

Thriving

children • youth • families

 Growing Edge Training online journal



Trauma-Wise Teens

Larry K. Brendtro

Adult-wary youth are often more receptive to support from other young people. This article describes how they can be enlisted in helping their troubled and traumatized peers.

James Anglin conducted qualitative research with leadership, staff, and young people in ten Canadian residential group care settings.¹ He found that all youth reported pain in their lives because of experiences of trauma or loss. Anglin coined the term *pain-based behavior* to describe how their overt problems masked deep-seated emotional distress. The word pain is not just a metaphor since physical and social pain use the same deep brain circuits to signal that the person is at risk.²

Youth often are highly attuned to the pain of peers who share difficult life experiences, and this empathy enables them to provide support and compassion. Unfortunately, Anglin found that staff in these group facilities seldom responded with sensitivity to the inner world of the child. Instead, they reacted with controlling demands and threatened consequences to problem behavior. Ironically, *punishment* comes from the Latin word *poena* meaning pain—thus, pain-based behavior is met by piling on more pain. Trauma researcher Bessel van der Kolk expressed a similar concern: “Faced with a range of challenging behaviors, caregivers have a tendency to deal with their frustration by retaliating in ways that uncannily repeat the children’s early trauma.”³

Balancing Trauma and Resilience

Since the year 2000, there has been widespread attention to childhood trauma. Staff in education, treatment, and juvenile justice have been mandated to become *trauma informed*. Despite a flood of trauma trainings, there is controversy about whether these make a real difference in the lives of children.⁴

Australian psychologist Howard Bath—well-credentialed as a trauma expert—authored an article titled “The Trouble with Trauma.” He observed that trauma-informed treatment has been oversold as the answer to most problems of children and youth and “the trauma perspective may be on the way to high-jacking the very meaning of the word *therapeutic*.”⁵

The focus on trauma can also shift attention away from strengths, but effective trauma-informed

programs must also be resilience-focused.⁶ Bessel van der Kolk enthusiastically promotes that view: “Every trauma survivor I’ve met is resilient in his or her own way, and every one of their stories inspires awe at how people cope.”⁷

Traditional models of assessment are preoccupied with deficit and disorder which casts youth in the role of victim. But young people are the real experts on their own lives and must be engaged as full partners in planning their futures. Larry Brendtro and Mark Freado describe a strength-based approach to assessment called *Planning Restorative Outcomes*.⁸ Known as PRO Assessment, this model attends both to trauma (*What has happened to you?*) as well as resilience (*How can you heal and thrive?*). PRO Assessment training is now available on-line at reclaimingyouth.org.

“Every trauma survivor I’ve met is resilient in his or her own way, and every one of their stories inspires awe at how people cope.”

In discussions of peer helping, we have made the distinction between *trauma informed* and *trauma wise*.⁹ To be *trauma informed* requires *information*. There is a flood of important data about trauma from diverse disciplines. Thus, being trauma informed might entail knowledge about trauma as a mental disorder, the neuroscience of trauma, and the epigenetics of trauma. While professionals are receiving training in these topics, parents, caregivers, and peer helpers need more practical tools to support kids in pain.

To be *trauma wise* requires *wisdom*. This does not require technical information but the ability to use practical knowledge to make good decisions. Trauma is not new to humans who have long been able to surmount hardship, survive, and thrive. Wisdom to overcome trauma is embedded in cultural values and human genes.¹⁰ For millennia, Indigenous peoples have created communities to ensure safety, meet growth needs of children, and support one another in times of trial. Such wisdom is transmitted by elders to the young.

Howard Bath and John Seita suggest that healing trauma does not just happen in the therapeutic hour but in supportive relationships with all who deal with a young person in “the other 23 hours.”¹¹

The Child Trauma Handbook proposes that parents, counselors, teachers, coaches, direct-care workers, case managers, and others who have relationships with the young person can play important roles.¹²

Absent from the trauma handbook's list of helpers are youth. This is a serious omission since they spend the greatest amount of time with one another—for better or worse. In fact, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration puts *Peer Support* on its short list of trauma-informed practices.¹³ Unfortunately, youth are often the *perpetrators* of trauma through peer mistreatment, so it is not surprising they are seldom seen as resources for healing trauma. We do not train trauma-wise teens through formal instruction in trauma science, but by unleashing the natural inborn capacity of humans to help one another in times of need.

Cultures of Respect

To develop healthy, resilient children requires *Cultures of Respect*, a phrase created by Canadian anthropologist Inge Bolin.¹⁴ Indigenous societies prevented abuse by either adults or peers. Children were reared by the village and youth were given responsible roles in caring for one another. Tapping this traditional wisdom, trauma-wise youth learn to respond to the needs of peers in conflict and pain.

Indigenous cultures engaged children and youth in nurturing and protecting one another. As Lakota psychologist Martin Brokenleg observes, "I was always taught that when I was the oldest in a group of children, it was my responsibility to protect and take care of those younger than me." Inge Bolin describes child-rearing in the remote Andes of Peru.¹⁵ Children were seen as sacred and abuse by adults or bullying by peers was virtually nonexistent. The values of these cultures of respect match the Native American Circle of Courage:¹⁶

Belonging: Children learn that loneliness is the saddest human experience. They are responsible for ensuring that no one is left out and all feel that they belong.

Mastery: Children are motivated to achieve but never flaunt their knowledge. They learn adult models and mature peers and share what they know with others.

Independence: Young people have responsible roles in working for survival of the community. They are encouraged to speak for themselves and make good decisions.

Generosity: Young people care for smaller children and contribute to the community. Respect is modeled by elders and children seek to help others in any way they can.

To develop healthy, resilient children requires Cultures of Respect.

The Indigenous Circle of Courage values have served for tens of thousands of years as the archetype for environments in which all can thrive. Researcher

Emmy Werner describes Belonging, Mastery, Independence, and Generosity as foundations of resilience and recovery.¹⁷ These become the basis for trauma-wise strategies which enlist adults and youth in creating cultures of respect.

Trauma-wise Helping Strategies

The motivation to help others is designed in the human brain.¹⁸ Scottish psychiatrist Ian Suttie observed that children are born with a generous disposition and need the opportunity to care for others.¹⁹ A child who senses his or her gifts are being rejected feels bad and unlovable. The remarkable generosity of children was documented by Anna Freud who worked with a group of young children rescued from a Nazi concentration camp. Devoid of caregiving by adults, the children were totally committed to one another, showing great kindness and self-sacrifice.²⁰ This is a remarkable example of how crisis triggers helping behavior.

In their work with aggressive youth, Redl and Wineman found that office-based therapy was generally ineffective.²¹ Instead, real-world problems need to be resolved when they occur in the natural living environment with those most directly involved. Redl jokingly called this "therapy on the hoof." Thus, the Life Space Interview (LSI) was created to use problems as learning opportunities.²²

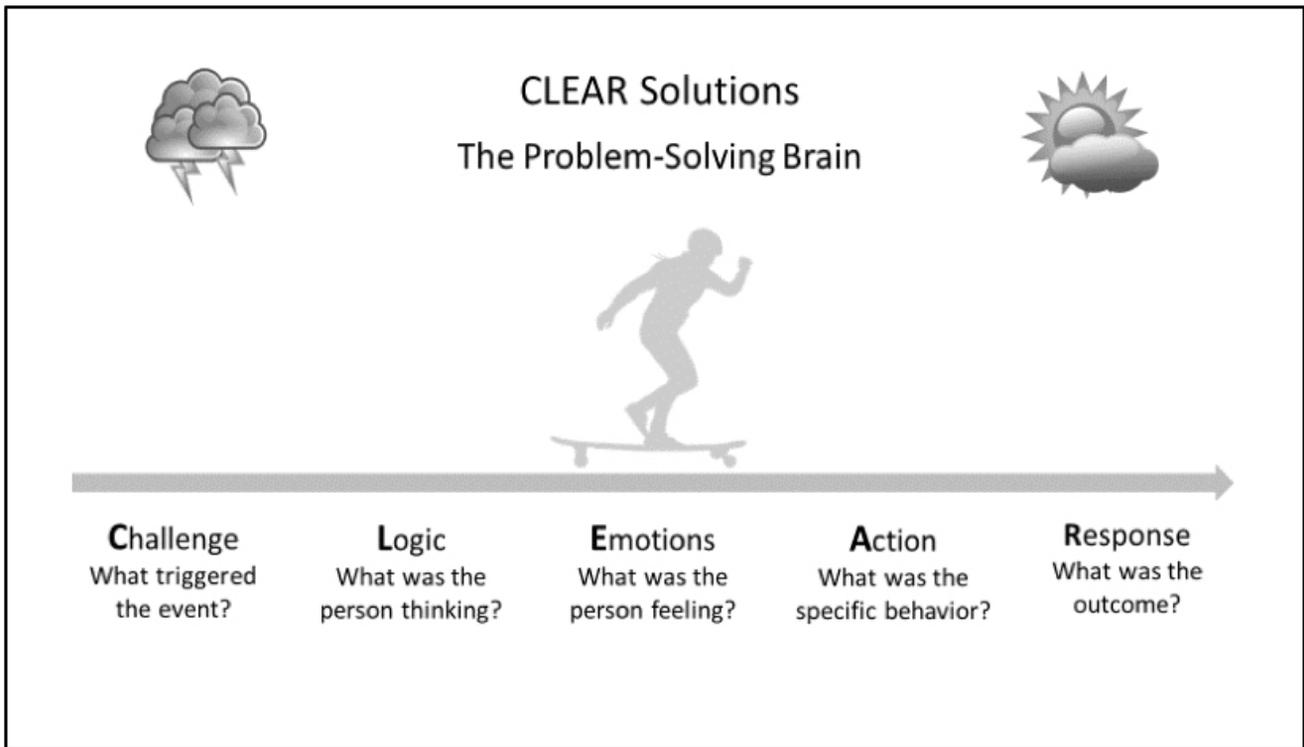
While life space interventions have been widely employed by professionals, Lesley du Toit adapted these methods for use by caregivers and responsible youth helpers in South Africa. She was appointed to manage the transformation of services to young people at risk in the administration of President Nelson Mandela. The Circle of Courage principles were implemented, and she piloted

a life space model called, RAP, an acronym for the title of the book *Response Ability Pathways*.²³ RAP is not a complicated intervention but the natural way humans help one another solve here-and-now problems. RAP involves these strategies: Connecting for Support, Coping with Challenge, and Restoring Respect. These can be used separately or in a three-stage problem-solving sequence as described below.

1. Connecting for Support. The helper maintains a calm, concerned manner, even if the person in need is upset. The helper shows interest and empathy through verbal and nonverbal bids to connect. A person who refuses these bids does not feel safe. Helpers continue showing care and concern, even towards those who are hard to like or

resist help. Connecting occurs in brief encounters and small acts of kindness, precursors to developing stable relationships. Building connections strengthens Belonging and Generosity which are keys to resilience.²⁴

2. Coping with Challenge. All problem solving starts with felt difficulty, said John Dewey.²⁵ In fact, when we have unsolved problems, we are motivated to keep trying to reach a solution.²⁶ The human brain is designed to make sense out of problems by analyzing the sequence of an event. Thus, the most effective way to solve problems is to explore the timeline of a challenging event. RAP uses this natural process as shown by the acronym CLEAR:



The helper does not mechanically follow this sequence, but these key questions give insight on how one’s behavior affects self and others. Clarifying a problem is the first step to taking responsibility. Being able to resolve challenging problems strengthens the sense of mastery and promotes responsible independence.

3. Restoring Respect. While Connecting and Clarifying can be free-standing strategies, the full RAP process uses these as the basis for planning restorative outcomes. The Minnesota Study

of Risk and Adaptation followed a large cohort of children from birth to adulthood and found that emotional and behavioral problems result from too much stress and too little support. This informs the restorative goals of trauma-wise helpers: *reduce stress and increase support*.²⁷ Thus, specific plans provide external supports and build inner strengths to cope with challenges. The Search Institute has codified these dual goals in lists of 40 Developmental Assets, half focused on external supports like family bonds and half building inner strengths like achievement motivation.²⁸

The central theme of being trauma-wise is simple: respond to needs instead of reacting to problems. The Circle of Courage provides the cultural foundation for Positive Peer Culture and a roadmap for peer helpers. These principles are formally taught first to adults who in turn model these to youth in the natural living environment. A growing body of research documents the evidence base of these strategies.²⁹

We do not train trauma-wise teens through formal instruction in trauma science, but by unleashing the natural inborn capacity of humans to help one another in times of need.

Youth in formal group sessions become experts at giving and receiving help—skills rare among today’s youth. Young people apply these skills with peers, family, and community. Both students and staff learn to see problems as signs that basic needs are unmet. Those who are disconnected need to belong, those frustrated by failure need mastery, those who are powerless or rebellious need to develop responsible independence, and those without purpose need to develop a spirit of generosity.

Voices of Youth

For a final perspective, here are the voices of several youth who explain their role in peer helping.³⁰ They all were students at risk who participated in Positive Peer Culture Programs.

Be Calm in Crisis: If you can help people before they get mad, they are more apt to listen. When upset, other things go through their head and they act disrespectfully. Basically, you set the pace and calm them down. I feel good when I help others, so they won’t be in the same position I was in.

Build Trust: When I was having problems, a group member would come and talk with me naturally, not in program language like a psychologist. He made me feel comfortable to open up. I started helping others like that and it made me feel better about myself.

Problem Solving: PPC helps develop our problem-solving skills so when those situations come up again, we will be able to deal with them and make ourselves more successful instead of giving up.

Show Respect: A lot of people weren’t taught respect. They are in a new place and don’t know what to do. They think they need to try to get relationships by giving in to peer pressure. In my group, we try not to have peer pressure. Respect is where everybody’s mind is at.

Develop Empathy: If you can put up with and learn to help or show empathy toward the lowest member in your group, the worst to get along with, you can show empathy to anybody.

Conclusion

Trauma-wise knowledge comes not from formal instruction but rather through what Inge Bolin calls rituals of respect.³¹ Humans evolved over millennia in egalitarian Indigenous cultures that nurtured and revered the young.³² Trauma-wise principles are essentially standards of good care which all young people deserve and are not reserved just for those who have experienced trauma.³³ Discovering the need beneath the problem transforms trauma into resilience.

Larry K. Brendtro, PhD, is Professor Emeritus at Augustana University and director of The Resilience Academy. Contact Information: phone 605-580-9557, email larry.brendtro@gmail.com.

References

Anglin, J. (2002). *Pain, normality and the struggle for congruence: Reinterpreting residential care for children and youth*. Binghamton, NY: Haworth Press.

Bath, H. (2017). The trouble with trauma. *Scottish Journal of Residential Child Care*, 16(1), 1-12.

Bath, H., & Seita, J. (2018). *The three pillars of transforming care: Trauma and resilience in the other 23 hours*. Winnipeg, MB: University of Winnipeg Faculty of Education Publishing.

Berliner, L., & Kolko, D. (2016). Trauma informed Care: A commentary and Critique. *Child Maltreatment*, 2(2), 68-172.

Boehm, C. (2012). *Moral origins: The evolution of virtue, altruism, and shame*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

Bolin, I. (1998). *Rituals of respect: The secret of survival in the High Peruvian Andes*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

- Bolin, I. (2006). *Growing up in a culture of respect: Childrearing in Highland Peru*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Bolin, I. (2010). Chillihuani's culture of respect and the Circle of Courage. *Reclaiming Children and Youth, 18*(4), 12-17.
- Brendtro, L., Brokenleg, M., & Van Bockern, S. (2019). *Reclaiming youth at risk: Futures of promise*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree.
- Brendtro, L., & Caslor, M. (2019). The effectiveness of Positive Peer Culture with youth at risk. *Global Journal of Human Social Science A. Arts and Humanities—Psychology, 19*(10), 7-14. Online: https://globaljournals.org/GJHSS_Volume19/2-The-Effectiveness-of-Positive-Peer.pdf
- Brendtro, L., & du Toit, L. (2005). *Response Ability Pathways: Restoring bonds of respect*. Cape Town, South Africa: Pre-Text.
- Brendtro, L., & Freado, M. (2018). Planning Restorative Outcomes: Lennox, SD: *Reclaiming Youth at Risk*. (Online training at www.reclaimingyouth.org).
- Brendtro, L., & Kreisle, B. (in press). *Trauma-Wise Youth: Responding to the Need Beneath the Pain*.
- Brendtro, L., & Ness, A. (1983). *Re-educating troubled youth*. New York, NY: Aldine de Gruyter.
- Brendtro, L., & Mitchell, M. (2015). *Deep brain learning: Evidence-based essentials in education, treatment, and youth development*. Albion, MI: Starr Commonwealth.
- Dewey, J. (1910). *How we think*. Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath.
- Eisenberger, N., Lieberman, M., & Williams, K. (2003). Does rejection hurt? An fMRI study of social exclusion. *Science, 302*(5643), 290-292.
- Freado, M. (2016). Transforming assessment. In CF Learning (Ed.), *A thousand fires burning: Reclaiming Youth at risk*. Amarillo, TX: Cal Farley's.
- Freud, A. (1951). An experiment group upbringing. In A. Freud, *The writings of Anna Freud* (pp. 163-229). New York, NY: International Universities Press.
- Greenwald, R. (2017). *Child trauma handbook: A guide for helping trauma-exposed children and adolescents*. New York, NY: Haworth Press.
- James, S. (2011). What works in group care? A structured review of treatment models for group homes and residential care. *Child and Youth Services Review, 33*(2), 308-331.
- Laursen, E. (2010). The evidence-base for Positive Peer Culture. *Reclaiming Children and Youth, 19*(2), 37-43.
- Long, N., Wood, M., & Fecser, F. (2001). *Life Space Crisis Intervention: Talking with students in conflict*. Austin, TX: Pro-Ed.
- Redl, F. (1966). *When we deal with children*. New York, NY: Free Press.
- Redl, F., & Wineman, D. (1952). *Controls from within*. Glen-coe, IL: Free Press.
- SAMHSA. (2014). *SAMHSA's concept of trauma and guidance for a trauma-Informed approach*. HHS Publication No. (SMA) 14-4884. Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.
- Search Institute. (2020). 40 Developmental Assets. <https://page.search-institute.org/40-developmental-assets>
- Soma, C., & Allen, D. (2020). *10 steps to create a trauma-informed resilient school*. Albion, MI: Starr Commonwealth.
- Sroufe, L., Egeland, B., Carlson, E., & Collins, W. (2005). *The development of the person: The Minnesota study of risk and adaptation from birth to adulthood*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Steinebach, C., Schrenk, A., Steinebach, U., & Brendtro, L. (2018). *Positive Peer Culture. Ein Manual für starke Gruppengespräche*. Weinheim, Germany: Beltz Verlag.
- Suttie, I. (1935). *The origins of love and hate*. London, UK: Routledge.
- van der Kolk, B. (2003). The neurobiology of childhood trauma and abuse. *Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Clinics of North America, 12*(2), 293-317.
- van der Kolk, B. (2014). *The body keeps score: Brain, mind, and body in the healing of trauma*. New York, NY: Viking.
- Werner, E. (2012). Risk, resilience, and recovery. *Reclaiming Children and Youth, 21*(1), 18-23.

Endnotes

- 1 Anglin, 2002.
- 2 Eisenberger, Lieberman, & Williams, 2003.
- 3 van der Kolk, 2003, p. 310.
- 4 Berliner & Kolko, 2016.
- 5 Bath, 2017, p. 2.
- 6 Bath & Seita, 2018; Soma & Allen, 2020.
- 7 van der Kolk, 2014, p. 278.
- 8 Brendtro & Freado, 2018; Freado, 2016.
- 9 Brendtro & Kreisle, in press.
- 10 Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 2019.
- 11 Bath & Seita, 2018.
- 12 Greenwald, 2017.
- 13 SAMHSA, 2014.
- 14 Bolin, 2006.
- 15 Bolin, 2006.
- 16 Bolin, 2010.
- 17 Werner, 2012.
- 18 Brendtro & Mitchell, 2015.
- 19 Suttie, 1935.
- 20 Freud, 1951.
- 21 Redl & Wineman, 1952, Redl, 1966.
- 22 Brendtro & Ness, 1983; Long, Wood, & Fecser, 2001.
- 23 Brendtro & du Toit, 2005.
- 24 Steinebach et al., 2018.
- 25 Dewey, 1910.
- 26 This is called the Ziegarnik effect.
- 27 Sroufe et al., 2005.
- 28 Search Institute, 2020.
- 29 Brendtro & Caslor, 2019; James, 2011; Laursen, 2010.
- 30 Youth interviewed by Randy Copas and colleagues from Starr Commonwealth, Albion, Michigan.
- 31 Bolin, 1998.
- 32 Boehm, 2012.
- 33 Berliner & Kolko, 2016.