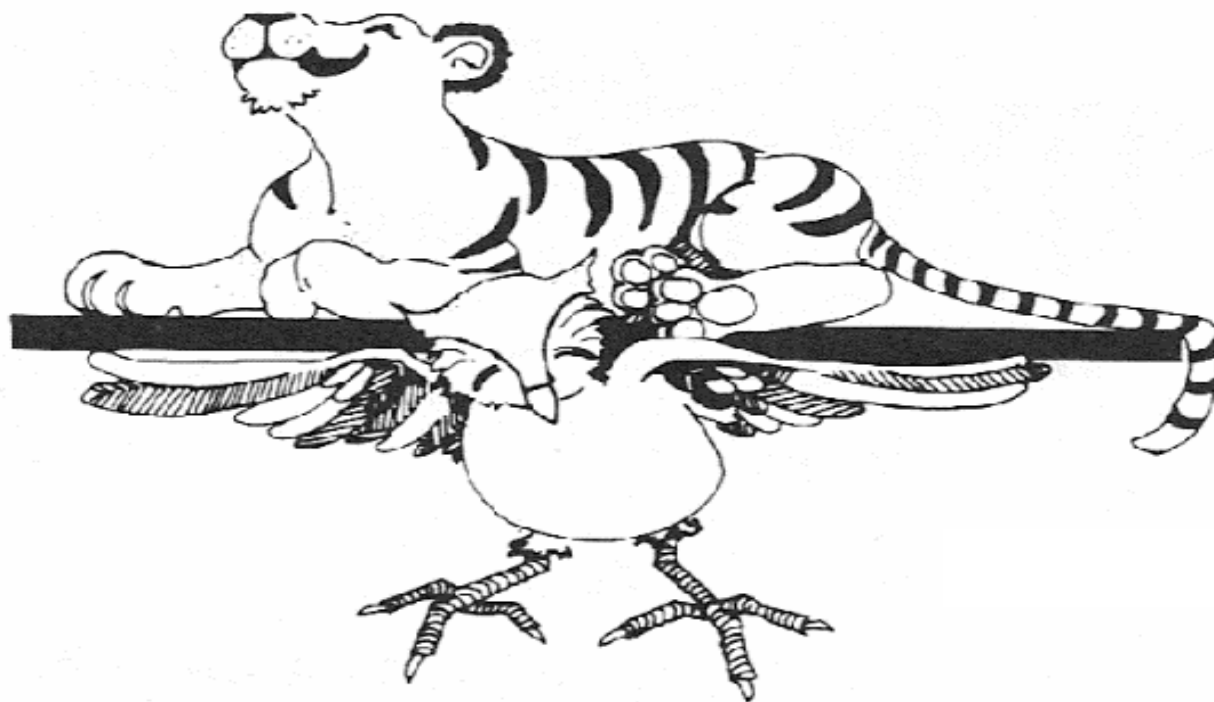
Permissive

PAMPER



Permissive

RESCUE





Permissive

BECOME ONE OF THEM



Disengaged

NEGLECT





Disengaged

AVOID



Disengaged

EXCLUDE





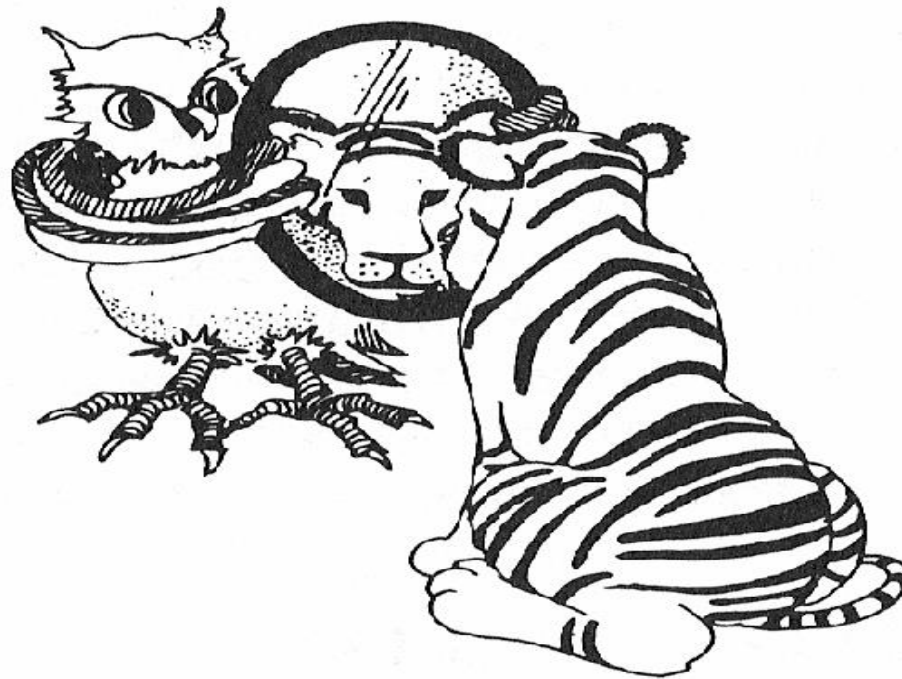
Respectful

CONNECT



Respectful

CLARIFY



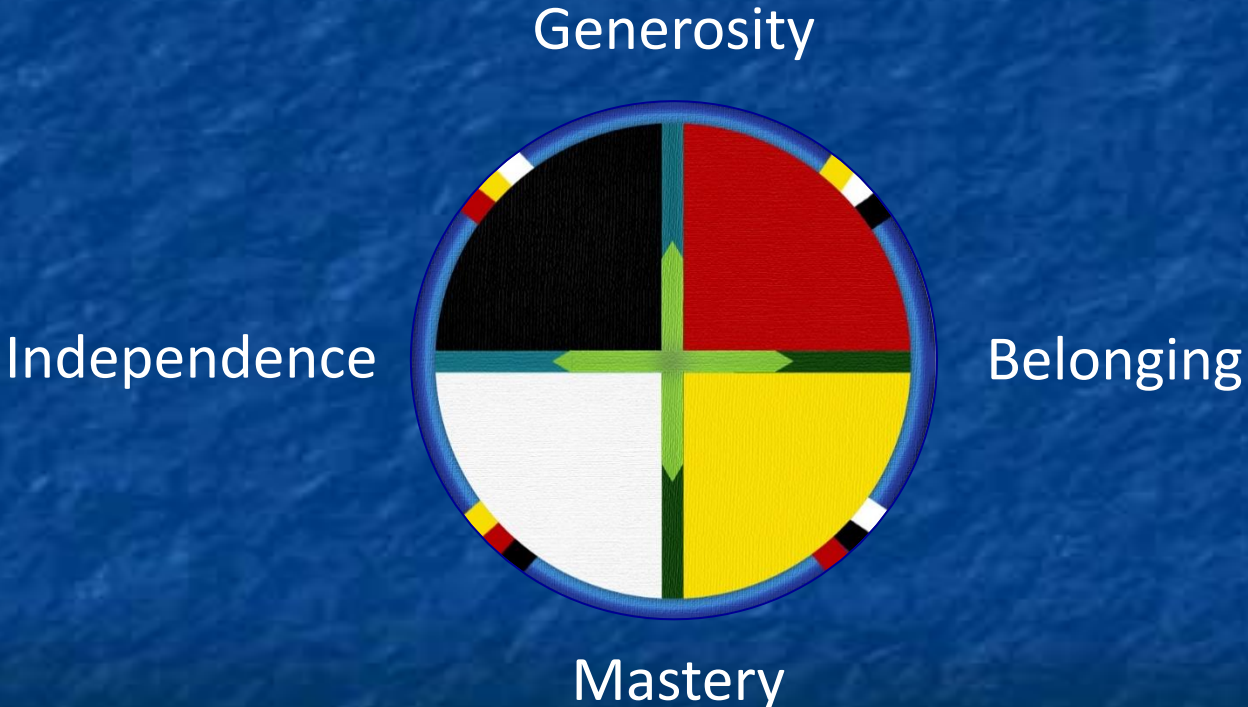


Respectful

RESTORE



# The Circle of Courage







## The Challenge to Change

If you aren't happy with where you have been, and you are not so sure about where you are going, the only thing to do is to set off in a new direction.

MAYA ANGELOU

A digital copy of this presentation is available at  
[reclaimingyouth.org/handouts](https://reclaimingyouth.org/handouts)

A person wearing a dark hoodie and a baseball cap is seen from behind, sitting on a rocky outcrop. They are looking out over a vast, hazy mountain range under a soft, golden light, likely at sunrise or sunset. The sky is a mix of light blue and orange.

**Connecting with Kids Who Outwit Adults**  
**Larry Brendtro**

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