

# Thriving

children • youth • families



Growing Edge Training online journal



## Hitting the Right Chord

### The Six Keys to Thriving

*Mark D. Freado*

**L**isa's name came up at various times during training. She was obviously a resident who the staff cared about but one they also feared. Examples of her out of control, aggressive behavior were mentioned as they questioned whether they could reach her and how that might occur. The aggressive behavior included significant property damage, most notably, ripping doors from their hinges. The program concerns about safety for Lisa and those around her were well founded. Lisa struggled significantly controlling her behavior at times including difficulty in relationships with family, peers, and staff, and she frequently refused to attend school.

I had an opportunity to visit the group home and meet Lisa. I met several of the girls residing there and their staff, without explanation of what I was doing in the program. I observed Lisa sitting on the couch with a keyboard on her lap and watched as she played bits and pieces of recognizable songs. Initially, I stood nearby watching and listening. When she looked at me I smiled. She smiled back and returned to her music. After a few minutes I moved closer and knelt on the side of the couch where Lisa sat. I asked if I could stay and listen and she responded, "I don't care," which I interpreted to be something more like, "Of course, and thank you for your interest."

After listening for a few minutes, I asked about her music and whether she had taken lessons. She had not but readily expressed interest. Among the songs she played was "Stand by Me." I identified it as one on my long list of favorites, and I asked her to play it again. She complied and laughed when I told her that I wouldn't sing along and ruin the moment. She laughed again when I told her I noticed that she didn't say it was all right if I sang along.

She also played a short bit of "Für Elise." I asked if she was aware that it was written by Beethoven, a very famous composer. I told her that it was one of his most famous pieces, and we watched a YouTube video of a piano performance. I suggested that with lessons she could learn to play it completely, and she responded with a smile.

Creating a pathway to connecting is rooted in neuroscience and human development. When we first encounter another person we pay close attention to

their eyes, facial expression, the tone of their voice and their physical presence. There is a reciprocity in those exchanges that tell us whether it is safe or desirable to proceed. Brendtro and du Toit referred to those micro exchanges as bids (Brendtro & du Toit, 2005). Through my assessment of the bids we exchanged, I felt we had established some rapport and what we call a *reachable moment* in The Art of Kid Whispering training (Chambers & Freado, 2015) (Brendtro & du Toit, 2005). I attempted to bring the conversation closer to the issues that were of more concern to her and the program staff. I asked if she ever used the keyboard as a timeout or healthy diversion when she felt like things were

getting out of control. She sat quietly for a few moments and replied that she hadn't. Then she looked at me curiously and asked, "Wait, who are you?"

The program director, who was sitting nearby, joined in to say

that I was there to do training with the staff and wanted to see the program. She seemed to accept that explanation. I told her that I did not want to get into her personal business and apologized if I made her feel uncomfortable. She said it was okay and agreed that we could continue our conversation.

There is both art and science in the act of listening effectively. The art begins with being able to convey genuine interest in the person with whom we are speaking. Being attentive and interested in what another has to say and understanding their experiences is almost always welcomed and appreciated. In our work with troubled and troubling kids we are mindful that they may not have much experience with adults who are committed to listening to and understanding their story. Everyone has a story to tell, and young people who have experienced loss, failure, and trauma are especially in need of someone to listen. Habit #5 in Stephen Covey's popular book still holds true when it says we should seek first to understand, then to be understood (Covey, 1989). Regarding the science of listening effectively Goulston notes, "The more interested you are in another person, the more you narrow the person's mirror neuron deficit – that biological hunger to have his or her feelings mirrored by the outside world" (Goulston, 2010, p. 57).

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In my conversation with Lisa, I expressed my sincere interest in her desire to make music on the keyboard. Having established that connection, I returned to the topic. I asked if she was aware of any signals in her body before she lost control. She said she was and wondered why I asked her that. I explained that I often ask that question of young people who have problems getting themselves settled and end up acting out in highly emotional and physical ways.

It is in those moments that opportunities for young people to practice self-regulation are immediate and meaningful. Building strength in recognizing the emotional tipping point and finding a safer and more acceptable outlet can significantly change the course of a young person's life. With support and practice over time, new neural pathways can be developed. "The brain is a malleable organ whose development and capacity for improvement and change are continuous and lifelong. We are not prisoners of our genes or our environment, a hopeful message for anyone struggling with the effects of trauma" (Heller & LaPierre, 2012, p. 107).

I explained to Lisa that it is possible that the creativity and rhythmicity she finds in playing music might be a way to help her get back to balance emotionally. I asked her to reflect on the experience she has when she loses control. She stated that she does not like to feel out of control, does not like the things she does, and does not want people to see her that way. She said she feels helpless to stop it. Asking her to reflect on what her thoughts and feelings are at the time of these incidents was an attempt to help her gain some insight into not only what happens in the moment but also afterward when she is typically ashamed and remorseful. Helping a young person gain insight through thoughtful questioning provides them a sense of responsibility and also allows them to see how they might have some control and power to handle the emotional stress in the future (Freado, 2011).

During our conversation, Lisa disclosed that she thinks she is mentally ill like her mother. 14-year-old Lisa had not lived with her mother since she was 4 years old, and she lived with her aunt until the previous year. Her aunt frequently told her she was just like her mother, "you know, crazy." She had been in at least three placements prior to her current residential program. Several diagnoses including ADHD, PTSD, and persistent depressive disorder are part of her record.

I asked Lisa if she felt safe in this setting. She said she did but added that she was "more afraid of what is inside me than what is in this place." She noted that when she begins to feel stressed, she wants those around her to "shut up." It just builds up and she does not realize what happens next. Lisa said it is like she is not awake when she gets like that. Afterward she feels ashamed. Seeing threat more from inside than outside makes her feel particularly alone and contributes to her tentative peer and adult relationships. Because her fear is more internally generated than externally, she frequently does not feel safe and *felt safety* is the first key to thriving (Brendtro & Freado, 2017). The Six Keys to Thriving: safety, belonging, mastery, power, generosity, and adventure are derived from our work developing the Circle of Courage<sup>1</sup> and enhancing the Model of Leadership and Service<sup>2</sup>. Attending to both biosocial and survival brain drives, we see the Six Keys to Thriving in the following ways (Brendtro & Freado, 2017):

**Safety**—ensure physical, emotional, and cultural safety by replacing threat with trust.

**Belonging**—strengthen social bonds and create positive family and peer group climates.

**Mastery**—build intrinsic motivation to engage learners and nurture intelligence.

**Power**—develop self-regulation, responsibility, and positive leadership.

**Generosity**—strengthen empathy and find meaning through service to others.

**Adventure**—provide challenges and healthy risks that spark the spirit of joy.

Lisa's inability to develop effective coping skills appears to have much to do with her belief that she will be like her mother. That significantly influences her fear of herself and the fear others have of her. Stephen Porges suggests that, "Victims of abuse may also employ maladaptive coping mechanisms, which may be related to paying inordinate attention to internal stimuli and distorting external cues" (Porges, 2011, p. 238).

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1 *Circle of Courage*® is a registered trademark of Starr Commonwealth.

2 *Model of Leadership and Service*® is a registered trademark of Cal Farley's.

In my work, I frequently encounter young people who are of significant concern to staff. When I interact with these young people in the various settings where I work they are usually meeting me for the first time. These encounters are productive for several reasons. Typically, I am the beneficiary of what I call a transfer of trust. When a staff member with whom the young person is familiar introduces me to them, their sense of relative safety with the staff transfers to me in that exchange. That benefit is temporary, however. These young people have many adults in and out of their space and various aspects of their lives. They are very attuned to quickly figuring out the potential value or threat of these adults through facial expression, voice tone, and perceived interest. When a skilled adult, sensitive to the safety and connection needs of young people enters in to the dialogue, it is likely that there is a very short period of time to set the course of the interaction (Porges, 2011).

Healthy connections with others or *belonging* is another key to thriving, particularly for young people who have experienced relational trauma (Brendtro & Freado, 2017). We are, by nature, tribal beings meant to be in community with others. The capacity to develop and engage in safe, meaningful relationships is significant in defining emotional health. For young people who have experienced relational trauma resulting from abandonment and abuse, the struggle between the need and desire for connections is compromised by fear of more pain and loss.

Among many assets I observed in Lisa was her ability to engage in conversation with me in a thoughtful and insightful way. During the parts of our conversation most closely related to her pain and fear, she turned from the keyboard to make eye contact and respond to my questions with reflective and seemingly honest responses. As she became more comfortable in our dialogue, she placed the keyboard next to her on the couch. Lisa also told me of her interest in art, make-up, and hair. I asked her to share some of her artwork with me, and I noted that she has talent in drawing. There was a brief break in our conversation when Lisa went to have dinner with others in the house. I indicated that I would like to continue our discussion after her dinner if she felt comfortable. She agreed.

During the interlude I talked with a staff member about Lisa's interests and asked if those interests were woven into her treatment or service plan in any way. I learned that they were not, but there appeared to be an openness to the idea.

Strength-based approaches to helping young people do not minimize or dismiss the emotional and behavioral problems that disrupt their lives. Such approaches do not focus exclusively on the problems. Heller and LaPierre state, "It cannot be repeated often enough that focusing primarily on dysfunction reinforces dysfunction and that, step by step, it is necessary to help clients shift their attention away from focusing exclusively on what is not working in their lives and encourage them to pay attention to areas of experience where they do feel connected and organized" (Heller & LaPierre, 2012, p. 192). Including attention and effort in identifying and supporting interests and strengths emphasizes what Brooks and Goldstein refer to as, "islands of competence" (Brooks & Goldstein, 2002). Developing staff competency in finding and supporting strengths allows them to foster hope and optimism in the young people as well as themselves (Brendtro & Freado, 2017). When we help youth in this way, we serve to recognize and build on existing strengths, and they also begin to see themselves through a filter of achievement and competence. Highlighting areas of *mastery* in their lives is another key to thriving.

### ***Developing staff competency in finding and supporting strengths allows them to foster hope and optimism in the young people as well as themselves.***

Lisa believed that it was inevitable that she would be like her mother, mentally ill and hurtful to others. She had a sense of helplessness about her lack of control and what happens to her when she "blacks out." I returned to the topic of what she experiences in the moments just before she has those episodes of aggression. She described the experience as not hearing things distinctly; voices become "fuzzy." She said she begins to breathe faster and feels anxious. One observant staff member noted later that Lisa's mouth moves in a particular way before she begins to act out. Lisa had not mentioned it, but it would be helpful for her to be aware of that as well.

I asked Lisa if she thought she was aware enough in those moments to take control of what happens next. Unsure, she agreed to talk about it and try something different. In the space and time between the "normal" Lisa and her out-of-control-self, there

might be an opportunity to build what we call an escape hatch. Her awareness of those frightening and frustrating feelings coming on is an opportunity to do something to help herself. At this point we went back to my earlier question about using the keyboard as a way to redirect herself to a calmer emotional state and awareness. This could be a way of regulating herself and finding a way to feel safe, allowing her to be more responsive to the staff and engage with them to get back to balance.

Lisa was very open to the idea of having some power over something about which she felt helpless. It is important for everyone to be able to exercise power to do things for ourselves and influence others. The foundation of exercising power begins with our ability to self-regulate. *Power* is the fourth key to thriving. We discussed the challenge of doing something she had never done before and how it might take many tries and lots of frustration before it became something she could count on herself to do. Practicing something new takes time and repetition, like learning to play music on the keyboard. This was a plan that would give her the chance to have power over something that typically left her frightened and ashamed. We agreed that I would talk with the staff about the plan to make them aware and enlist their support. Having the skilled and active involvement of staff will provide the critical co-regulation support necessary for Lisa to master the challenges of learning to self-regulate in these significant growth circumstances (Brendtro & Freado, 2017).

One of the significant functions we have as helpers is to empower the young people with whom we work “to live more productive and satisfying lives and to flourish” (Bannink, 2014, p. xii). The more she practices, the more hopeful she will become that she can accomplish things that are important to her. Research shows that strong, healthy connections to caregivers are important in the development of hope in young children. When, through the experience of developmental trauma, young people grow without the capacity for hope, it is the responsibility of later, professional caregivers to help create a sense of hope in them. While hope can be seen as a learned mental set, it is also likely that “operations of hopeful thinking have neurobiological underpinnings, especially as related to goal-directed behaviors” (Lopez, Pedrotti, & Snyder, 2015, p. 206).

Late that night, there was a disturbance in the group home after the girls had gone to bed. Lisa found herself in that transitional state that typically led

to trouble. She asked the staff on duty if she could use the keyboard, and they agreed. They were able to work through some of the logistical challenges having to do with not keeping other girls awake, inability to find headphones, and a few other things. Finally, Lisa was able to sit in another area of the house and play music on the keyboard. After a relatively short period of time, she thanked the staff and went to bed. The next morning, she got up and went to school. The significance of this first successful attempt by Lisa to exercise power in such an important aspect of her life gave hope to her and the staff who work with her. It may serve to give her a sense of who she might become.

### ***Strong, healthy connections to caregivers are important in the development of hope in young children.***

The willingness of the program leadership and the staff to create an approach supporting Lisa’s courage to try a new way to regulate is the kind of flexibility many young people need. Nicholas Hobbs, when building the Re-ED model, encouraged just that kind of creativity and adaptability. He noted that, while there should be a principle-based approach, there should be no orthodoxy or dogma. He promoted flexibility in finding ways to help troubled youth and their families so that there were on-going opportunities for discovery and invention (Hobbs, 1994). In this example of helping Lisa, the first four of six keys were involved in helping her make a plan and make the plan work. Using practices that embrace the Six Keys to Thriving allows programs to be responsive, adaptable, and turn moments of crisis in to moments of satisfaction and joy.

**Mark Freado, MA** (counseling and forensic psychology), is the director of Growing Edge Training, LLC. He previously served as Director, International Training Network with CF Learning, a program of Cal Farley’s, and President of Reclaiming Youth International. His career involves direct service, supervision, and executive management in programs and services for troubled and troubling youth and their families. For more than 20 years, he has provided training and consultation to an international array of public and private organizations in mental health, social service, education, and juvenile justice disciplines. He can be reached at: [freado@growingedgetraining.com](mailto:freado@growingedgetraining.com)

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