
Circle of Courage

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Abstract

This chapter promotes the “Circle of Courage” as a model for developing resilience in young people. Resilience in the context of this chapter refers to factors which contribute to the success of young people and protect them from participating in risk behavior. The “Circle of Courage” is a child rearing model used by Native Americans before white conquest and has four main components – Belonging, Mastery, Independence, and Generosity. The components are in alignment with what modern psychologists are promoting for young people today and are common to most indigenous groups.

“I don’t know why they do those things! I told them not to! I told them it was dangerous!”

How many times have you heard these words or similar words spoken? If only it were that easy. If our role as a parent, teacher, pastor, church member, and neighbor were just as simple as having to tell young people what is good for them and warn them of the dangers of risk behavior, life would be simple, but life is not that simple. Certainly information plays a role in helping young people to become resilient, but it is a minor role. Factors that lead young people into risk-taking behavior of binge drinking, experimentation with drugs, and teen sex are complex.

Resilience in this context is about identifying the factors that contribute to young people’s success. One model of resilience is the Circle of Courage. It is an ancient model used by the American Indians before Caucasians came. The elements are common to most indigenous communities and are what we would hope to make up the fabric of modern society.

The Circle of Courage espouses four key elements.

- A sense of belonging
- A sense of mastery
- A sense independence
- A sense of generosity

Belonging

Young people are desperately pursuing a sense of belonging, a sense of identity. Who am I? Where do I belong in this world? Who cares about me? We all modify our behaviors according to where we gain our sense of belonging. We modify our dress, our speech, and our behavior in order to fit in. Sadly, with the busyness of life and the fears of stranger danger (not wanting to be viewed as a predator on young people), adults have withdrawn more and more from young people’s lives. As children no longer feel their sense of connection with the adults in their lives, their community, and their church, they seek that sense of belonging from elsewhere. They seek it from their peers. They say, “Well I don’t fit in over here; I have to fit in somewhere? What does it take for me to fit in here? Do I have to party? Do I have to give my body for sex? Do I have to experiment because I have to fit in somewhere, and I’ll do whatever it takes to fit in here?”

Dr. Karl Menninger (2002) observes that “Today’s children are desperately pursuing artificial belongings because this need is not being fulfilled by families, schools, and neighborhoods. Living with and loving other human beings who return that love is the most strengthening and salubrious emotional experience in the world.” Sadly, too many young people grow up without this sense of belonging.

The International Youth Foundation (2003) put it this way: “Every young person needs at least one adult who is irrationally committed to their well-being. Millions of children grow up virtually alone—disconnected from adults. No love. No supervision. No positive role models. Yet these people must still find their way—they still grow up to become adults. Children can endure the most miserable conditions—even thrive in the midst of them—if they have at least one loving adult committed to their success.”

Are we willing to stand up and be those adults who believe in young people in our church, in our neighborhood, in the lives of the young people within the social circle of contact?

Emmy Werner, the godmother of resilience, concluded that: “The strongest predictor of resilience (of children who grow up in abusive situations and then go on to live productive lives) was an adult mentor outside the immediate family. A grandmother, a minister, for example, a neighbor, someone who gave them a sense of being loved and being important” (Dean, Clark, & Rahn, 2001, p.147).

The more layers of community that we surround a young person with, the better they do. Family is an important foundation for a sense of belonging, but there is also the need to have significant other adults in a young person’s life. Youth need to feel connected and accepted within their school environment. They need to have a faith community that surrounds them and supports them. A young person may have other connections with the community as well as in sporting groups or other community interest groups. The more layers of connection that young people have, the better they do. All young people experiment to some degree, but if they are well-connected with multiple layers of community, then they experiment within a narrower framework and are more likely to return to the normal. However, as we strip away each level of connection, then young people experiment over a wider framework and are less likely to return to the normal.

Mastery

When the child’s need to be competent is satisfied, motivation for further achievement is enhanced; deprived of opportunity for success, young people express their frustration through troubled behavior or by retreating into helplessness and inferiority. Here we move just beyond knowing young people by name and giving them a friendly greeting when we meet them. We take the time to know them individually; we take the time to be able to identify the unique talents and skills that they have and to encourage the development of those talents. Part of our role as adults is to be able to help young people to reach their potential. We need to not only identify the talents they

have but to affirm them for the contribution they make to the community through their uniqueness.

Young people’s self esteem is based upon their perception of how we value them. It is a gift that we give. “You will never amount to anything if you keep doing that! You are too lazy! I wish you were more like your sister! He is about as hopeless as his old man!” Our words become prophetic. What we reinforce, children become. If we use negative factors for re-enforcement then they live up to that prediction, but if we take the time to identify things of value in their lives and encourage the development of those things then they will live up to our expectations.

Research suggests that children can grow up in an abusive situation but still do well if they have an adult who believes in them. We can alter their self value by identifying things they are gifted in, affirming those talents and encouraging and supporting them in the development of those talents.

Independence

Independence is not about teaching children to grow up thinking only of themselves. It is about giving them the skills to be able to master their environment. Today we have diverse groups of young people. One group has no significant adults in their lives, nobody to teach them life skills. The other group is the over-protected. All the decisions are made for them. In adolescence when their parents aren’t there to tell them what to do, they have not developed decision-making skills and lack confidence in asserting themselves, so they become followers.

None of us like to see how children suffer, and so when times are tough, we try to make things right for them. But where do they learn their coping skills if we don’t allow them to experience life? As adults it is not our role to protect young people from life but to be there when they do experience difficult times in their lives. Our aim should be to be significant enough in their lives that as they face challenges, they will talk to us about those challenges and give us the opportunity to share some of the skills that we have developed through our own life experience.

Dean et al. (2001) state it this way: “It is clear that young people grow to maturity in general and to maturity in Christ in particular by being around those people who have such maturity themselves. Margaret Mead, the renowned anthropologist, warned of the dangers of what she called a co-figurative culture—a culture in which all learning is horizontal, and little or no learning comes from an older and wiser generation” (p. 144).

If we are not present in young people’s lives, then where do they learn their coping skills? Where do they learn their

values? They learn them from their peers who have not the maturity or life's experience to guide them.

Anthropologist Ruth Benedict et al. (2002) state that adults "Criticized our culture for excluding youth from responsibility only to blame them for their irresponsibility" (p. 25). Adolescents need oases, places where they can go and make mistakes and be imperfect, places where they can test themselves in the presence of safe, caring, and accepting adults and peers.

Are we prepared to create a faith community that trusts young people, that gives them responsibility and holds them accountable to that responsibility but also recognizes that they are still growing and maturing, that they will make mistakes and will accept them in their imperfection?

Generosity

The American Indians tell of how a boy would long for the day when he was old enough to join in on a hunt. It was not the killing of a deer or buffalo that made him the man. What made him the man was the fact that he would bring that kill back to his community and share it with the community. He might share the food with a widow who didn't have a man to bring food home for her children. Right of passage was when you provided a service to your community that was of value to them.

Today, little is asked of young people except that they be consumers. A vast industry serves youth with schooling, entertainment, and goods of all kinds, but there are limited opportunities for the young themselves to produce goods and services for others.

Deprived of opportunities for genuine productivity, lured into consumptive roles, young people come to believe that their lives make little difference to the world.

True purpose is found in serving. It is not found through wearing the right label of clothing or having the right electronic gadget.

Father Chris Riley (Riley, 2008) is a Catholic priest who runs a program entitled "Youth Off the Streets" in Sydney, Australia. He gathered together a group of homeless young people and took them overseas to serve in an orphanage. For the first time in their lives these young people provided a service to somebody else. When they saw what value was placed on the service they offered they came to realize that they too must have value and it became a life-changing experience for them.

Do we work hard enough to provide the opportunity for young people to be engaged in service activities? How do we get young people to engage in service type activities? The answer is that we become significant in their lives, we engage them in the planning of the event, we do it with them and we review it with them afterwards.

A lot of research points to the protective benefits of service and is discussed in another chapter of this book. We work harder and harder to provide a means for our young people to live. But are we working hard enough to provide them meaning to their living?

The following table explains some of the science behind the four elements of the Circle of Courage. The normal column is accumulative and lists the characteristics that are developed in young people as each element is present in a balanced way in their lives. The distorted column refers to where this element is present in isolation. Young people have none of the other three elements and so over emphasize this element. The third column, the absent column, refers to the characteristics exhibited by young people where this element is absent in their lives.

Normal	Distorted	Absent
Attached	Gang Loyalty	Unattached
Loving	Craves Affection	Guarded
Friendly	Craves Acceptance	Rejected
Intimate	Promiscuous	Lonely
Gregarious	Clinging	Aloof
Cooperative	Cult Vulnerable	Isolated
Trusting	Overly Dependent	Distrustful

Normal	Distorted	Absent
Achiever	Overachiever	Nonachiever
Successful	Arrogant	Failure Oriented
Creative	Risk-Seeker	Avoid Risks
Problem-Solver	Cheater	Fears Challenges
Motivated	Workaholic	Unmotivated
Persistent	Delinquent Skill	Gives Up Easily
Competent		Inadequate

Normal	Distorted	Absent
Autonomous	Dictatorial	Submissive
Confident	Reckless/Macho	Lacks Confidence
Assertive	Bullies Others	Inferiority
Responsible	Sexual Prowess	Irresponsible
Inner Control	Manipulative	Helplessness
Self-discipline	Rebellious	Undisciplined
Leadership	Defies Authority	Easily Led

Normal	Distorted	Absent
Altruistic	Noblesse Oblige	Selfishness
Caring	Plays Martyr	Affectionless
Sharing	Co-Dependent	Narcissistic
Loyal	Over involvement	Disloyal
Empathetic	Servitude	Hardened
Pro social	Bondage	Antisocial
Supportive		Exploitative

What we must do as adults is stop reacting to young people's behavior and start to look at the cause. We must ask ourselves: Where is the circle broken? What could I do to mend the circle? Is this revenge by a child who feels rejection? Is this frustration in response to failure? Is this rebellion to counter powerlessness? Is this exploitation in pursuit of selfish goals?

One cannot mend the circle without an understanding of where it is broken. These elements are not taught, they are caught. "We surround them with social support and a loving and caring environment, we learn their names and greet them personally taking a few moments to talk one on one, and we develop enduring relationships with them" (Hopkins & Hopp, 2002, p.51).

Is this the church community that we are creating? Am I a significant adult to the young people within my neighborhood who reflects Christ's character of acceptance, forgiveness, patience, understanding, and love? Am I a significant adult in the lives of the children within my social circle of contact? We may be the single most important factor within children's lives that protects them from risk.

"But suppose that they look at the model and find a person with whom they can truly identify. Suppose they find a warm, loving, accepting, compassionate heart. Suppose they find high personal standards coupled with a great understanding of human weakness in others. Suppose they find one who has purpose in life, who knows where he is going, and who journeys on his way with a song on his lips and a radiance on his face because God is with him. Will they not say, 'That's what I want. Let me follow you. Teach me how to find the richness of life that you have found'" (Dudley, 1978, p.85).

Anthropologist Margaret Mead once said: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has" (The Quotations Page, 2008).

Are we willing as a faith community to stand up and be significant in the lives of the young people within our community and open their eyes to a new world, a better world?

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