

## The Resilience Code: Finding Greatness in Youth

**By Larry Brendtro and Dr. Scott J. Larson**

*Children at risk who surmount difficult life situations challenge traditional views that focus on problems through the lens of deficit and disorder. Difficult life problems pose dangers but also can lead to new strengths and coping ability. According to the Circle of Courage model, positive growth results from opportunities to experience belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity. The Resilience Code integrates key findings from resilience science with Circle of Courage principles. The goal is to bring research-validated principles into practice and provide a roadmap to positive youth development.*

*What we want to achieve in our work with young people is to find and strengthen the positive and healthy elements, no matter how deeply they are hidden. We enthusiastically believe in the existence of those elements even in the seemingly worst of our adolescents. -- Karl Wilker, 1920*

Long before the terms “resilience” and “risk” came into common use, Alfred Adler (1930) used the words “courage” and “discouragement” to express similar ideas. Thinkers since Plato have tried to define courage. In the classic book, *The Courage to Be*, Paul Tillich (1952) noted that courage is necessary to surmount life’s difficulties, but courage only comes from experiencing adversity. Thus, adults should not shelter children from all difficulties, nor allow them to become discouraged. The goal is to support children as they develop courage to cope with the challenges and problems of life.

Resilience science is a relatively recent arrival on the psychological scene. A leading researcher, Emily Werner (1995), described resilience as achieving positive life outcomes in spite of risk. Resilience also involves the ability to rebound from adversity with greater strength to meet future challenges (Walsh, 1998). Clinical research shows that even serious disruptions in a child’s life can offer unexpected opportunities for growth (Flach, 1988). How do we develop resilience in children? Research on positive youth development is providing a growing body of data about the factors that give kids the courage to thrive, even in the face of great adversity.

When the concept of resilience first was studied, the view of some was that this was a rare and remarkable trait of a few invulnerable super-kids. Now we realize that humans are, by nature, resilient, for we are the descendants of survivors. Even children exposed to great trauma can turn their lives around, if they can develop certain inner strengths and rely on supports from caring persons in their lives. The other side of the coin is that there are no invulnerable humans, for if our basic needs are frustrated, we are all at risk.

### **Deficits or Strengths?**

*“Glance at problems, gaze at strengths.” -- J. C. Chambers*

Eminent psychiatrist Karl Menninger (1893-1990) believed that building strengths was the foundation of mental health. When he was well into his nineties, Dr. Karl was asked which of his many books would have the most enduring impact. He quickly chose The Vital Balance, which he had written in 1963.

That work described three stages in the history of mental health:

- Yesterday marked the discovery of mental illness.
- Today's research focuses on methods for prevention and treatment.
- Tomorrow will show how persons can become "weller than well."

Dr. Menninger accurately foretold a science of resilience, where even life's disruptions could strengthen human character. His prototype of "weller than well" was William James, who overcame serious personal problems to achieve eminence in both psychology and philosophy. In 1902 in a classic treatise on religion, James wrote: "The potentialities of development in human souls are unfathomable" (cited in Menninger, 1963, p. 412).

In contrast to the optimism of James, the two prevailing views about how to best deal with youth problems are both pessimistic. The first is to punish behavior. The second is to treat disorders. Punitive models describe wayward youth as deviant and disruptive. Treatment models cast them as disturbed and disordered. We encountered yet another strain of pessimistic professionalism on a visit to a Russian children's home. Our professional hosts proudly introduced themselves as "defectologists." We have tried to stop using such deficit words, because they mask the needs and potential greatness of young persons. Sharing this repugnance to the deficit mindset is Australian therapist Michael White who writes, "Pathology. The word makes me wince" (White, 1995, p. 5).

During the last half of the twentieth century, psychology was preoccupied with the study of pathology (Aspinwall & Staudinger, 2003). Tomes were written about anger, guilt, depression, and trauma. Locked in this deficit mindset, little attention was given to human strengths like hope, courage, friendship, and kindness. This is rapidly changing as resilience science has sparked a new positive psychology.

### **The Resilience Revolution**

After decades of dwelling on the dark side of human behavior, a psychology of human strengths is emerging. Researchers are now exploring how to cultivate qualities such as courage, responsibility and hope. In the words of leaders in this revolution: "Much of the task of prevention in this new century will be to understand and learn how to foster these virtues in young people" (Seligman & Peterson, 2003, p. 314).

In many ways, the move to strengths is the blossoming of seeds planted over the past century. In spite of the dominance of the deficit model, there have always been powerful advocates for the strengths perspective.

Following is a quick 100-year sample of contributions to a psychology of strength and resilience in work with troubled children:

- 1900 – Sociologist Ellen Key of Sweden writes The Century of the Child and predicts that science and democracy will unleash a new positive approach to education and treatment of youth.
- 1917 – Physician Karl Wilker turns Berlin’s worst facility for delinquents into a model of self-governance, searching for positive qualities in the most troubled young persons.
- 1925 – Austrian educator August Aichhorn pens the classic book, Wayward Youth, explaining how those who act out against authority are often those who inwardly, most fiercely long to be loved.
- 1939 – Psychologist Carl Rogers concludes that children from difficult backgrounds are able to gain insight into their circumstances and take responsibility for their problems.
- 1942 – Janusz Korczak of Poland accompanies 200 Jewish children to the Nazi gas chambers. In his Ghetto Diary, he predicts that in fifty years the world will finally recognize a child’s right to respect.
- 1951 – Anna Freud forms an experimental group of Jewish orphans from concentration camps. Wildly defying adults; they show amazing loyalty, concern, and self-sacrifice towards peers.
- 1965 – Paul Torrance summarizes research on healthy personal development and concludes that mental health involves developing skills and resources to deal constructively with life stresses.
- 1972 – Urie Bronfenbrenner attacks research on “strange behavior in strange situations” calling for ecological study of the child’s natural relationships in family, school, peer group, and community.
- 1989 – The United Nations ratifies the Rights of the Child, recognizing that even youth growing up in difficult situations are entitled to care in environments of happiness, love, and understanding.
- 1995 – Pioneering resilience researcher Emmy Werner has followed high-risk Hawaiian children into adulthood finding most show positive outcomes, in spite of troubled backgrounds.
- 2000 – The American Psychological Association (APA) calls for the creation of a positive psychology which would shift from a preoccupation with deficits to focus on the development of strengths.

At the millennium, Martin Seligman used his presidency of APA to bring human strengths to the forefront of psychology. This is now a robust movement where researchers are providing exciting new studies on the psychology of strength and resilience (Aspinwall & Staudinger, 2002). As the narrowness of the deficit mindset is exposed, even the established DSM system of diagnostic labels for mental disorders is being questioned (Buetler & Malik, 2002). An alternative view is that most interpersonal problems of children and youth result from the absence of essential human strengths (Seligman & Peterson, 2003). Following this premise, researchers are seeking to identify and classify the key strengths that lead to successful life outcomes.

One may not need psychologists to identify strengths, since they have been known throughout human history. Strengths are valuable because they contribute to personal balance and interpersonal harmony. Even cultures without a written language pass on stories of heroes who embodied the key virtues elders seek to instill in children. For example, the parables of the Bible and the stories of Native Americans are both rich with inspiring accounts of generosity. The recent attention given to developing virtues and character in children is yet another example of the importance placed on teaching positive strengths (Lickona, 2001).

It is reasonable to believe that those strengths that insure the survival of individuals and communities are built into both human nature and culture. While strengths are probably universal, certain groups more highly prize particular virtues (Seligman & Peterson, 2003). Thus, belonging is the centerpiece of kinship cultures, while independence is a highly valued trait in competitive, materialistic societies. If strengths are wired into the human DNA, children would be expected to show natural variations in these, as is the case with any human trait.

### **Decoding Resilience**

After years of listing disorders, there is great interest in cataloguing strengths. For starters, we could re-read Allport and Odbert who, in 1936, identified 18,000 English words for human traits, some positive and some negative. But long lists of strengths would be just as unwieldy as 900 pages of disorders in the DSM manual of psychiatric diagnoses. Einstein advised that the important ideas of any field should be stated in terms "as simple as possible but not simpler." Following his advice, we seek to distill the myriad of human strengths into a practical and manageable set of concepts.

One promising system of categorizing strengths is the Developmental Assets model, produced by researchers from the Search Institute (Benson, 1997). This is a list of 40 assets that lead to positive outcomes. Twenty are internal assets (e.g., achievement motivation) and twenty are external assets (e.g., positive peers). Youth with many assets usually turn out well. But those with limited assets are at risk for a host of bad outcomes; including substance abuse, reckless sexuality, school problems, emotional problems, and delinquency.

Remarkably, 60% of youth in the United States have less than 20 of these protective assets. Across the country, the Search Institute is helping communities increase assets for children and youth of all ages.

In South Africa, Nelson Mandela's Commission on Young People at Risk had a unique opportunity to reconstruct child and youth care programs. Rejecting the bitter legacy of apartheid, they embraced a strengths perspective. The Circle of Courage, first identified in *Reclaiming Youth at Risk* (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 1990), was adopted as the basic model of organizing developmental assessment and strength-building interventions. This model focuses attention on the four principles of belonging, mastery,

independence, and generosity. When youth have opportunities to develop these strengths, they thrive. When these are lacking, children are at risk.

The commitment to this positive philosophy is expressed by Archbishop Desmond Tutu in the foreword to the latest revision of Reclaiming Youth at Risk:

We must look on children in need not as problems but as individuals with potential to share if they are given the opportunity. Even when they are really troublesome, there is some good in them, for after all, they were created by God. I would hope we could find creative ways to draw out of our children the good that is there in each of them (Tutu, 2002).

For some time, we have been intrigued at the close connection between the 40 Developmental Assets of the Search Institute and the Circle of Courage dimensions of belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 2002). The twenty internal assets seemed to describe nuances of the four global strengths included in the Circle of Courage. The 20 external assets identified a range of environmental supports that help youth develop these strengths.

While the Search Institute labeled 40 assets, researchers in positive psychology have developed a tentative list of over 50 strengths, which they place in six categories (Seligman & Peterson, 2003?). Once again, most of these seem to be extensions of the four Circle of Courage strengths.

We thought it would be illustrative to take key studies of resilience and overlay them on the Circle of Courage. There is richness in the longer lists. There is simplicity in being able to interpret these as exemplars of belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity. We believe that the reason the Circle of Courage has a goodness of fit with so many other data sets is that it is tied to universal developmental needs, namely; attachment, achievement, autonomy, and altruism.

In Table 1, we sort four other lists of strengths into Circle of Courage categories. These are drawn from leading researchers on resilience and self-worth. The Circle of Courage provides a unifying tool to integrate the complex factors identified by diverse researchers. A perusal of these concepts clarifies just what is involved in building Circles of Courage.

**Table 1: The Resilience Code**  
**Circle of Courage Principles and Resilience Science Findings**

**Attachment:** This growth need is met by opportunities for **Belonging**.

- **Coopersmith:** Significance, acceptance, attention, and affection of others.
- **Flach:** A network of friends, a community where one is respected, humor.
- **Werner:** Caring and attentive family environments; if parents are absent or inattentive, extended family, siblings, and other adults provide counsel, safety, and support;

participation in school and community programs.

- **Wolin:** Relationships, humor, intimate and fulfilling ties to others.

**Achievement:** This growth need is met by opportunities for **Mastery**.

- **Coopersmith:** Competence; success in meeting demands for achievement.

- **Flach:** Creativity, open-mindedness, receptive to new ideas, wide range of interests, recognizing one's gifts and talents, willing to dream, finds novel solutions to meet goals, redefines assumptions and problems to find solutions.

- **Werner:** High expectations, academic success, communication skills.

- **Wolin:** Insight, initiative, creativity, stretches self in demanding tasks, asks tough questions, gives honest answers, brings order and purpose to chaos.

**Autonomy:** This growth need is met by opportunities for **Independence**.

- **Coopersmith:** Power, the ability to be in charge of self and to be able to influence others.

- **Flach:** Autonomy, independence of thought and action, personal discipline and responsibility, insight into one's own feelings, high tolerance of distress, distances oneself from destructive relationships.

- **Werner:** Sense of personal efficacy or control over one's environment.

- **Wolin:** Independence, keeps boundaries and emotional distance from troubled persons, initiative, takes charge of problems, exerts control.

**Altruism:** This growth need is met by opportunities for **Generosity**.

- **Coopersmith:** Virtue, adherence to moral and ethical standards.

- **Flach:** Insight into the feelings of others, hope, commitment, the search for meaning, purpose, faith, a sense of destiny.

- **Werner:** Empathy and caring, productive roles in family and community life.

- **Wolin:** Relationships of empathy, capacity to give, morality with an informed conscience, judges right from wrong, values decency, compassion, honesty, fair play, responds to needs and suffering of others.

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The Resilience Code translates and clarifies a mass of important research on the psychology of human strengths. It places the focus on core needs of children and

provides a roadmap for supporting youth in their sometimes painful journey through the hazards of human existence. An emphasis on resilience does not mean that we throw children to their own resources. Youth cannot thrive on strengths alone, but need concerned adults and peers who embrace them in both good and difficult times.

### **Children as Acorns**

A remarkable blending of scientific and spiritual worlds comes from research on resilience. Psychiatrist Robert Coles (1990) studied the spiritual life of children. He concluded that youngsters ask the same eternal spiritual questions as thinkers like Tolstoy and Gaugin: "Where do we come from? Who are we? Where are we going?" (p. 299).

Youth whose lives are in pain and turmoil are those most likely to wrestle with deeply spiritual questions, such as, "Why was I born?" and "What is the reason for living?" Many studies show that resilient youth are able to find meaning in their lives by investing in a purpose beyond themselves (Larson & Brendtro, 2000). We once asked teens in a detention center if they had any hopes or dreams for their future. One boy responded, "No. That's why we're here."

As young people gain an understanding of who they have been uniquely created to be, they discover a sense of calling for their lives. A youth returning from a week-long volunteer service project exclaimed, "I finally found the reason I was born!" Suddenly he had something bigger to live for than his self-gratification. But without a sense of purpose, the lives of these young people are mostly about deviance control or "sin management." Helping a young person discover their dreams involves more than simply saying, "You can do whatever you put your mind to. Go for it!" That's just another set-up for failure. We need to help kids think realistically, yet boldly, about who and what they could become. And then we walk with them one step at a time to get there.

Writing in *The Soul's Code*, Robert Hillman (1996) uses the metaphor of an acorn to describe each child's unique hidden potential. A tiny acorn carries coded instructions for becoming a mighty oak. All children are endowed with the seed for some unique "genius." In the struggle to find their purpose, they make missteps and show many problems. Our task is to provide opportunities so children can discover their destiny and calling.

It is amateur night at the Harlem Opera House. Ella, an awkward skinny teen, fearfully goes on stage. The announcer first tells the audience that this next contestant will dance for them. "Hold it, hold it. Now what's your problem honey?" Ella has just changed her mind so he announces her decision to the crowd: "She's not gonna dance, she's gonna sing ...." (Hillman, 1996, p. 10). That night, a shy girl found her calling, taking a new pathway to become the legendary singer, Ella Fitzgerald.

Some children show their destiny and genius very young. Golda launched into leadership in fourth grade in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, public schools. She organized a

protest against requiring poor children to purchase schoolbooks. She rented a hall to stage a meeting, raised funds, enlisted a group of girls to help, and then addressed the assembly. Young Golda Meir was well on the way to her destiny of becoming prime minister of Israel.

Robert Perry who crossed the Arctic and “discovered” the North Pole was the only child of a widow. He stayed close to his mother to escape the neighborhood boys who called him skinny and bullied him about his fearfulness. Mohandas K. Gandhi was a short, thin, sickly, ugly, and frightened child, afraid of snakes, ghosts, and the dark. His stand against racism in South Africa was a rehearsal for his nonviolent protest in India that confounded the power of the British Empire.

As children struggle to find their calling, along the way they often create grief for themselves and others. By current standards, Eleanor needed therapy. Before nine, she had lost a mother, younger brother and father. In school, she was sullen and stubborn and threw tantrums. Because of school failure, she was taught for years by a tutor whom she hated. Deprived of normal relationships, she would fantasize and dream of the day when she would do great acts of compassion. The destiny of Eleanor was to care for a family and to be the strength behind her disabled husband, Franklin Roosevelt, as he served as governor of New York and eventually, president of the United States.

Psychologists sometimes describe high-achieving young persons as “compensating” for their weakness. But this is a pessimistic view, since obviously the potential was always lying within the acorn. Hardship and difficulty only brought it to the fore. Reframing these lives in resilience theory, the challenges, frustrations, and disruptions of life are essential to develop character and strength.

On their way to achieving their destiny, many youngsters are obstinate, frustrated, and angry. If one checks off lists of “symptoms,” they might qualify for one or more psychiatric labels from DSM. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) is so named because it uses statistical standards of “normal” to label those deemed “abnormal.” Hillman prefers the term “extraordinary” and challenges us to diagnose the encoded greatness in children, rather than some disorder. On the search for their destiny, children strive and defend, and stubbornly persist. They should be expected to show problems when their needs and potentials are ignored. The new psychology calls for identifying those conditions that enable youth to achieve important life goals (Stokols, 2003).

## **Conclusion**

Two centuries ago, Goethe declared that the job of the educator was to find the germ of virtue concealed in the kernel of every fault. The resilience revolution has brought us full circle, back to the wisdom of early pioneers who saw positive qualities in even the most challenging youth.



One of today's leading experts on resilience is John Seita. His credentials begin when removed from his family at age eight. In the next four years, he was kicked out of 15 court-ordered placements, as he battled all who crossed his path. Soon his case file was heavy with pessimistic assessments of deficit and disorder. Along the way he found adults who engaged in "talent hunts" to uncover and unleash his hidden potentials. He also bonded to positive peers who shared his pain and his dreams. His journey of resilience led him to his current role as professor of social work at Michigan State University. He views troubled kids as possessing a unique but distorted courage, even as they struggle to outwit adults (Seita & Brendtro, 2002). In a book describing his own battles with adults (Seita, Mitchell, & Tobin, 1995), he offers this straightforward advice to all who dare to care for difficult kids:

*I personally challenge all of you to take the bold, brave steps to reclaim every child. My message to you is to use your hidden resources to summon courage, compassion, wisdom, strength, and tenacity so that all children of today may have a tomorrow. No longer should we expect children to navigate without a map, steer without a rudder, or seek without a friend. (p. 62)*

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*Footnotes:*

1 Karl Wilker was a physician and educator who transformed Berlin's worst juvenile institution into a model of mutual respect between youth and adults. He wrote *Der Lindenhof*, which was a rallying cry for the Wandervogel youth movement. When Hitler came to power, Wilker's books were burned and he fled to South Africa, where he taught in schools for Black students. This quotation is from: Wilker, K. (1920). *Der Lindenhof*. Translated 1993 by Stephan Lhotzky. Sioux Falls, SD: Augustana College, p. 69.

Connect with us:

Resilience-Promoting Qualities. Resiliency research most often focuses on identifying the protective mechanisms associated with positive adaption in children. In this vein, an extensive look at the substantive literature (e.g., Blaustein & Kinniburgh, 2018; Gavidia-Payne, Denny, & Davis et al., 2015; Grotberg, 1995; Petty, 2014) reveals the following domain-specific qualities that promote child resilience. Teens have greater amounts of resilience when they experience a sense of pride that comes with achieving manageable objectives. Take Breaks: Many young people feel enormous academic pressures and are often extremely driven toward achievement. Positive youth development in the United States: Research findings on evaluations of positive youth development programs. I understood its majesty and power in a way I never had before. And I had a greater inclination to protect it and be a steward of the natural world. I also became aware of how much I had changed in only 10 days. A contemplative retreat and wilderness trip intentionally change life circumstances for youth, giving them the space to create an opportunity for finding their purpose. One other critical point is the role of technology. All of these trips give young people a chance to take a break from their constant use of technology; this alone is a powerful force for young people to re-connect with themselves and seek connection with their peers. Young people do not usually develop a specific purpose and then go become an expert in that thing.