

# Voices of Youth

*Rekindling Hope in Positive Peer Cultures*



Larry Brendtro and Beate Kreisle



RECLAIMING  
Youth at Risk  
[reclaimingyouth.org](http://reclaimingyouth.org)



ACRC

## Restoring Bonds of Respect

Larry Brendtro  
Lesley du Toit



*RAP*

**Response  
Ability  
Pathways**

## Building Strengths in Youth

Larry Brendtro  
Beate Kreisle



*PPC*

**Positive  
Peer  
Culture**

# Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Experiments in Youth Self-Governance

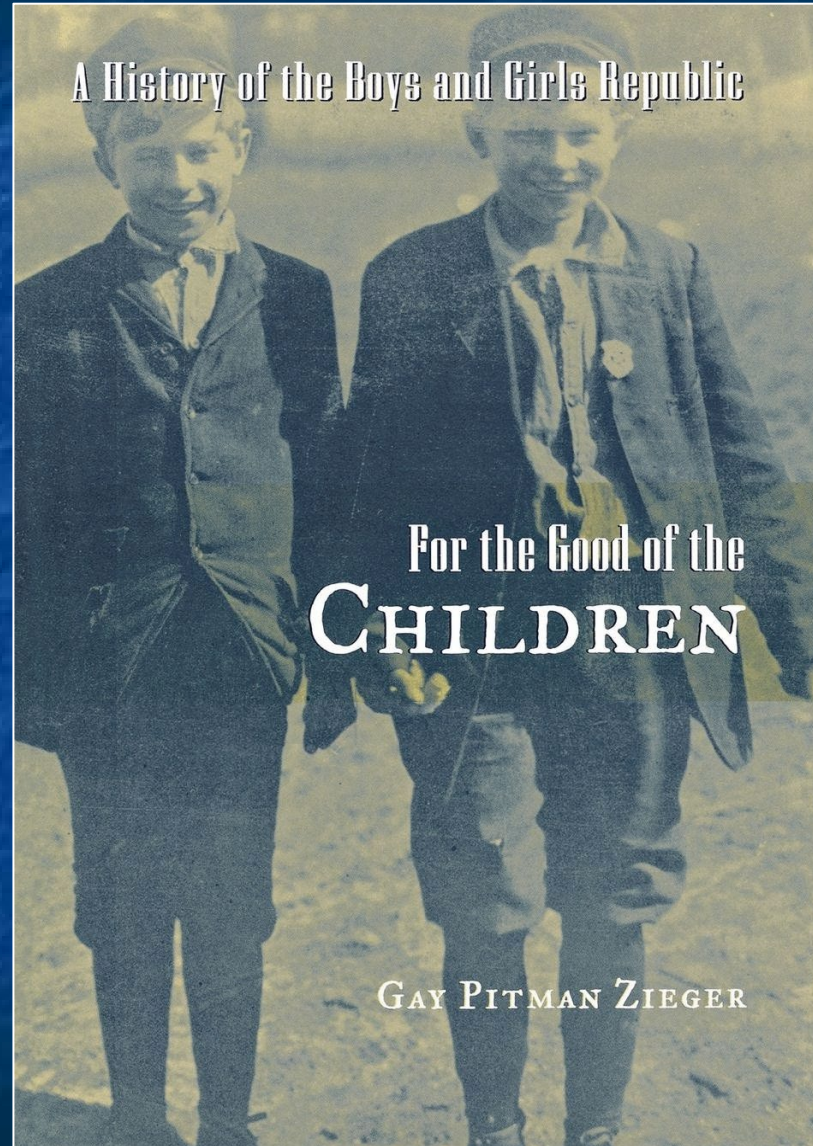
Reformers organized schools as simulated small democracies.

*Youth Republics*

*Commonwealths*

*Children's Villages*

*Boys and Girls Towns*



Young people were given the power to discipline their peers.

*Youth elected leaders.*

*A legislature passed laws.*

*Violators were tried in courts.*

*Peers imposed punishments.*

# The Failure of Self-Governance



Over time, most programs became disorganized and punitive.  
When charismatic founders departed, self-governance failed.

CLARA LIEPMANN, 1928

# From Self-Governance to Shared Responsibility



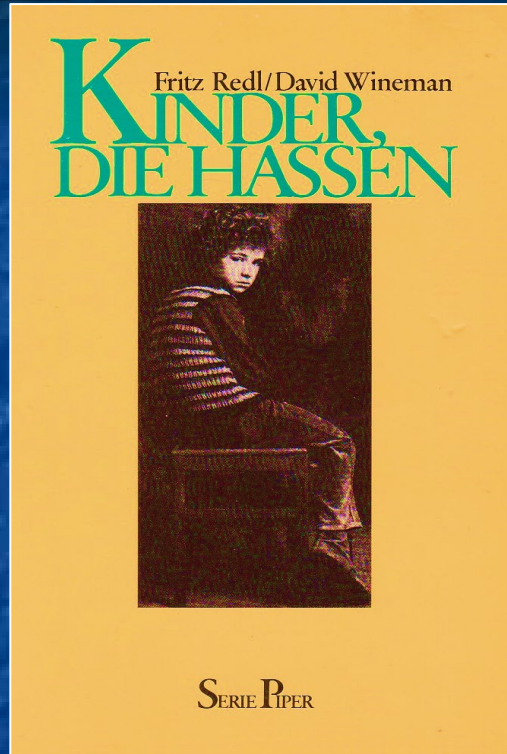
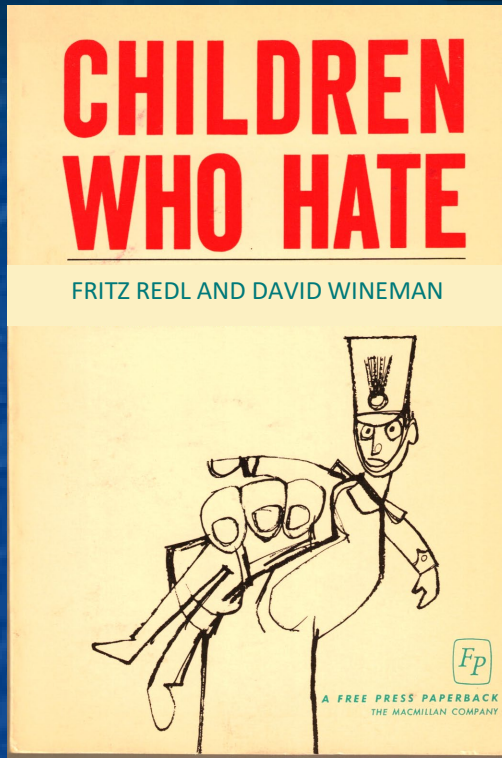
Most pseudo democracies led to anarchy or the tyranny of peers.

Self-governance systems were replaced by *shared responsibility*.

DAVID WILLS,  
*The Barns Experiment*, 1945

A.S. Neil's permissive Summerhill School

1951

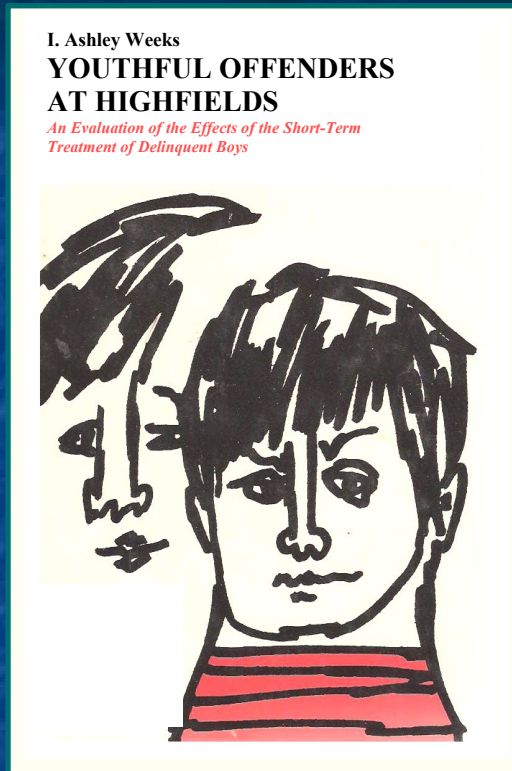
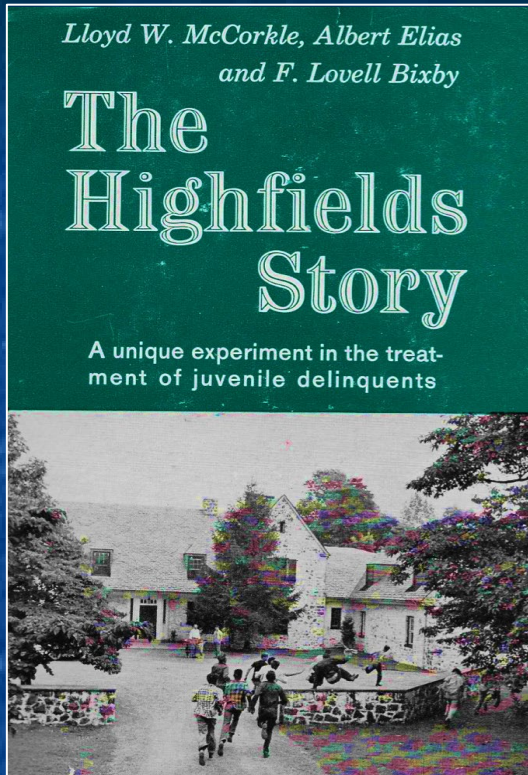


Across three decades, the University of Michigan Fresh Air Camp prepared hundreds of professionals in life-space methods for reclaiming youth at risk.



Fritz Redl and David Wineman developed therapeutic group milieus serving troubled and traumatized children and youth.

1958



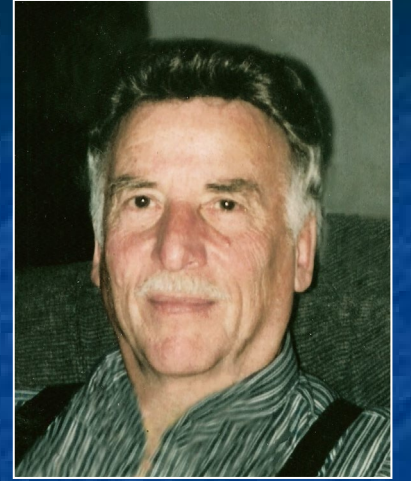
*Peer group treatment research at Highfields in New Jersey sparked widespread interest in the Guided Group Interaction (GGI) approach.*



Aviator Charles Lindbergh's child was kidnapped and murdered. The family donated their mansion, Highfields, for use as a children's home.

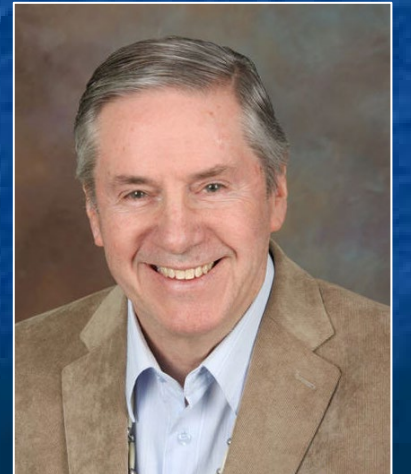


HARRY VORRATH  
was a graduate intern  
at Highfields and started  
**Positive Peer Culture**  
programs for troubled  
youth in several states.



## Creating Positive Peer Groups

LARRY BRENDTRO  
was on the University of  
Michigan Fresh Air Camp  
staff and brought these  
strength-based methods  
to Starr Commonwealth.



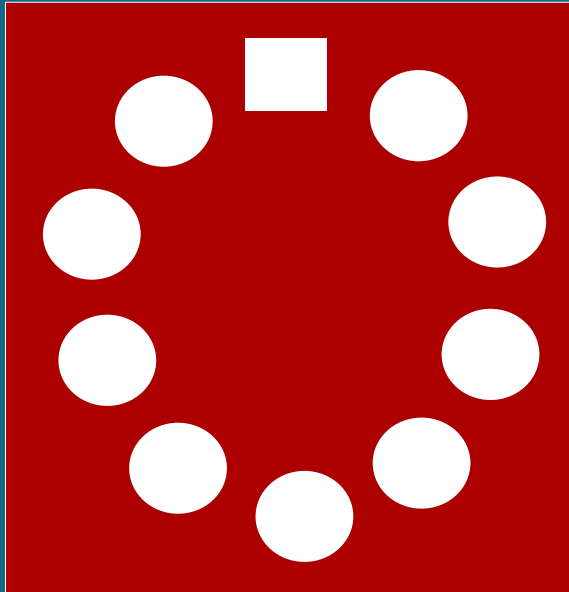
1974

1985

## POSITIVE PEER CULTURE

HARRY H. VORRATH  
LARRY K. BRENDTRO

Charting a new course for education  
and treatment with contemporary youth



Vorrath and Brendtro wrote *Positive Peer Culture* at Starr Commonwealth.  
Beate Kreisle and colleagues brought Positive Peer Culture to Germany.

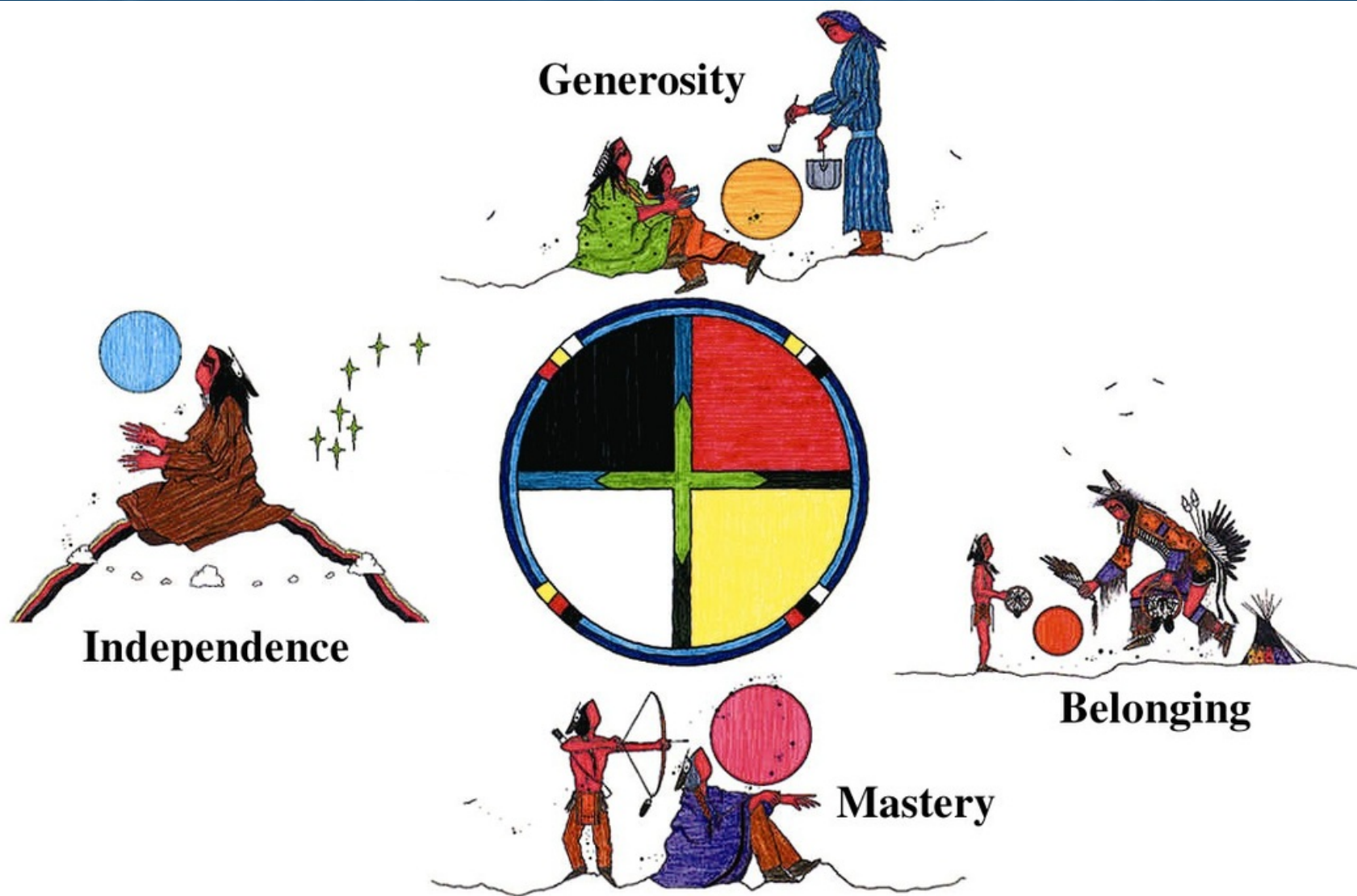
# RECLAIMING YOUTH AT RISK

*Futures of Promise*



Larry K. Brendtro | Martin Brokenleg | Steve Van Bockern

# The Circle of Courage



# VOICES OF YOUTH



Positive Peer Culture Groups in Adelsheim, Germany

*We treat each other with respect.*

*We help others if they have problems.*

*We reject all physical or psychological violence.*



*We treat each other with respect.*

*We help others if they have problems.*

*We reject all physical or psychological violence.*





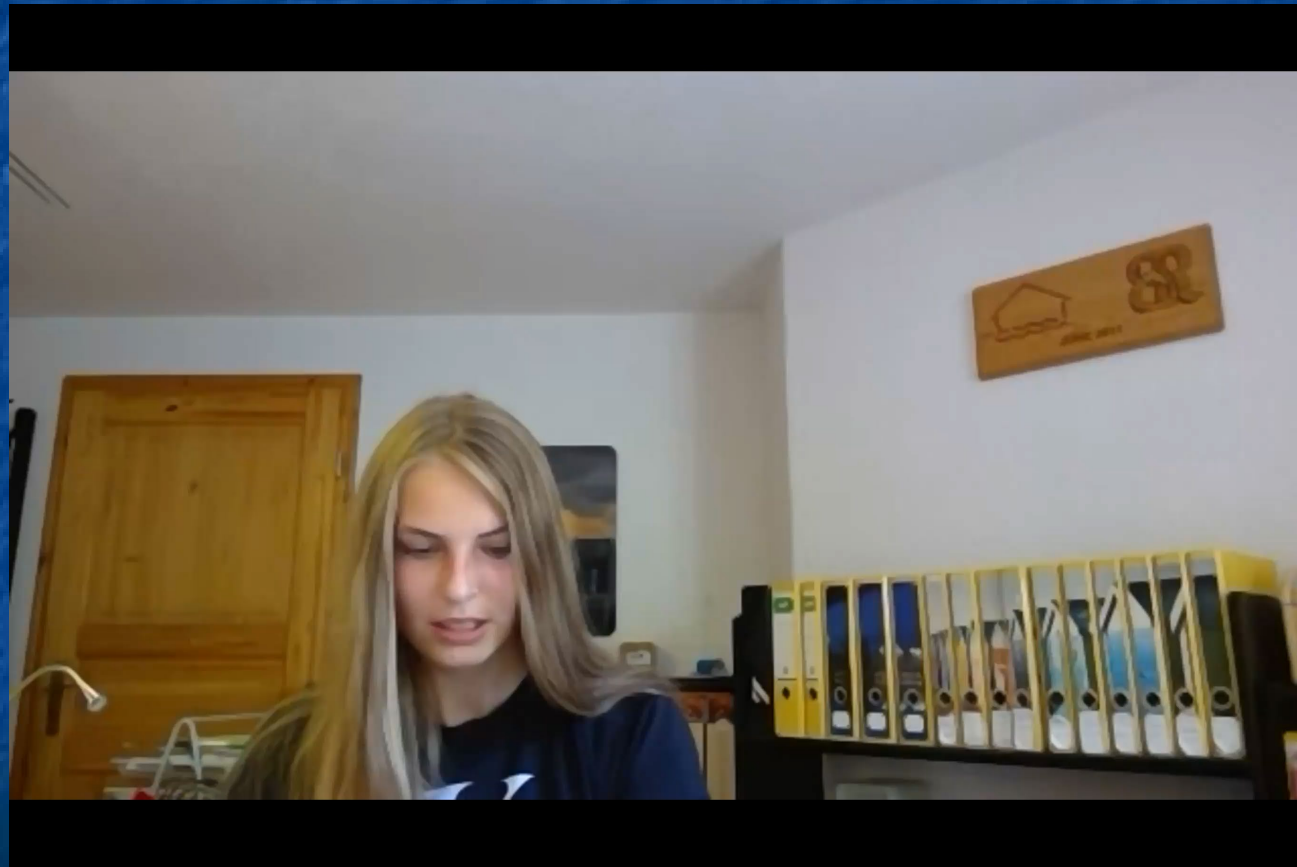
*We used to have fights every day, but now we never fight—we have learned to treat one another as human beings.*

Youth in PPC Group

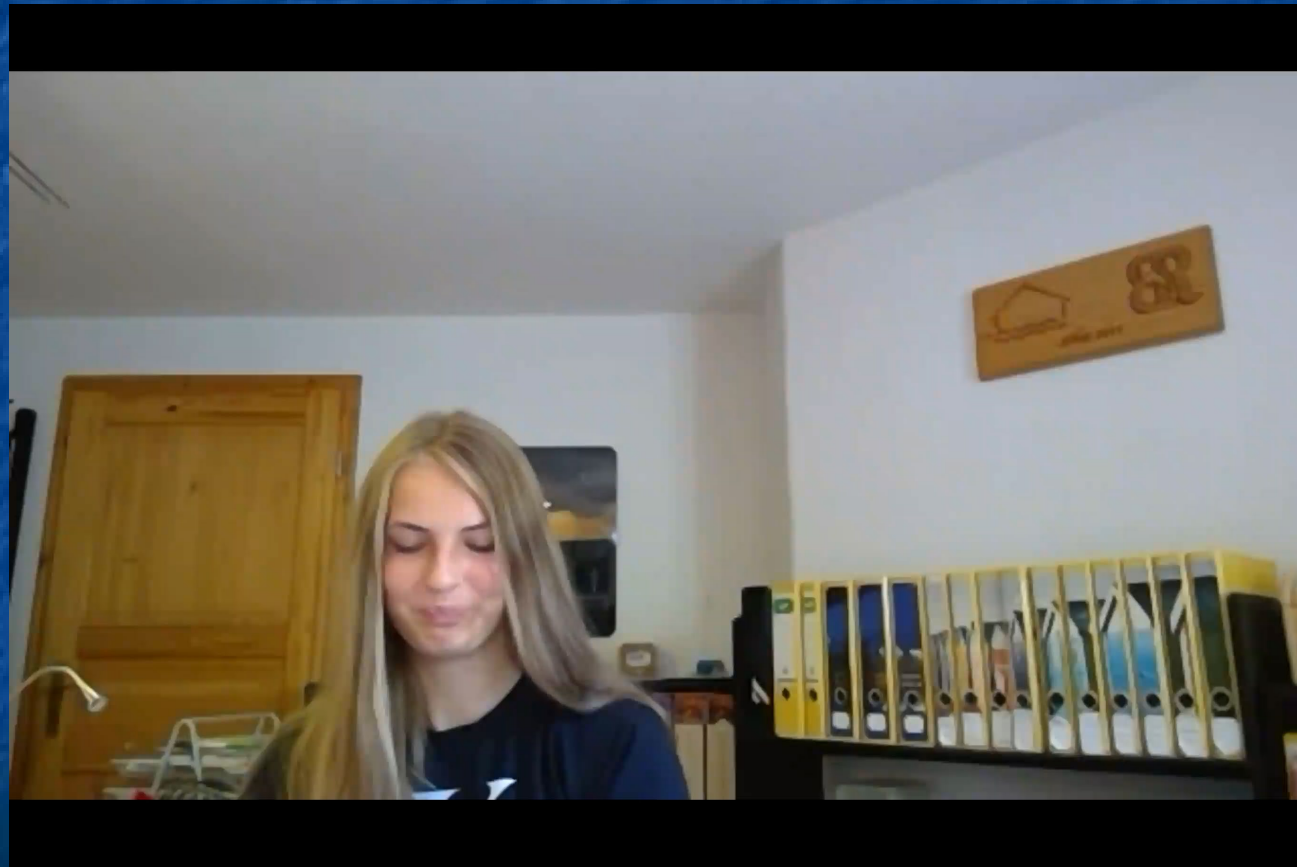
*Many staff used to call in sick because of all the stress of this job—but now we enjoy coming to work.*

Youth Supervisor

# Shila's Story



# PPC in Germany



# PPC with Immigrant Youth



# From Conflict to Caring



*Climates of Conflict*

*A Curriculum of Caring*



## The Loss of Purpose

Only 20 percent of today's youth can identify a purpose in their life.

WILLIAM DAMON



Modern youth are suffering from the misery of unimportance.  
Each young person has a *Grande Passion* which is often hidden.

KURT HAHN



# A Global Youth Culture

Art by a boy in a Russian orphanage celebrates his hero, rapper Eminem.



EMINEM



## Problems Sound Cool

Teen slang expresses values influencing modern youth.

**Smash:** casual sex

**Turnt Up:** high or drunk

**Crunk:** both high and drunk

**Drama:** conflict and bullying

*The Teen Slang Dictionary for Parents*



Slang insults sound cool.

**Cancel:** Reject a person

**Crashy:** Crazy and trashy person

**Creeper:** Outcast “creepy” person

**Ghost:** Ignore a person on purpose

**Throw Shade:** Give a dirty look

*Teen Slang Dictionary for Parents*

# What is the purpose of insults?

To attack another's self-worth.  
To make yourself feel superior.



# A Curriculum of Caring



I have been advocating the introduction in our schools, from the earliest grades onward, of what I have called a *curriculum of caring*—not to learn *about* caring but to engage in it.

URIE BRONFENBRENNER



## Labels and Scripts

Values are rooted in language.

BERT PEETERS  
Australian National University

*What does this graffiti script say about relationships of youth to authority?*



## SCRIPTS Shape Values

Scripts are brief labels or phrases that influence thinking and action.

A good script is simple, direct, and does not need discussion. The brain stores easily understood ideas so these sound bites can be more potent than long discussions.

# *BELONGING Scripts*

*We make all feel welcome.*



*We support one another.*

# *MASTERY Scripts*

*Solve difficult problems.*



*Failure is feedback.*

# *INDEPENDENCE Scripts*

*Making mature decisions*



*Thinking for yourself*

# *GENEROSITY Scripts*

*We respect one another.*



*We help people in need.*

# Scripts to Build Responsibility

*It's not my fault.*



Persons who deny responsibility for their problems are unlikely to change.

Thus, mentors can use brief scripts to “reverse responsibility.”



## **Student**

*Why finish school? When I'm 18, nobody can make me stay.*



## **Reversal**

*Then it seems your future will be in your own hands.*



## Student

*All the other kids do drugs.  
So what's the big deal?*



## Reversal

*Actually, you are the big deal.*



## **Student**

*Nobody likes Chris because  
he treats others like crap.*



## **Reversal**

*Guess that shows Chris really  
needs the group's help.*

# Scripts to Make Caring Fashionable

Caring is Devalued



*I take care of number one.*

Caring is Valued



*It takes strength to help others.*



## The Language of Respect

*We believe that no one has the right to hurt another person either physically or verbally, and everyone has the responsibility to help.*

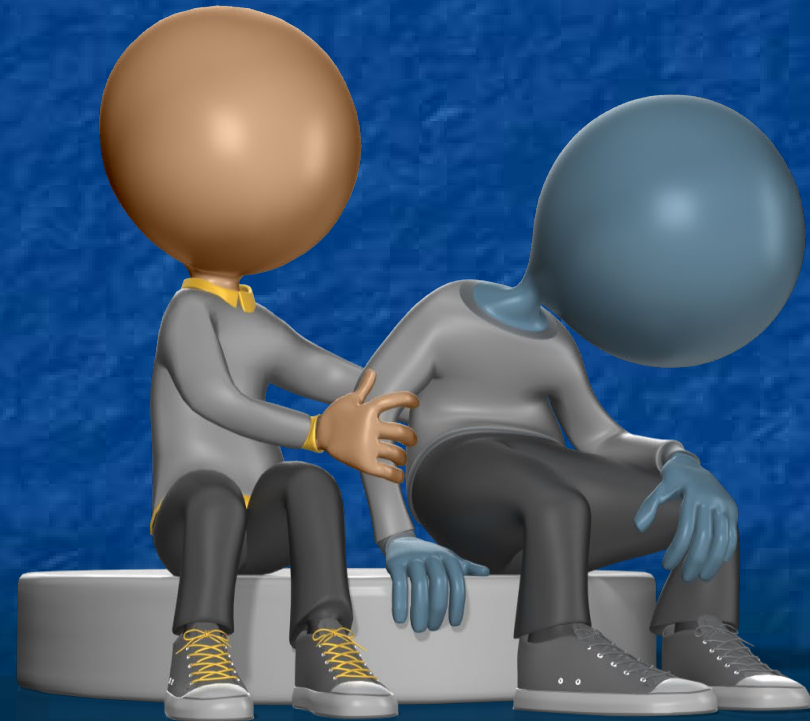
## A Care Recipient

*People care for me  
but I still feel worthless.*



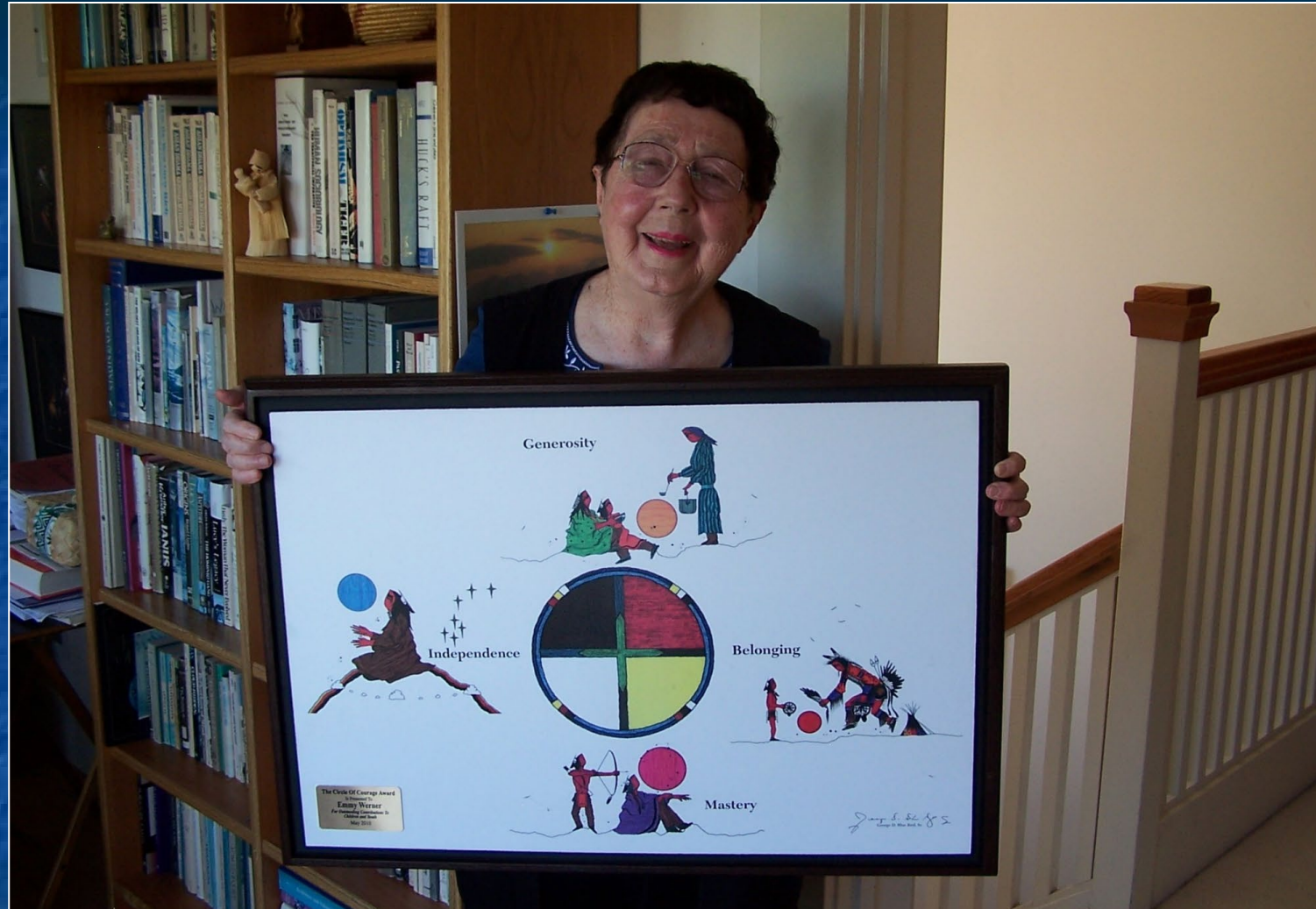
## Caring for Others

*When helping others,  
I know that I am of value.*



# POSITIVE PEER CULTURE PRINCIPLES





To build resilience, we focus our efforts on what matters most.

EMMY WERNER

# BELONGING



The Power of Peers



Relationships of Trust

# MASTERY



Talent Hunts



Solving Problems

# INDEPENDENCE



Building Responsibility



Positive Leadership

# GENEROSITY



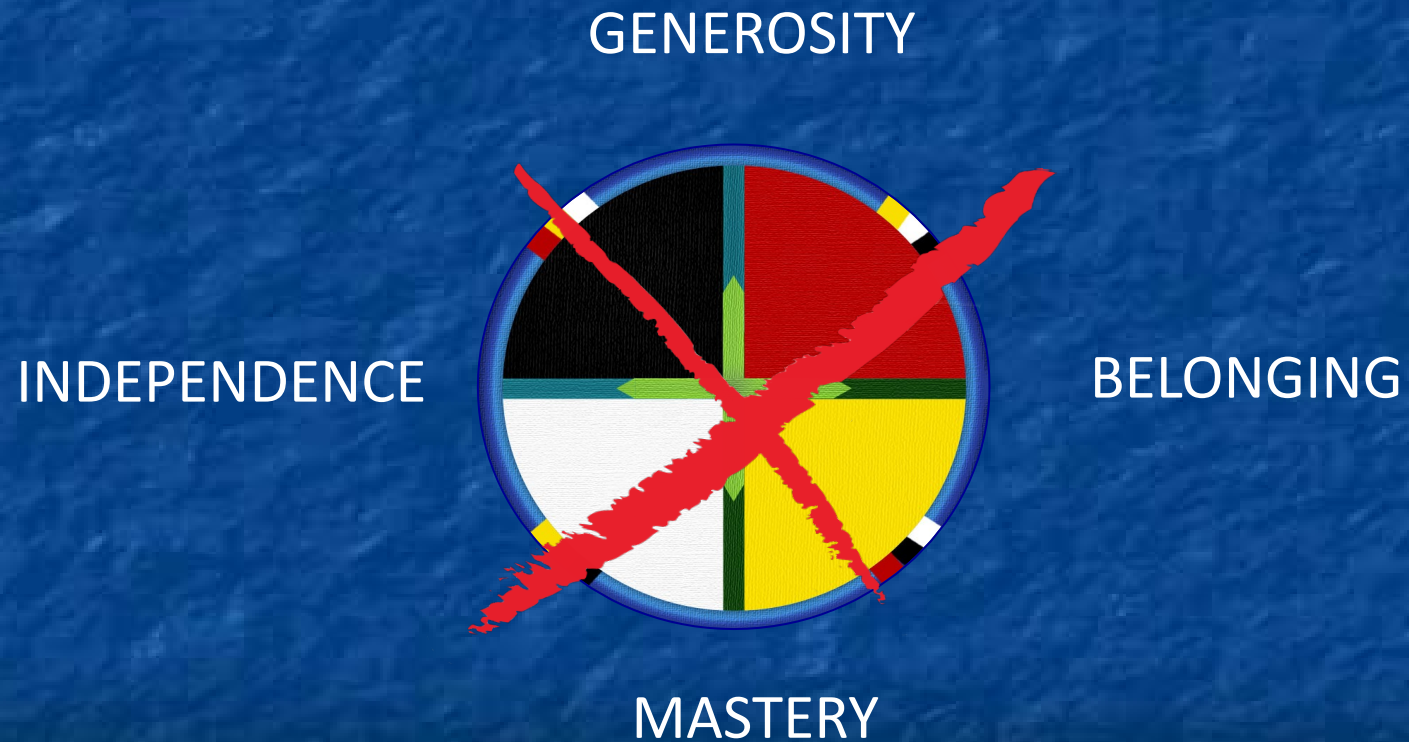
Peer Helping



Lives with Purpose

# Most problems come from unmet needs.

ABRAHAM MASLOW



**Social  
Brain**

Self-transcendence

GENEROSITY

Self-actualization

INDEPENDENCE

Esteem

MASTERY

Belongingness

BELONGING

**Survival  
Brain**

Safety

Physiological

## Problem List

These are common challenges faced by children and youth.



### Problems

#### ~~BELONGING~~

1. Disconnection
2. Conflict

#### ~~MASTERY~~

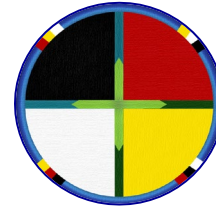
3. School Difficulty
4. Social Difficulty

#### ~~INDEPENDENCE~~

5. Lacks Self-Control
6. Lacks Self-Confidence

#### ~~GENEROSITY~~

7. Self-Centered
8. Disrespect



### Strengths

#### BELONGING

- Trust  
Cooperation

#### MASTERY

- Talent  
Social Skills

#### INDEPENDENCE

- Self-Control  
Self-Confidence

#### GENEROSITY

- Caring  
Respect

## Growth Goals

Solving problems develops strength and resilience.



BELONGING



Disconnection



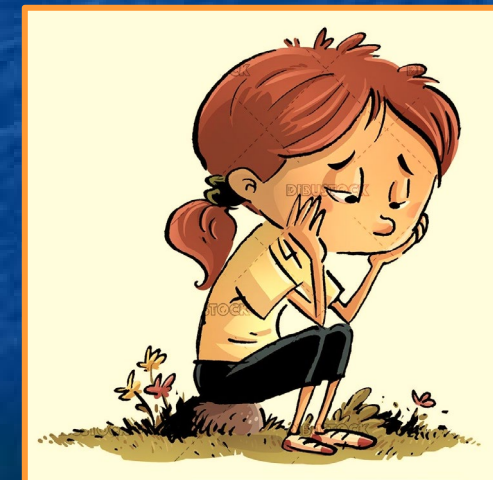
Conflict



MASTERY



School Difficulty



Social Difficulty



~~INDEPENDENCE~~



Lacks Self-Control



Lacks Self-Confidence



Generosity



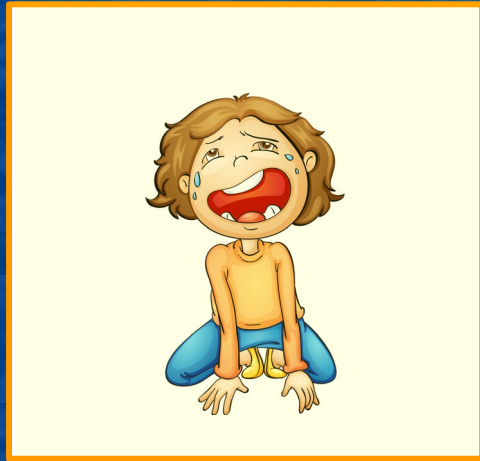
Self-Centered



Disrespect

# Keep Problem Solving Positive

Avoid expanding or stigmatizing this list with more problem labels.  
Even serious problems can be discussed as examples of *Disrespect*:



## *Disrespect of Self*

Examples:

- Self-Harm
- Substance Abuse



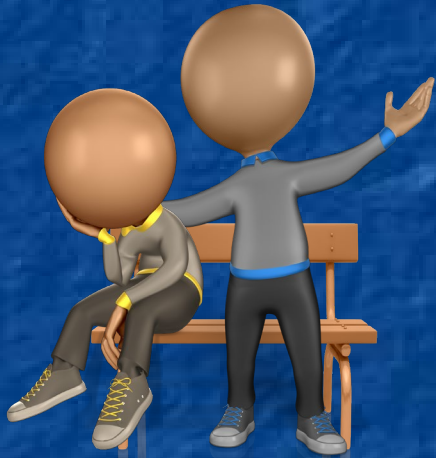
## *Disrespect of Others*

Examples:

- Acts of Racism
- Criminal Offenses

# Response Ability Pathways — RAP

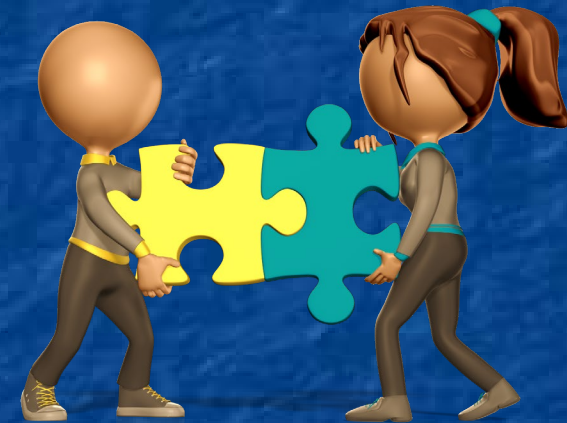
*Our Brain's Natural Helping Process*



CONNECT  
for support



CLARIFY  
challenges



RESTORE  
harmony



CONNECT  
for support

# Connecting



*Creating Safety*

*Showing Empathy*



# Building Trust



Trust is the glue that holds teaching and learning together.

NICHOLAS HOBBS



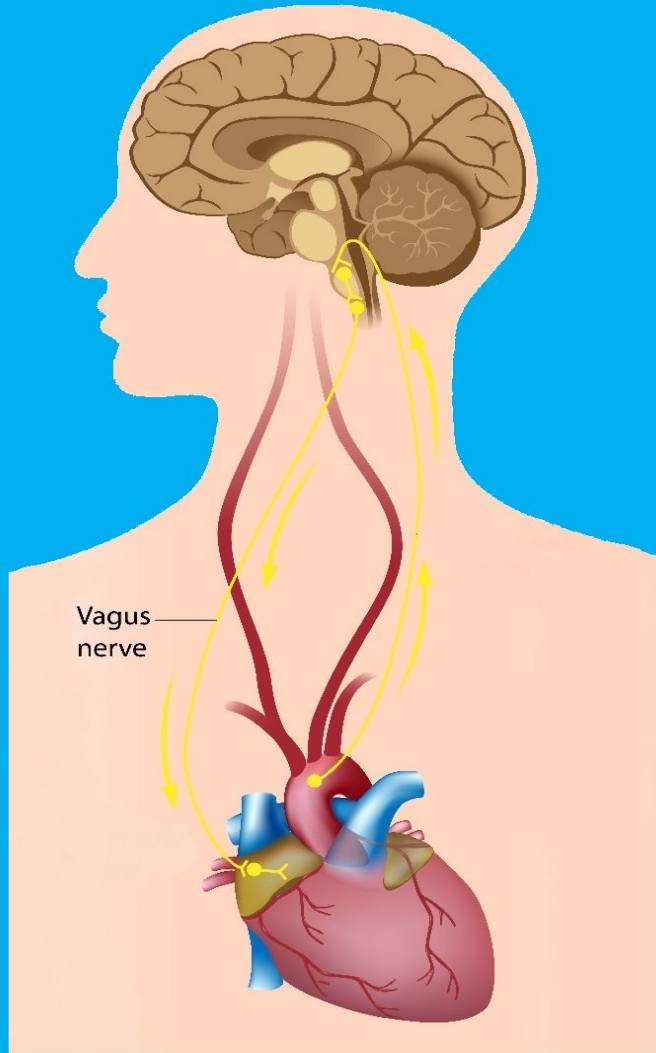
## Rapid Trust

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*



## The Vagal System Connects Brain & Heart



## The Biology of Safety and Danger

The 10<sup>th</sup> cranial nerve decodes ***voice tone*** and ***facial expressions*** to give us a gut level feeling of whether a person is friend or foe:

- **Signs of danger** → fight, flight, or freeze
- **Signs of safety** → calm, social connection

Trust helps regulate emotions and stress.

BESSEL VAN DER KOLK

*The Body Keeps Score*



Bids to Connect  
include engaging  
behavior, smiles,  
conversation, and  
even what we wear.

What bids do you get  
from young people?

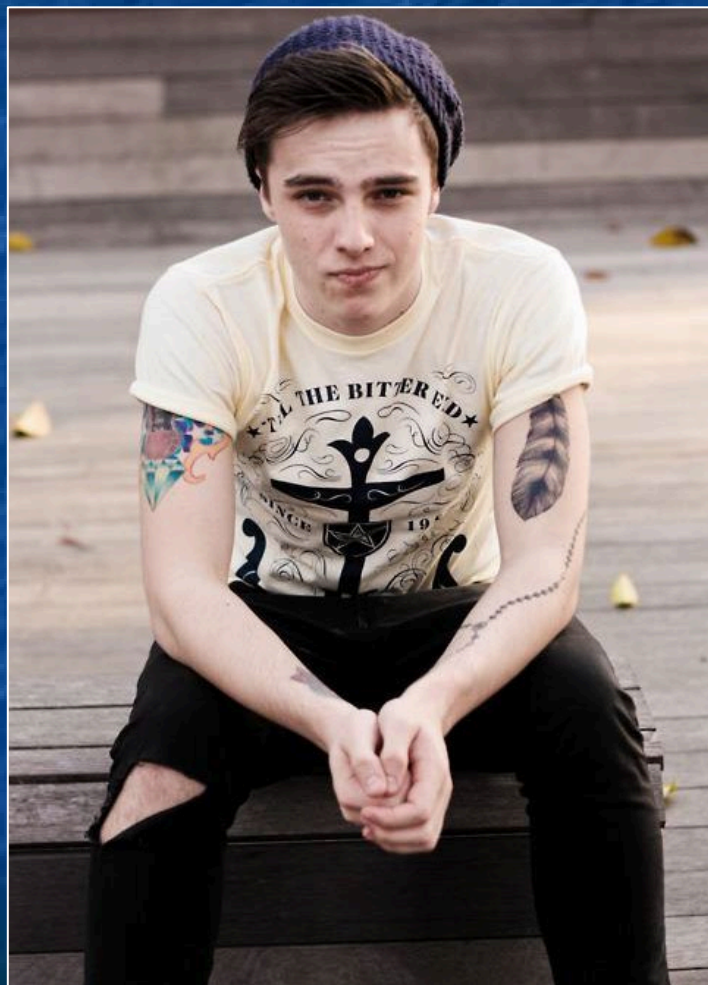


# The Science of Trust

JOHN GOTTMAN

## Bid to Connect

*I am having a really hard day.*



## + Turn Towards

*Oh! What happened?*

## o Turn Away

[no response]

## - Turn Against

*Quit complaining and suck it up!*



# The Social Brain's Two Big Questions





Calming and connecting in moments of crisis.



CLARIFY  
challenges

# Clarifying

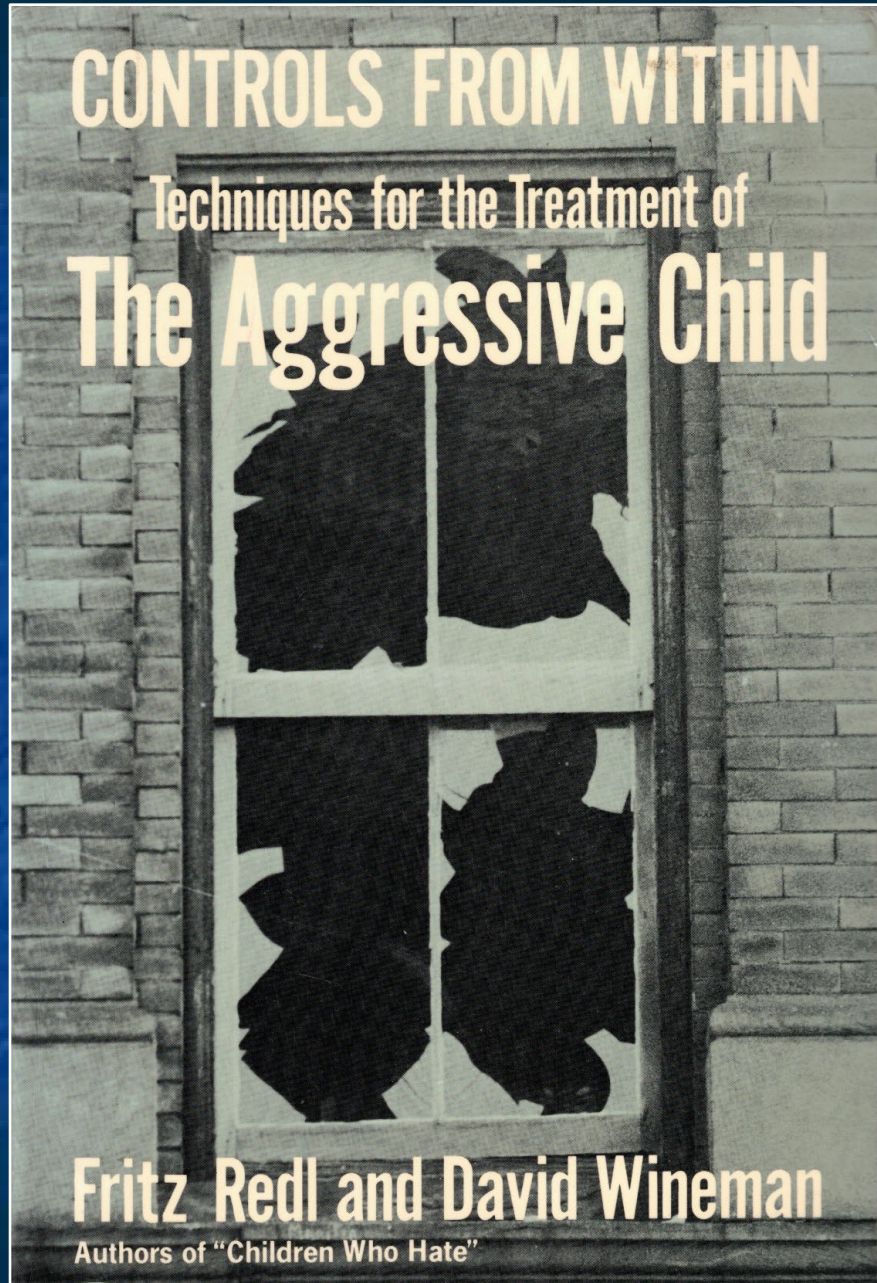


*Exploring Timelines*

*Gaining Insight*



CLARIFY



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

FRITZ REDL    DAVID WINEMAN



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 Problem-Solving Brain



### Challenge

A stressful event

Amygdala Alert

### Logic

Thoughts evaluate

Reasoning Brain

### Emotions

Feelings motivate

Limbic Brain

### Actions

Coping behaviors

Motor-Speech

### Reaction

Consequences of action



CLARIFY

# Private Logic



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

# BAMMS Thinking Errors

**BIAS  
ABOUT  
OTHERS**



## **Blaming**

The teacher isn't fair.

## **Assuming the worst**

You can't trust anybody.

## **Minimizing**

I was just joking.

## **Mislabeling**

He is such a wuss.

## **Self-centered**

I get what I want.

# BAMMS Thinking Errors

**BIAS  
ABOUT  
SELF**



## **Blaming**

I am worthless.

## **Assuming the worst**

I always fail.

## **Minimizing**

I am powerless.

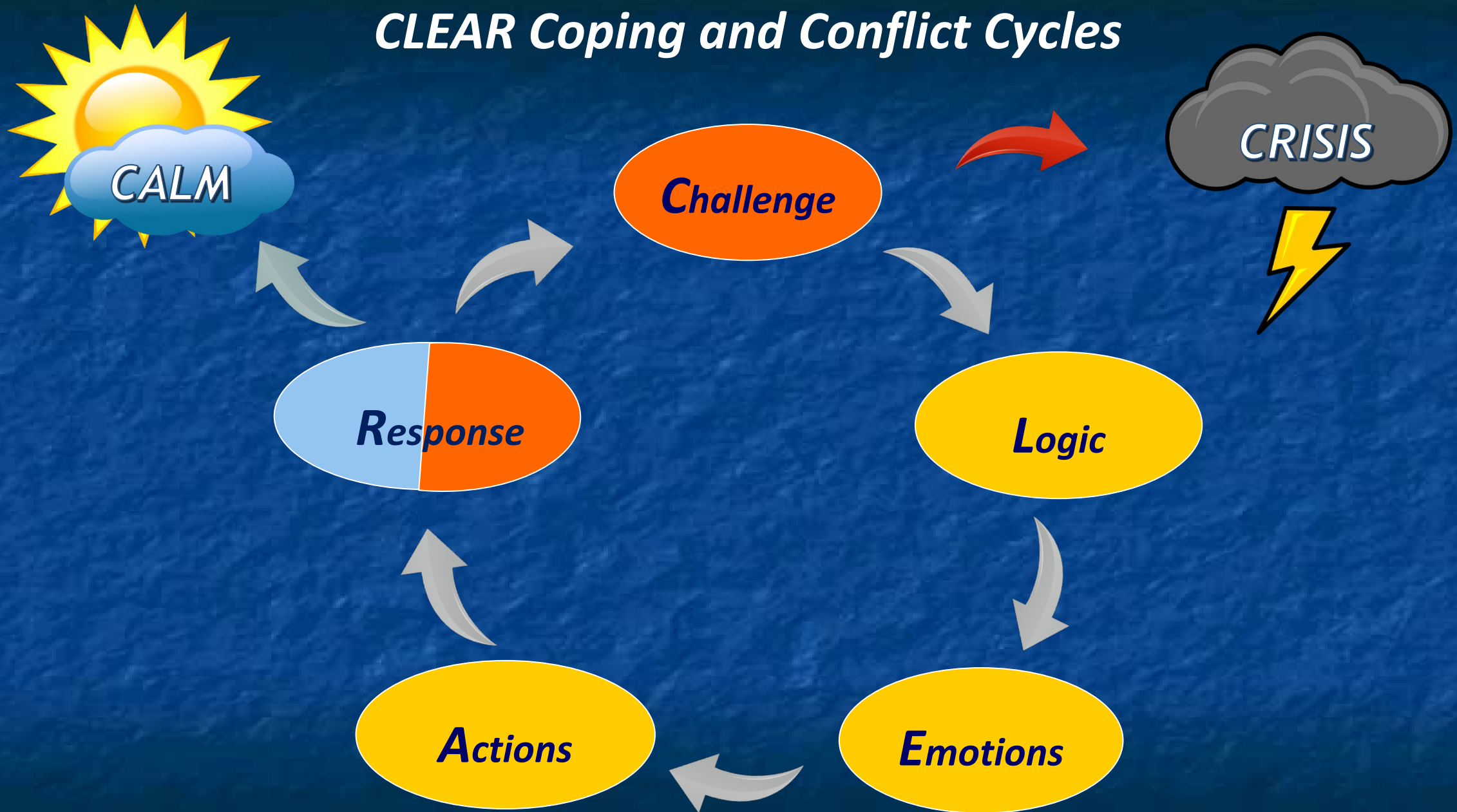
## **Mislabeling**

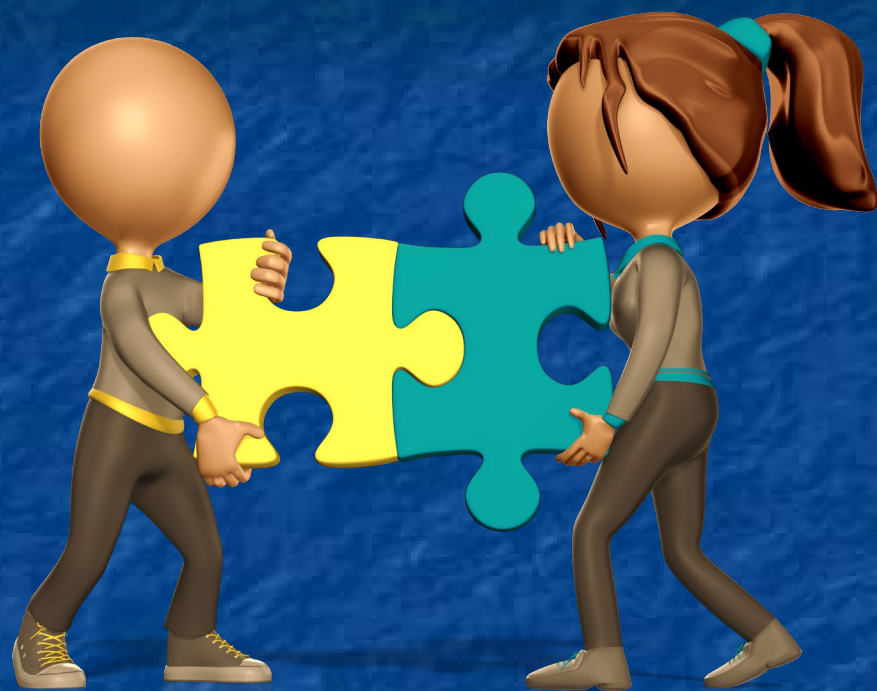
I am just a loser.

## **Self-centered**

Nobody likes me.

# ***CLEAR Coping and Conflict Cycles***





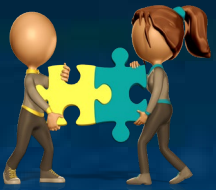
RESTORE  
respect

# Restoring



*Providing Supports*

*Building Strengths*



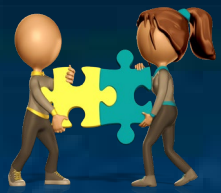
RESTORE



## *Providing Supports*

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

ALAN SROUFE



RESTORE

# From Surviving to Thriving



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

ERIK LAURSEN

# Agenda for Peer-Helping Meetings



Ritual and order give safety.

NICHOLAS HOBBS

## 1. Reporting Problems

Members check in with peers to take the pulse of the group.

## 2. Awarding Meetings

The group decides who is to receive help in this meeting.

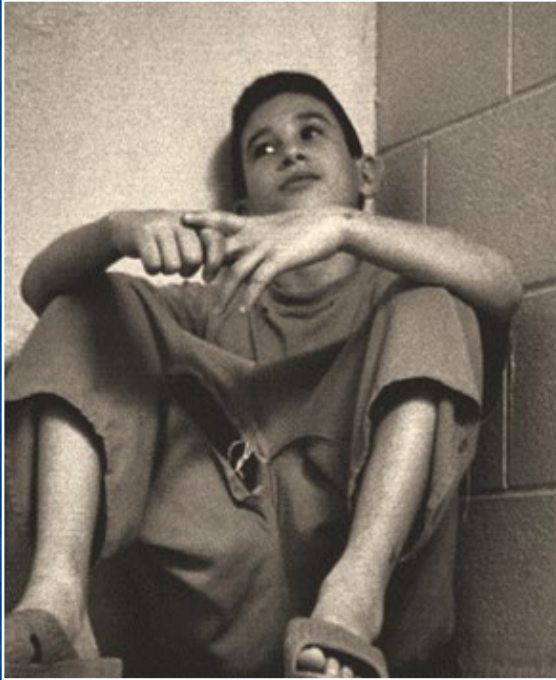
## 3. Problem Solving

The group connects, clarifies challenges, and builds strengths.

## 4. Leader Feedback

Reflecting on a group meeting equips peers with helping skills.

# Problem Solving



## CONNECT for Support

Create safety and trust so that the person is open to receiving help.



## CLARIFY Challenges

Reflect on how actions affect self and others and find new coping strategies.



## RESTORE Respect

Strengthen belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity.



## Caring in the Community

A group of youth from a Minnesota Positive Peer Culture program volunteer in an elementary classroom.



## Cross-generational Bonds

Students in a PPC group at Starr Commonwealth in Michigan “adopt” a grandmother in a nursing home. She is celebrating her 100th birthday.

# *Work is love made visible:* Kahlil Gibran



Projekt Chance is a Positive Peer Culture Program in Creglingen, Germany. Teens reside in an 800-year-old abbey that they are restoring for the community.



## VOICES OF YOUTH

The one thing I really enjoy about being in a peer group is that I can take what I have learned and help other people to apply it to their lives, sort of like everybody helps each other out.

# Need for a Positive Staff Team



# Positive Staff Teams Produce Positive Youth Cultures



Teams that respect and empower young people  
have the most positive peer group cultures.



## Effective Teams

1. Team cohesion
2. Team involvement
3. Belief in program success
4. Optimism on youth success



positive peer culture

## **The Evidence Base for Positive Peer Culture**

### Key Research Outcomes

1. Student and staff safety
2. Close adult and peer bonds
3. Problem-solving abilities
4. Lower incidence of crisis
5. Internal locus of control
6. Increased self-worth
7. Prosocial behavior and values
8. School engagement
9. School achievement
10. Lower recidivism

ERIK LAURSEN



SIGRID JAMES,  
University of Kassel, Germany

## Positive Peer Culture (PPC)

PPC is a peer-helping model designed to improve social competence and cultivate strengths in youth. Care and concern for others is the defining element of PPC. Rather than demanding obedience to authority or peers, PPC demands responsibility, empowering youth to discover their greatness....

As individuals become more committed to caring for others, they abandon hurting behaviors.

# Safety



While many other programs for youth at risk can have negative peer subcultures, PPC researchers found youth viewed their environments as safe.

# Belonging



Youth at risk need close personal relationships to reconstruct their lives. Youth who bond to staff and peers are more prosocial in the program and community.

# Mastery



School failure sparks antisocial behavior. Successful teachers give “uncommonly warm emotional support” and foster achievement. Students who develop interest in school have better life outcomes.

# Independence



Treating youth with respect builds autonomy and responsibility.  
Coercive controls fuel negative peer subcultures and antisocial values.

# Generosity



The spirit of generosity and concern for others is the core value in positive peer cultures. Peer helping and service learning achieve a role reversal as self-centered individuals become engaged in helping.

*He's not heavy, he's my brother.*

Christoph Steinebach · Álvaro I. Langer  
*Editors*

# Enhancing Resilience in Youth

Mindfulness-Based Interventions in  
Positive Environments

 Springer

## Generosity and Resilience

Positive Peer Culture research at the Zurich University of Applied Science show that generosity is a key factor in developing resilience.

CHRISTOPH STEINEBACH  
Zurich, Switzerland, 2019

# Problem Youths or Problem Solvers?

WILLIAM WASMUND & RANDY COPAS



## Youth as Experts

These young people were members of different PPC groups and most had multiple prior placements. Here they share perspectives on peer helping.

## What got you into this program?



- Not listening to my parents, running away, selling drugs, doing drugs, getting involved with gang activities.
- Not able to cope with my feelings, manipulating my family to get what I wanted.

## How does PPC prepare you to be successful?



- It teaches you responsibility and how to care for other people.
- Deal with things you did in the past through exploring different solutions and points of view.

# What motivates you to want to succeed?



- When a person is doing real well, you use them as an example: “I’m going to do what they did.”
- The staff are people I can look up to and be like, to succeed like they have succeeded.
- Helping others in the group gives you so much encouragement for doing the right thing. It really makes you feel good.

# How does PPC compare with other programs?



- A lot of programs work on level systems and all you have to do is “be good.”

Here they challenge your thinking and get down to the root of the problem. You figure out how to change it instead of just making it look good on the surface.

# What have you changed about yourself?



- I've learned how my actions affect other people.
- My group helped me feel comfortable being myself instead of having to be somebody I'm not.

## Can kids really help other kids?



- Yes, kids can help other kids to change. They know better than psychologists what there is to deal with in life, and that's better than anything.
- I think youth can help other youth more effectively than older people can. They relate more to people their age and are more ready to believe them.

## Doesn't PPC make it okay to bully other kids?



- Everybody in the group is considered equal. People prevent that problem from happening.
- In every group you always have a person who will prevent anything that allows somebody to get hurt.

## What do you do if someone won't cooperate?



- We try our best as a group to help them out. We take care of their responsibilities, and when they calm down, we work through what happened.
- We work with them when they are not upset, because that's the time they are going to get the most help.

# Wouldn't it be better if you could punish?



- Punishment doesn't give a chance to learn from what they've done or how they've hurt people. That's not really promoting change or showing them how to be better.
- If everyone were punished for their problems, everyone would be in jail.

# Does helping others change you?



- Helping others helps you by building relationships and teaching you not to be selfish.
- Community service helps us practice our communication and social skills. It gives us a chance to make other people happy.

## Outwitting Adults

**Fight:** I acted violent and mean until they kicked me out.

**Flight:** I ran away when they started getting close to my problems.

**Fool:** I hugged my staff and promised to change to get them off my back.



## Positive Peer Culture

I didn't want to face my problems.

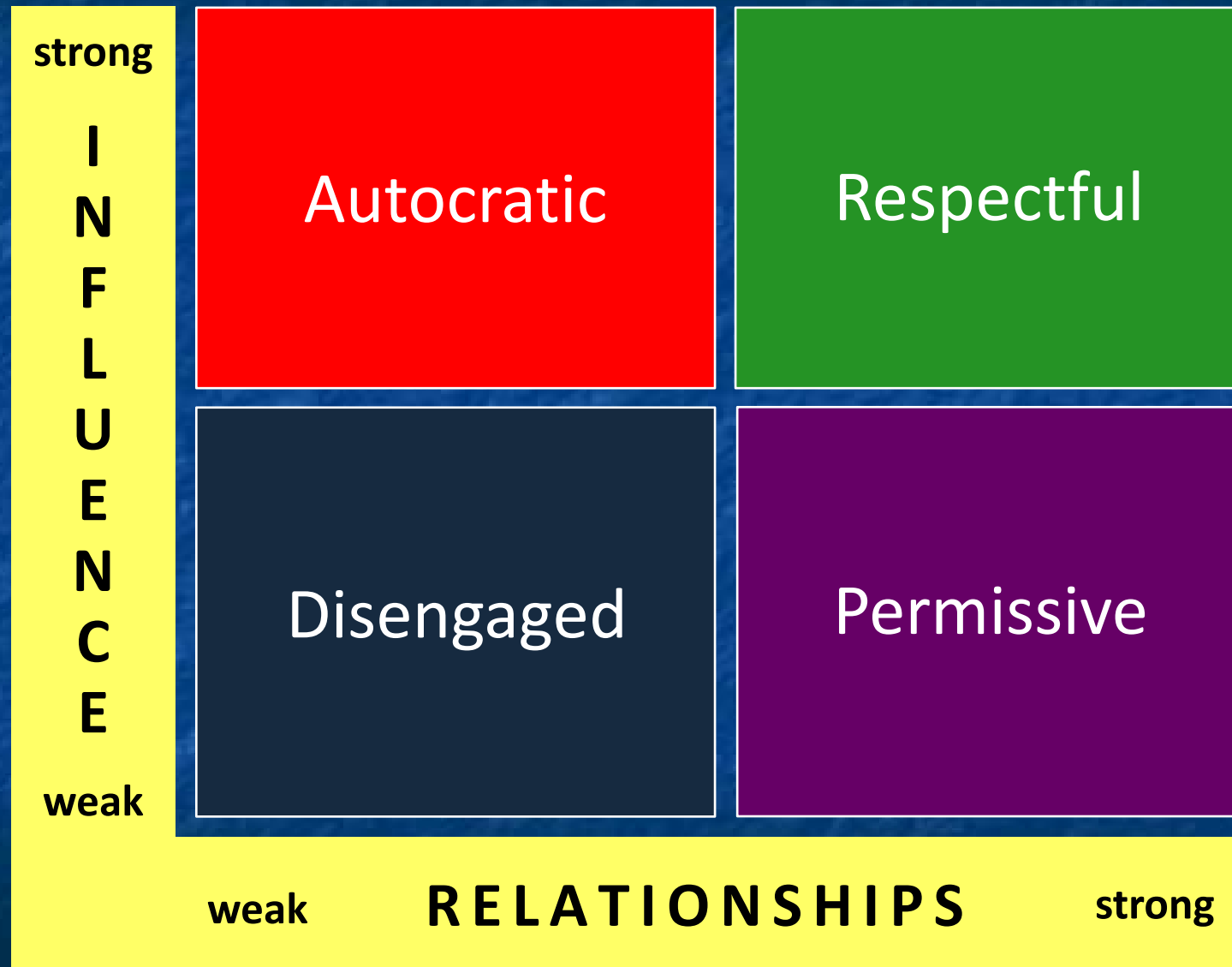
My group didn't give up on me, even when I kept rejecting them.

They believed in me, even when I didn't believe in myself.

## Fighting to Survive

CARIN NESS WITH GIRLS IN PPC

# Leadership Styles



Autocratic

## OBEDIENCE TRAINING



Autocratic

## POWER STRUGGLES



Autocratic

FLAW FIXING



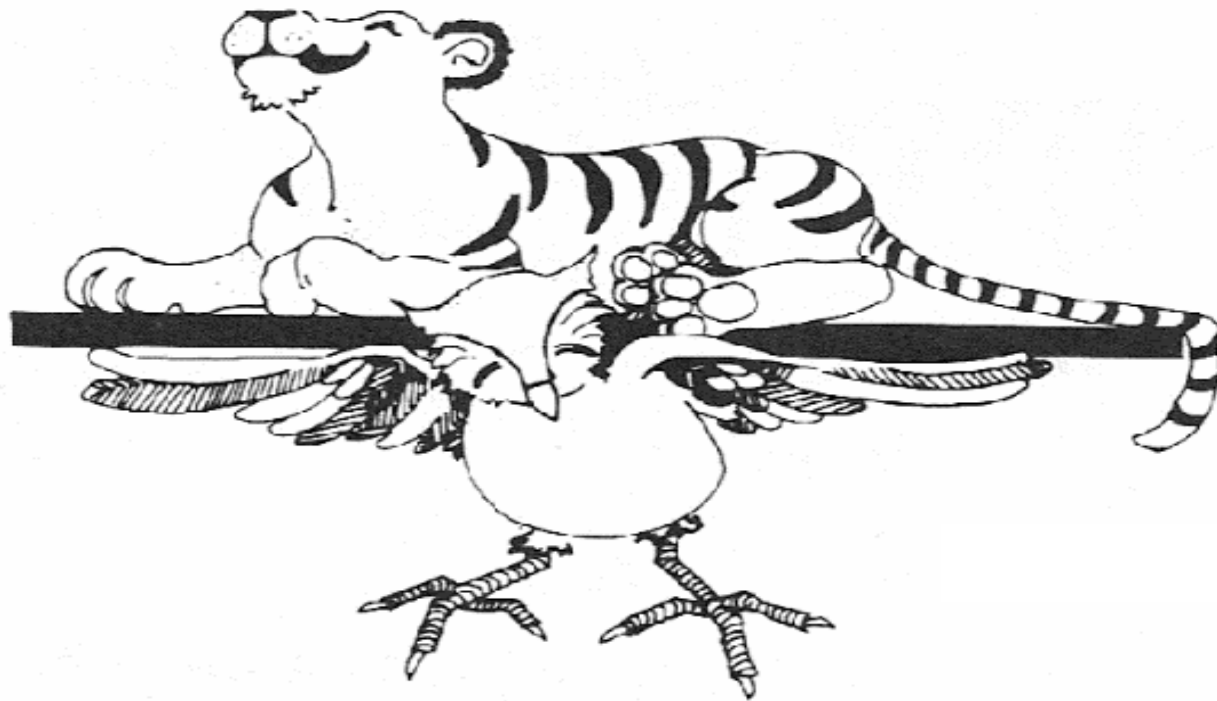
Permissive

PAMPER



Permissive

RESCUE



Permissive

BECOME ONE OF THEM



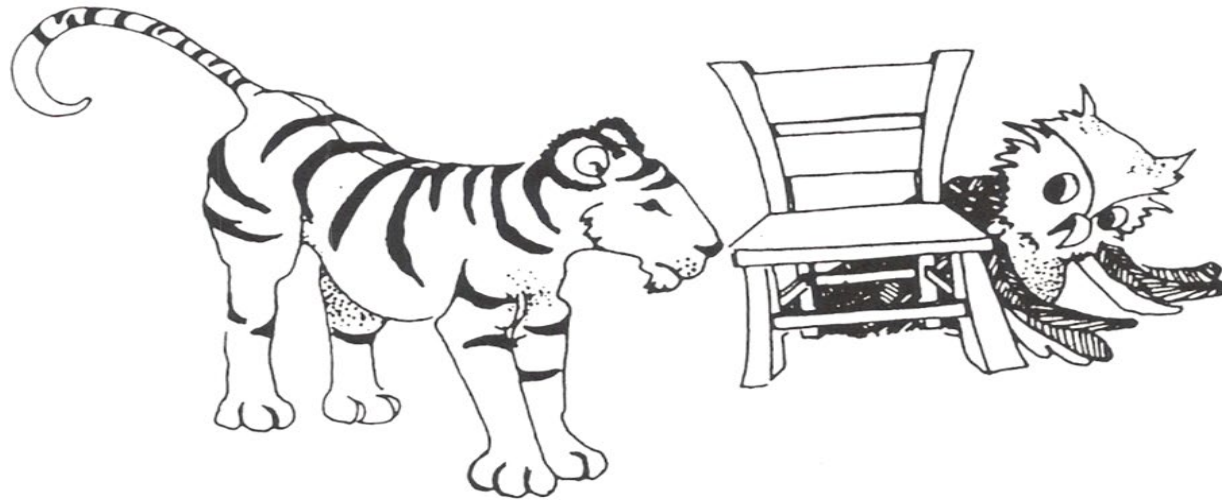
Disengaged

NEGLECT



Disengaged

AVOID



Disengaged

EXCLUDE



Respectful

CONNECT



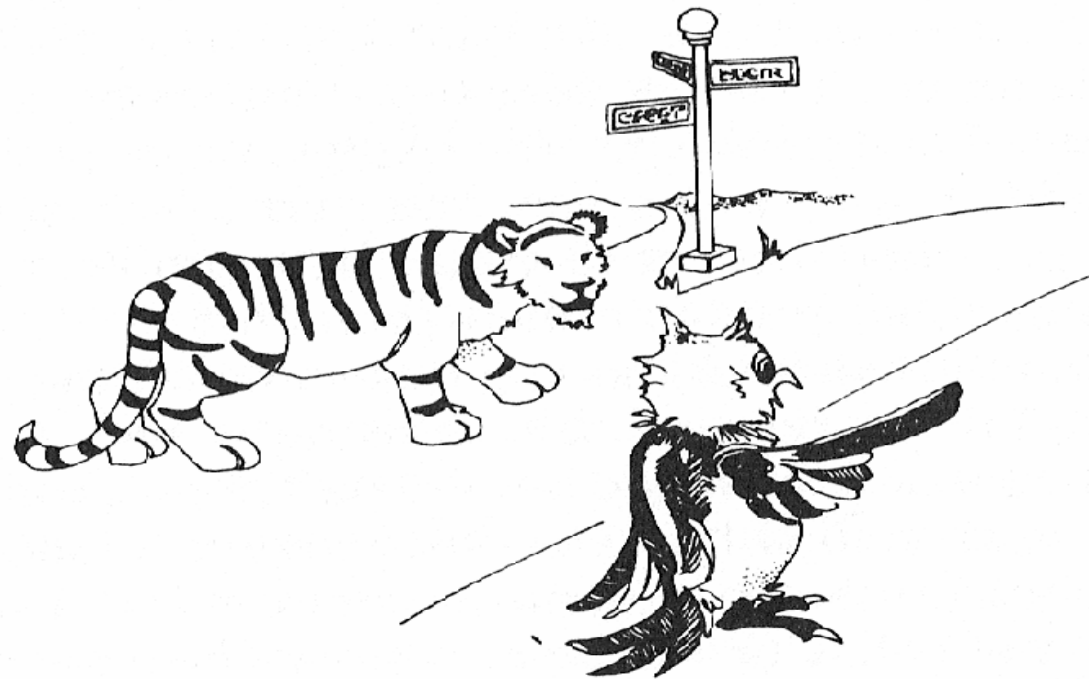
Respectful

CLARIFY



Respectful

RESTORE



## Antonio: The old and the new



# Voices of Youth

*Rekindling Hope in Positive Peer Cultures*



Larry Brendtro and Beate Kreisle



RECLAIMING  
Youth at Risk  
[reclaimingyouth.org](http://reclaimingyouth.org)



ACRC