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The Circle of Courage: Focusing on What Matters Most

Martin Brokenleg and Larry K. Brendtro

Let us build a country in which our children and youth can learn to care for and respect others. ~Nelson Mandela

Since the first edition of *Reclaiming Youth at Risk* in 1990, there have been thousands of publications on Positive Youth Development (PYD). Amidst this information overload, practitioners seek to focus on what matters most. A panel of researchers from the national 4-H organization identified the Circle of Courage as the most understandable evidence-based model of Positive Youth Development (Heck & Subramaniam, 2009; Kress, 2014). It integrates research from positive psychology, resilience, and neuroscience, with childcare philosophies from traditional Native “cultures of respect” (Bolin, 2010; Brokenleg & Brendtro, 2025). The four Circle of Courage principles are Belonging, Mastery, Independence, and Generosity. These are universal brain-based *needs* which are essential to building “futures of promise” (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 2019).

Albert Einstein advised that everything should be made as simple as possible but not simpler. He also mused that those who cannot explain a theory to a six-year-old may not understand it themselves. The Circle of Courage is often described as simple but not simplistic; even children can understand these principles. The following brief description of the Circle of Courage was provided by Robert Foltz of the Chicago School of Professional Psychology who teaches these principles directly to teens in therapy.

Belonging. Beyond physical survival, the most important human need is to connect with others. When relationships are damaged, floods of painful emotions signal us to restore social bonds. Those without a sense of Belonging may crave attention, engage in risky sexual behaviors, or join a gang to meet the need for connections. Some who do not belong withdraw and isolate. But, when Belonging is experienced with family and friends, life is fulfilling and fun. One can trust others, be trusted in return, and feel pride and acceptance.

Mastery. Children who experience mastery develop talents and solve problems. A youth may want to be a successful student, athlete, or singer, but fear of failure can unleash negative emotions. Some become overachievers—taking on too much—leading to more stress. Others are tempted to cheat to achieve a false sense of success. Most discouraging is to develop feelings of being “a loser” and give up easily in the face of difficulty. Research shows that overcoming failure by working hard actually grows new brain pathways for intelligence.

Independence. It takes over twenty years for the brain to gain full capacity for independent thinking and action. Individuals in charge of their lives can control their emotions and make good decisions. Lacking these strengths, they have difficulty managing impulses and take reckless chances. Some have a sense of power but misuse this by bullying others or rebelling against authority. Others lack confidence and are easily misled by peers. With maturity, the “executive” part of the brain builds pathways to manage emotions, think ahead, and make good choices. Those who show responsibility find others relying on them and trusting their judgment—and they gain more responsibility at home, school, and work.

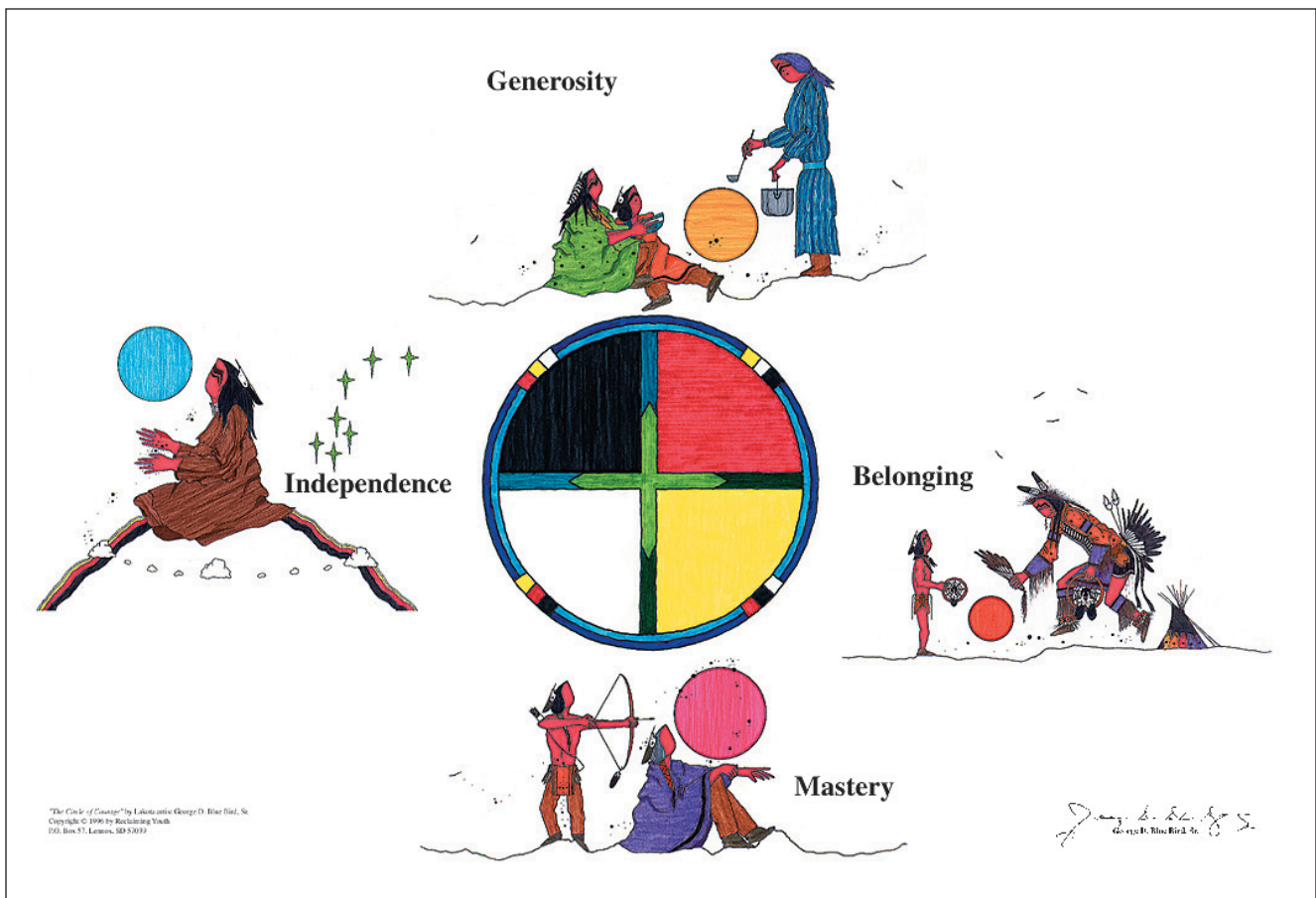
Generosity. Only recently have scientists discovered that the brain is designed to show care and concern for others. In fact, the secret of our human survival is helping others in need and watching one another’s backs. But those lacking empathy and compassion act selfishly without much regard for the needs of others. Humans only develop real happiness by contributing to others. For example, volunteering in the community can build self-worth since we are being of value to others. Helping others actually reduces stress and gives a sense of purpose to life.

Origins and Applications for the Circle of Courage

Let us put our minds together and see what kind of life we can build for our children.

Sitting Bull, Lakota Leader

As Augustana University colleagues, the authors sought to bring together Indigenous and Western perspectives on children and youth. The origin of the Circle of Courage dates to an invitation we received to present a workshop on Native American Youth for a 1988 conference sponsored by the Child Welfare League of America. We enlisted the talents of Lakota artist George Blue Bird in illustrating the four Circle of Courage principles of Belonging, Mastery, Independence, and Generosity. As seen in the accompanying reproduction, these images were placed around a Native American medicine wheel which conveys the world in balance. We used this art to illustrate our presentation which sparked other invitations to share the Circle of Courage. With fellow Augustana professor Steve Van Bockern, we published the first edition of *Reclaiming Youth at Risk* (Brendtro, Brokenleg, and Van Bockern, 1990).



The Circle of Courage went worldwide when this “little green book” was presented to an international conference of youth professionals in New York City in 1990. In attendance was Lesley du Toit from the National Association of Child Care Workers in South Africa. Her country was in transition from apartheid to democracy, and she invited Martin Brokenleg and Larry Brendtro to bring their Indigenous model to South Africa. When Nelson Mandela became president, he established the Interministerial Committee on Young People at Risk headed by Welfare Minister Geraldine Moloketi and managed by Lesley du Toit. They launched nation-wide training in the Circle of Courage. Over a period of years, the Circle of Courage became the core philosophy for youthwork in South Africa. It continues under the Zulu name for courage, *Isibindi*, training workers who are building a democracy. Merle Alsopp, a leader in this movement, documents how Circle of Courage principles have transformed South Africa, beginning with young people and those who care for them (Alsopp, 2020).

Under the leadership of Lesley du Toit, South Africa piloted a universal design training for all who serve children and youth called *Response Ability*

Pathways (RAP for short). RAP provided practical strategies for responding to needs instead of reacting to problems (Brendtro & du Toit, 2005). RAP has subsequently expanded worldwide (Brendtro & du Toit, 2025).

Here are a few recent examples of how the Circle of Courage is being applied to various settings.

- Deb Espiner and Diane Guild (2018) of Auckland, New Zealand, developed *Rolling with Resilience* to build strengths in families.
- Our Augustana colleague Steve Van Bockern (2025) has published *Schools that Matter: Teaching the Mind, Reaching the Heart*.
- Doug Bolton (2025) who developed a therapeutic school on the North Shore of Chicago authored *Untethered: Creating Families, Schools, and Communities to Raise a Resilient Generation*.
- Robert Foltz (2025) challenges deficit-focused approaches in mental health in *No Method to the Madness: Making Sense of the Psychiatric Treatment of our Youth*.

- Mark Freado and Jamie Chambers (2026) have authored *The Art of Kid Whispering: Reaching the Inside Kid*.
- Larry Brendtro and Mark Freado (2020) have developed a web-based Circle of Courage training called *Planning Restorative Outcomes: Assessment of Strengths and Needs*.

Summarizing her classic studies of risk and resilience, Emmy Werner (2012) described how children thrive when Circle of Courage needs are met. Howard Bath and John Seita (2019) also consider the Circle of Courage to be the key in turning trauma into resilience. The American Academy of Pediatrics (Frankowski et al., 2014, 2020) proposes using the Circle of Courage for interviewing youth and identifying their needs.

Finally, since the Circle of Courage is grounded in Native American values, it is a birthright to Indigenous populations—as well as a gift to peoples worldwide (James & Lunday, 2014). Our most recent Circle of Courage publication is *Cultures of Respect: Re-Righting History* (Brokenleg & Brendtro, 2025). While we live in an era of unprecedented technology and wealth, our world grows increasingly dangerous and divided. For hundreds of thousands of years, humans evolved to thrive in Cultures of Respect—secure societies that meet the needs of both individuals and communities. But for millennia, much of the world has been trapped in Cultures of Domination, where the powerful exploit the powerless, fueling conflict and violence. Blending Indigenous wisdom and Western science, we chart a path toward restoring Cultures of Respect in today's fractured world. "Re-Righting" history is not about revising the past but discovering the untapped wisdom of Indigenous peoples which is needed to make the world "Right." This requires meeting the universal human needs for Belonging, Mastery, Independence, and Generosity. Such is the blueprint for building Cultures of Respect where humans can live in harmony with others and Nature.

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For more information, see www.reclaimingyouth.org. To communicate with the authors or to explore training in the Circle of Courage model, email courage@reclaiming.com

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