

THIRD EDITION

# RECLAIMING YOUTH AT RISK

*Futures of Promise*

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**Hawker Brownlow**  
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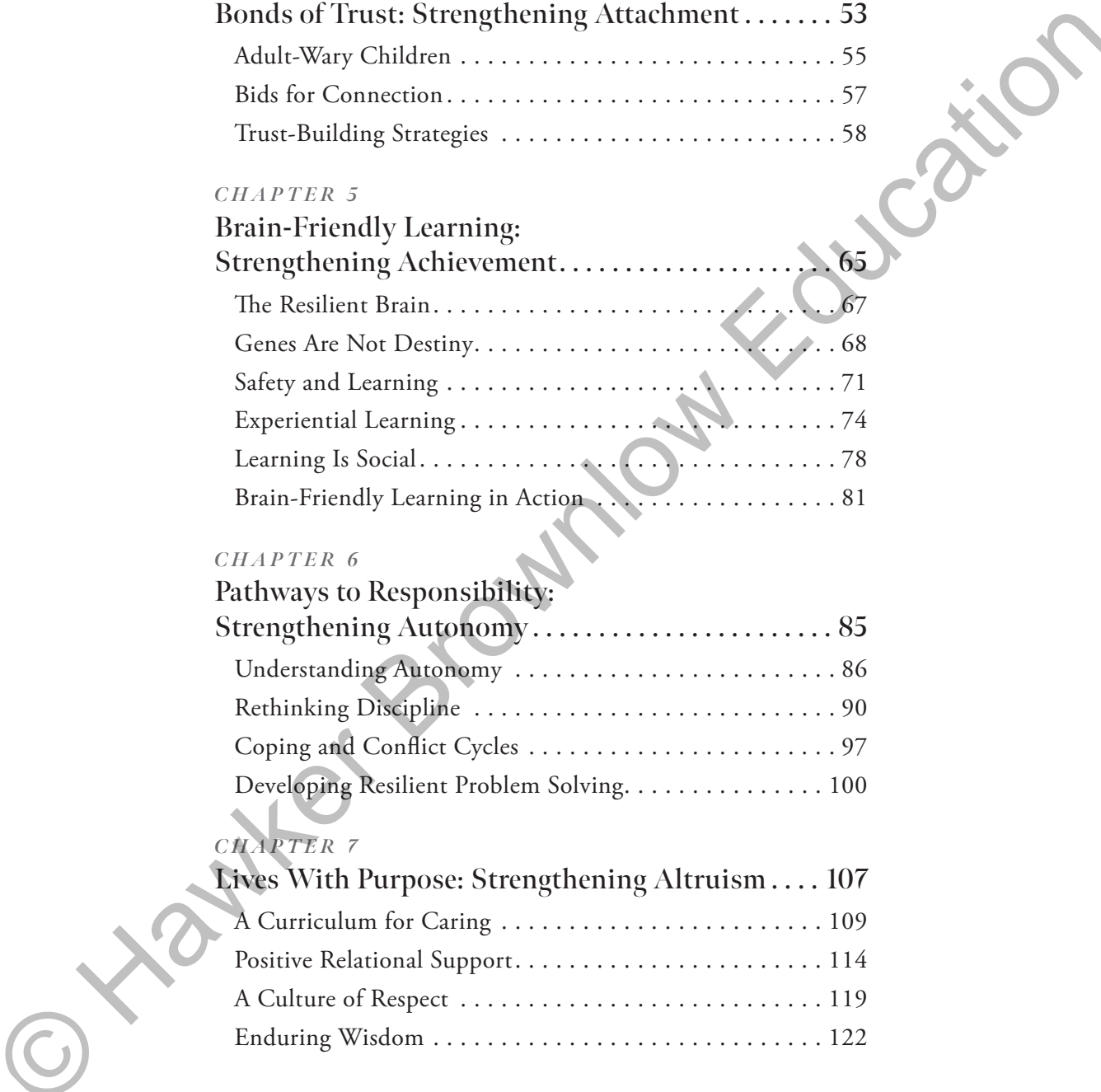
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# Introduction

The values of the Circle of Courage evolved over thousands of years in cultures that deeply revere children. We shared this knowledge within the publication of the first edition of *Reclaiming Youth at Risk* with illustrations by Lakota artist George Blue Bird. For this wholly revised third edition, we re-examined and restructured our approach to the reclaiming model to provide an even more comprehensive understanding of how Native science and the current research into brain-based learning can function together to support and reclaim our most troubled youth.

Indeed, the reclaiming model is a synergy of Indigenous wisdom, perspectives of youth-work pioneers, and leading-edge research on resilience, neuroscience, and positive youth development. Samuel R. Slavson first used the word *reclaiming* in connection with youth at risk. He believed their most basic needs were to trust and be trusted. Receiving love is not enough—young people need opportunities to give love as well.<sup>1</sup> The first systematic study of the reclaiming process came from Israel, which has a rich history of serving displaced youth. Martin Wolins and Yochanan Wozner defined *reclaiming* as meeting the needs of both the young person and society.<sup>2</sup>

Our book title uses the person-first label *youth at risk*, which refers to environmental hazards that disrupt development. In contrast, the common use of *at-risk youth* implies the blame lies with the young person. But humans are all are at risk, and it is our human bonds

that enable us to survive and thrive. Such is the message of the subtitle, *Futures of Promise*.

This book is grounded in the Circle of Courage model of resilience and positive youth development based on Native American values of Belonging, Mastery, Independence, and Generosity. When the circle is complete, humans live in harmony and balance. When the circle is broken, discouragement ensues, with youth being particularly at risk of becoming lost. But they can be *reclaimed*.

This book's structure is straightforward. Chapter 1 explores important cultural and biosocial values that the Circle of Courage represents as well as some enduring truths about the necessary consilience of thought and ideas necessary to reclaim youth at risk. Chapter 2 fully introduces the Circle of Courage and the importance its values have in reclaiming traumatized youth. Chapter 3 explores the seeds of discouragement that place youth at risk when their Circle of Courage is broken. Chapters 4 through 7 each explore in detail one of the four core values of the Circle of Courage, how each can be broken and the approaches you can use to understand and mend it. Finally, chapter 8 concludes the book by reflecting on the journey of reclaiming youth at risk through the lens of resilience, recovery, and healing.

By understanding the relationship of Circle of Courage values with the challenges youth experience when those values are absent from their lives, you can apply the reclaiming model to your practice and help the youth you serve to discover their most promising futures.

## CHAPTER 1

# Enduring Truths

*We are drowning in information, while starving for wisdom.*

—E. O. Wilson<sup>1</sup>

Harvard researcher E. O. Wilson says complexity is overwhelming every field of study.<sup>2</sup> Scientists entrenched in silos of knowledge churn out mountains of data that are inaccessible, incomprehensible, or irrelevant. This knowledge explosion is exacerbated as anyone can now use an internet-connected device to google *resilience* and *children* yielding millions of hits. Literally, we suffer from data overload.

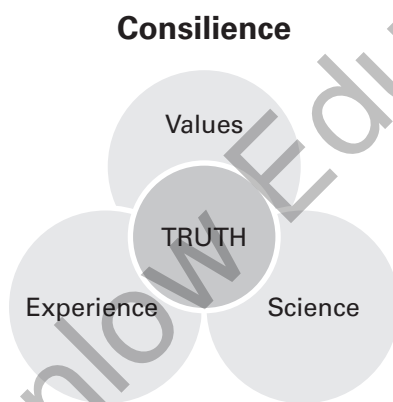
Amidst this flood of information, practitioners face mandates to adopt *evidence-based* approaches in education, treatment, and youth development.<sup>3</sup> But as child psychiatrist John Werry of Auckland University notes, so-called evidence-based interventions often have *statistical* significance yet are *insignificant* in the real world of practice.<sup>4</sup> Thus, instead of preoccupation with *evidence-based practices*, we believe the goal of any practitioner tasked with developing and supporting youth at risk is to identify *evidence-based principles*.

## Searching for Solutions

How do we select the core principles that can guide our work with children and families? The solution is *consilience*, a term 19th century British scholar William Whewell coined. Trained in three professions—(1) science, (2) architecture, (3) and theology—he was

intrigued to discover connections among these dissimilar fields. He observes that findings from separate disciplines jump together to identify powerful simple truths.<sup>5</sup>

Wilson reintroduced the concept of consilience when he observed that hyperspecialization obscures the reality that there is a “unity of knowledge.”<sup>6</sup> Consilience links findings from different fields to discover simpler universal principles. Simple does not mean simplistic; as Einstein once said, if you can’t explain your theory to a six-year-old, you probably don’t understand it yourself.<sup>7</sup> Figure 1.1 shows three essential sources of truth—(1) values, (2) experience, and (3) science—which form the evidence base for this book. The following sections examine each of these sources.



**Figure 1.1:** Sources of evidence.

### *Values: What Matters Most*

Values are rooted in both culture and biology. Throughout most of human evolution, people lived in Indigenous societies which we describe as *cultures of respect*, a shared humanity toward others. The Zulu language calls this worldview *Ubuntu*. Across millennia, humans survived and thrived in egalitarian communities which shared core values.<sup>8</sup> Children and elders are held in great respect, the entire village is involved in raising the young, and the leaders are servants of the people.

*Cultural values* determine how society rears and educates children. The lens for our discussion is grounded in values that emerged over thousands of years in traditional societies that deeply revere children.



Our focus is on the values of the Circle of Courage: Belonging, Mastery, Independence, and Generosity.

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*In our every deliberation, we must consider the impact of our decisions on the next seven generations.*

—*Iroquois Confederacy Maxim*

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*Biosocial values* are the brain-based motivations that shape human behavior across cultures and throughout the lifespan. Philosopher Mortimer J. Adler observes that not all values are relative; absolute values are those tied to universal human needs.<sup>9</sup> By the design of their DNA, humans have inborn drives for Attachment, Achievement, Autonomy, and Altruism. These brain-based needs align with the Circle of Courage values.

Developmental needs of children are universal since these are tied to the human genome. Yet societies place different priorities on certain values. For example, Western culture emphasizes individualism while many other civilizations place more emphasis on group belonging.<sup>10</sup> Those cultures which attend to all basic needs produce healthier and happier children.<sup>11</sup> These form the foundation for creating schools and communities where children thrive.

### *Experience: Practical Wisdom*

Another source of knowledge comes from life experience; for example, the contributions of pioneers in education and youth work. A powerful voice for reclaiming youth was Janusz Korczak, who established orphanage schools for Jewish street children in Warsaw.<sup>12</sup> A champion of youth empowerment, Korczak authored twenty books, from his earliest *Children of the Street* penned in 1901 to his final *Ghetto Diary*, written in 1942 while living under Nazi occupation.<sup>13</sup> Believing that children were *citizens in embryo*, he gave young people a voice in running their school. Moral development

psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg considered Korczak as the exemplar of a *just and caring community*.<sup>14</sup>

*Practice expertise* is a recognized source of evidence-based practice in the profession of psychology.<sup>15</sup> Our discussion also draws from the wisdom of pioneers in youth work in the Western tradition.<sup>16</sup> These individuals challenge authoritarian systems of education and child-rearing in Eurocentric cultures.

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*Science is nothing more than a refinement of everyday thinking.*

—Albert Einstein<sup>17</sup>

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*Client expertise* recognizes that those we serve are the ultimate authorities on their own lives. Democratic values call for empowering the voice of youth, and parents are literally lifespan experts on their children. Further, many professionals in this field bring unique perspectives as former youth at risk themselves.<sup>18</sup>

Zulu sociologist Herbert Vilakazi further notes that elaborate knowledge about child-rearing predates Western science.<sup>19</sup> He describes how traditional African men and women, particularly the women, were consummate psychologists with sophisticated understanding of child development. Researchers have observed these patterns in Indigenous cultures worldwide.

Child-rearing in traditional tribal cultures focuses on meeting the developmental needs of children.<sup>20</sup> Indigenous people rear respectful, responsible children without resorting to harsh punishment. In contrast, Western parenting and education is tethered to obedience models of discipline. With the advent of democracy, inspired reformers advocated for progressive approaches in education and youth work. We tap their practice wisdom throughout this book.

### *Science: Two Worlds of Knowledge*

The traditional view sees science as a product of Western civilization. A more informed understanding is that humans have always been applied scientists, searching to make sense of their world. A course correction is underway as experts in a variety of fields recognize the broad scope of Indigenous knowledge.

*Indigenous science* (which we also refer to as *Native science*) encompasses a little-explored trove of knowledge from *homo sapiens*—the Latin designation for *wise man*. The highly developed brain of this species and the vast knowledge it produced predated Western science.<sup>21</sup> Native science describes the relationship of humans with nature, not only the way the world works but also the way to live in harmony.<sup>22</sup>

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

—*Sitting Bull*<sup>23</sup>

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*Modern science* focuses on empirical observations and experiments. Historian of science Steven Shapin quips, “There was no such thing as a scientific revolution, and this is a book about it.”<sup>24</sup> The notion of such a revolution ignores the rich history of ancient thought. Consilience taps both Indigenous and Western science.

Native peoples acquired profuse knowledge by carefully observing their world and transmitting their discoveries through oral history. The authors of the *Encyclopedia of American Indian Contributions to the World* describe their work as mere brushstrokes of twenty-five thousand years of Native thought and creativity.<sup>25</sup>

With perspectives spanning generations, Native people had a holistic worldview that cannot be gained from brief isolated research studies. Western science seeks value-free knowledge by measuring cause-and-effect links between isolated variables. Indigenous science