

# Circle of Courage: Reaching Youth in Residential Care

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**ABSTRACT.** The Circle of Courage, based on traditional Native American philosophy, emphasizes belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity. This study assessed the prevalence of the Circle of Courage values among youth in a residential facility and examined the relationship between these ideals and indicators of placement success. After 12 weeks in placement, youth (n = 29) completed a semi-structured interview about their experiences with the four Circle of Courage values. Twelve weeks later, the interview was re-administered to 26 youth still in placement. Administrative records were used to measure youth's success in placement. Findings suggest a positive relationship between youth reports on experiencing the Circle of Courage values and achieving success in placement. doi:10.1300/J007v22n04\_01 [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2005 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

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The statistics about the youth we serve in residential settings are sobering. Most of these youth have experienced traumatic events like

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physical abuse, sexual abuse, or neglect (Schneiderman et al., 1998). They often encounter failure in academic classes or require special educational assistance (McMillen, Auslander, Elze, White, & Thompson, 2003). Rates of mental health disorders among the child welfare population have been estimated to be as high as 80% (Pilowsky, 1995), making mental health needs of these youth an emerging public health priority (USDHHS, 1999). Youth placed in residential settings often have comorbid conditions and medical complications (Foltz, 2004). These findings have led some researchers to conclude that “children in foster care are the most vulnerable to experiencing poor health compared with any group of children within the United States” (Kools & Kennedy, 2003, p. 39). However, labeling youth deficits rather than their strengths yields only risks further discouragement.

An entire body of research is now devoted to resilience and positive youth development (cf. Brendtro & Larson, 2004). These fields are based on the belief that problem behaviors can be prevented by increasing protective factors like connection, caring, competence, confidence, and character (Catalano, Hawkins, Berglund, Pollard, & Arthur, 2002; Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2002; Lerner, Almerigi, Theokas, & Lerner, 2005). While most of these programs focus on youth in community settings who may be “at-risk” or “high risk,” some applications of this philosophy have been directed toward youth in out-of-home settings. Recent examples in residential care include the development of a resiliency based social learning model (Dowd, Cxyz, O’Kane, & Elofson, 1994) and a strengths-based behavior management system that replaced traditional point and level systems (Pike, Millspaugh, & DeSalvatore, 2005).

Resiliency science has been called “the study of human courage” (Brendtro & Shahbazian, 2004, p. 75). The Circle of Courage is a framework for promoting resiliency that can be applied to youth in residential care. This model for youth empowerment originated from Native American culture. It is focused on promoting four “sacred” values: belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 1990). The model is illustrated by the quadrants of the medicine wheel, an important symbol among Native American tribal culture. Through instilling and nurturing the four values in youth, the Circle of Courage can lead to positive outcomes for youth (Gilliam & Scott, 1998; Brendtro & Shahbazian, 2004). For youth in care, this framework suggests that experiencing belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity while in residential placement would increase their successes (both in and out of care).

The timeless values of the Circle of Courage have been applied in other specialized youth settings. For example, a physical education program for youth at an adolescent treatment center integrated the Circle of Courage framework to promote participation and build youths' connections to the school environment (Halas, 2002). In addition, this framework has been used to understand the school experiences of youth with behavior disorders (Habel, Bloom, Ray, & Bacon, 1999) and goal-setting for South African youth in residential care (Coughlan & Coughlan, 1999).

Because the Circle of Courage may have currency in understanding youth experiences in out-of-home placement, further applications for this model should be made. Researchers have developed assessment guidelines for youth in care that are based on the Circle of Courage framework (Gilgun, 2002; Gilgun, Chalmers, & Keskinen, 2002). However, no assessment tool has been developed to measure the presence of belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity for youth in placement settings.

The purpose of this study was to develop and evaluate a measure Circle of Courage concepts based on youth self-report on their experiences in residential placement. Further, we will assess the relationship between youth ratings of these concepts and indicators of placement success. Because the Circle of Courage framework suggests that youth who experience belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity will have better outcomes, a positive relationship is hypothesized.

### ***PROGRAM BACKGROUND***

This study was conducted by social workers at Mooseheart Child City & School, Inc., a residential campus for 240 children from infants to high school seniors. Youth are privately placed and frequently remain in residence for several years. The program features a model of care that incorporates a social skills curriculum as well as a character development component.

At the time this study was conducted, the program was making initial efforts to integrate the Circle of Courage into the milieu. This process began with a seminar conducted by Larry Brendtro that explained the Circle of Courage framework. Administrators then brainstormed the opportunities youth in the program were given to experience belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity. In addition to using the medicine framework to classify existing activities, administrators were also

encouraged to develop new ways to promote these elements. For example, a ritual for welcoming new youth, called the Citizenship Ceremony, was initiated. This event, held each month, allows youth an opportunity to be formally introduced to the community and “sworn in” as official citizens, with subsequent rights and responsibilities.

In addition to campus-wide efforts, the Circle of Courage was integrated in the youth’s residence. Supervisors and direct care staff self-evaluated the activities in the living environment and often developed additional opportunities for youth to experience the Circle of Courage elements. While each youth home developed a unique schema appropriate to the needs, developmental level, and interests to the youth in the home, a few examples will be described as illustrations.

- Within the youth home, rituals for welcoming new youth and maintaining a sense of belonging for established youth included assigning new youth a “buddy” to review home rules and introduce to the school setting; providing new youth with a small gift basket of essential toiletries and decorative items; and having a photo taken of all the youth and staff together and framing for the home.
- Creative efforts to celebrate youth accomplishments involved distributing award certificates when youth meet a goal or developmental milestone; posting positive announcements about youth on campus closed-circuit cable channel; and making intentional efforts to find individualized hobbies and activities for youth to build competence.
- Interventions to promote independence were necessarily customized to developmental needs. Older youth were given opportunities to practice independence through planning and cooking a meal for the home or making decisions about how to spend recreation money for home activities. Younger youth were empowered to provide input on consequences and rules within the home.
- Generosity was incorporated in a variety of ways. One home of middle school youth volunteered to help with recreational activities each month at a retirement home. High school youth were given opportunities to volunteer in elementary classrooms and assist the teacher with special activities.

Infusing the Circle of Courage went beyond just staff efforts. Youth were also involved in learning about and applying this philosophy. To promote understanding of these abstract concepts, one home assembled a Circle of Courage scrapbook, with photos of youth depicting each element.

In other homes, a poster of the medicine wheel with illustrations of each quadrant was displayed.

## ***METHODOLOGY***

### ***Instrument Design***

To measure the concepts of belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity for youth in residential settings, the authors developed an instrument with consultation from Dr. Larry Brendtro. Dr. Brendtro and other child welfare researchers, administrators, and practitioners offered input on instrument creation to promote face and content validity. The measure was designed to be interviewer-administered due to concerns about reading ability of some youth participants. Items were pilot-tested with younger youth to assess comprehension prior to field implementation.

The assessment tool was composed of a series of statements that centered on each of the four Circle of Courage components: belonging (i.e., “People I live with at Mooseheart like me”), mastery (“I like to learn new things”), independence (“I can speak up and say what I think”), and generosity (“In the last week, I have helped someone else”). The statements sought to operationalize the abstract concepts incorporated in the Circle of Courage. In each component area, one statement was worded negatively and reverse-coded.

Youth were then asked an open-ended question about their experience with each component while in placement at Mooseheart (i.e., “Independence means doing things on your own. What have you learned to do independently since coming to Mooseheart?”).

Interviewers then asked standardized follow-up questions concerning youth participation in specific extracurricular or program-related activities.

### ***Survey Procedures***

The survey was administered to youth at two time points: 12 weeks after intake and 24 months after intake. New youth arrive to Mooseheart at various ages. For the purpose of this study, only intakes over age 6 were included. Face-to-face individual interviews were conducted by a social worker not otherwise involved in the youth’s daily care. Written consent

from legal guardians and assent of youth subjects were obtained. A structured interview format was followed. Each interview lasted approximately 15 minutes. Youth responded to open-ended questions as well as questions on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly disagree to 7 = Strongly agree).

Along with youth self-reports, archival data were collected from each youth's daily behavior reports for the 30 days in placement prior to each interview. These records were completed by each youth's direct care workers. Data points collected included: number of family contacts, number of out-of-control episodes, number of physical interventions needed, number of self-harm incidents or lethality statements and the percent of time youth earned privileges. These data points were selected as indicators of a youth's success or lack of success in placement.

### *Sample*

During the 8-month study period, 41 new youth were admitted to Mooseheart who were over 6 years old. Six youth were not included in the study due to scheduling difficulties. Two youth were excluded due to lack of guardian consent. Of the remaining 33 youth, four youth (12%) left placement prior to completing 12 weeks and another three youth (10%) left placement between 12 and 24 weeks. The remaining 29 youth completed the 12-week interview and 26 youth completed the 24-week interview.

Demographic information is based on youth who participated in the 12-week assessments. Of these 29 youth, 16 youth were male (55%) and 12 were youth of color. Youth age ranged from 8 to 16 years old at intake, with a median age of 13.5 years old.

During the first 12 weeks in placement, two youth (7%) were relocated to a different residential home on campus and four youth (14%) encountered complete staff turnover between intake and the completion of 12 weeks of placement. From 12 to 24 weeks, only one youth (4%) was relocated on campus to a different residential home.

In this residential program, youth participate in a point-and-level system that includes a social skills curriculum. At 12 weeks of placement, 13 (45%) youth remained on the most restrictive system while 16 (55%) had been promoted to a less restrictive system. At 24 weeks, only 6 (23%) remained on the most restrictive system while 20 (67%) had been promoted to a system with additional privileges.

## **RESULTS**

Analyses were conducted using SAS 9.1. The average response to each item at the two administration times are reported in Table 1. During the 12-week interviews, the highest rated statements about youth experiences were found in the concept of belonging. At the 24-week interviews, mastery statements were most strongly endorsed. Lower ratings were given to the areas of independence and generosity, which averaged overall scores between 5.4 and 5.5.

TABLE 1. Youth Responses for Circle of Courage Scale Items (1 = Strongly Disagree, 7 = Strongly Agree)

Item	12-week M (SD)	24-week M (SD)
<i>Belonging</i>	5.9 (.9)	5.9 (1)
I feel like I am part of the Mooseheart Community.	6.1 (.9)	6.0 (1.4)
I feel like I am accepted at _____ Home.	6.5 (1.0)	6.4 (.9)
People I live with at Mooseheart like me.	5.6 (1.4)	6.0 (1.2)
I do not have an adult on campus that I trust.	5.5 (2.1)	5.3 (1.9)
People at Mooseheart have helped me feel like I belong here.	5.9 (1.0)	5.7 (1.2)
<i>Mastery</i>	5.9 (.6)	6.1 (.7)
It's not important for me to do my best.	5.7 (2.0)	6.3 (1.5)
I am usually successful at most things I try.	6.0 (.7)	5.9 (1.0)
People at Mooseheart have helped me find success.	5.7 (.9)	5.8 (1.4)
I like to learn new things.	6.2 (.8)	6.5 (.6)
I am getting good at solving problems.	5.7 (.9)	5.9 (.9)
<i>Independence</i>	5.5 (.7)	5.4 (.7)
I complete tasks without being asked.	5.6 (1.0)	5.5 (1.7)
I can speak up and say what I think.	5.6 (1.1)	5.5 (1.4)
I can learn to take care of myself.	6.3 (1.2)	6.5 (.6)
I am easily misled by other kids.	4.2 (1.9)	4.3 (1.8)
People at Mooseheart care about what kids think.	5.9 (1.6)	5.2 (1.7)
<i>Generosity</i>	5.4 (.9)	5.5 (.9)
I am too busy to help others.	5.4 (1.7)	5.5 (1.3)
Others come talk to me about their problems.	4.6 (2.0)	5.1 (1.6)
When others are upset, I want to help them.	5.7 (1.4)	5.7 (1.3)
In the last week, I have helped someone else.	6.0 (1.3)	5.8 (1.6)
People at Mooseheart have helped me find ways to help others.	5.2 (1.4)	5.2 (1.7)

To assess change in respondent ratings over time, non-parametric signed rank tests were conducted for each item. Two items showed a trend toward significant differences in item score medians. Between 12 and 24 weeks, youth ratings of the statement “I like to learn new things” increased ( $p = .06$ ). Another item had the reverse effect over time. The statement, “People at Mooseheart care about what kids think” was less strongly endorsed over time ( $p = .06$ ).

Prior to interviewing youth, a variety of experiences were identified as opportunities where youth at Mooseheart may experience belonging and generosity. During the interviews, youth were asked specifically if they participated in these experiences during their first 12 weeks of placement. Of the ten identified activities related to belonging, youth experienced 8.03 of these events on average. Several of the identified activities related to belonging were experienced most commonly, which corresponds to the high ratings earned by items related to belonging. For example, all of the youth in this study remembered having their name on the “Welcome” sign at the entrance to campus. All 29 youth also participated in a Citizenship Ceremony where they were formally introduced to and became members of the community. These campus-wide efforts demonstrate an interest in promoting belonging.

Six opportunities to practice generosity during placement were identified prior to surveying youth. All 29 youth participated in at least one of these opportunities, with an average of 2.62 volunteering activities per youth surveyed. Seventy-two percent of youth reported “helping younger peer(s)” as an avenue to show altruism. Through a campus peer tutoring program or less formal means, 35% of youth provided homework help to peers. Fewer youth (28%) participated in volunteer efforts in the surrounding community. Participation in identified generosity activities occurred less frequently than belonging activities.

To determine whether the presence of Circle of Courage components correlated with success in placement, additional data points were collected from daily behavior reports accumulated from the 30 days prior to the youth interview. The data point that most closely reflected success in placement is the percentage of time the youth earned privileges. In order to maintain a sense of achievement for youth, privileges should be earned at least 65% of the time (Dowd, Cxyz, O’Kane, & Elofson, 1994).

It was hypothesized that youth placement success (as evidenced by earning privileges consistently) would correlate with experiencing components of the Circle of Courage. Spearman correlations were conducted comparing youth ratings in each of the four categories and the youth’s rate of earning privileges in the previous 30 days (Table 2).

TABLE 2. Spearman Correlations Between Mean Category Score and Frequency of Earning Privileges

	12-weeks privilege rate <i>r</i>	24-weeks privilege rate <i>r</i>
Belonging	.37*	.33
Mastery	.33	.41*
Independence	.17	.26
Generosity	.56**	.09

\* $p \leq .05$ , \*\* $p \leq .01$

After 12 weeks of placement, there was a significant positive correlation between the amount of time youth spent on privileges and the strength of agreement to statements that reflected the Circle of Courage experiences ( $r = .47$ ;  $p = .01$ ). The strongest correlation was between youth agreement with generosity statements and the amount of time youth earned privileges ( $r = .56$ ). At 24 weeks of placement, the correlation between time on privileges and endorsement of Circle of Courage statements decreased slightly ( $r = .40$ ;  $p = .04$ ).

Daily behavior reports also charted contacts with off-campus family members. Many youth interact with siblings or cousins that also live on-campus; this factor was not considered in collecting data on family contacts. Family contacts could include on-campus visits, off-campus visits, or telephone calls. No relationship was found between the frequency of family contacts and youth experiencing the Circle of Courage components or success at earning privileges.

Other data points collected included physical interventions required and self-harm behaviors or threats. Data from these indicators revealed that none of the youth in the sample required physical intervention or had participated in self-harm or threats of self-harm during the data collection period prior to the 12- and 24-week interviews. The number of youth whose behaviors necessitated specialized verbal de-escalation techniques was also measured. Since only ten youth at 12 weeks of placement and five youth at 24 weeks received this intervention, no conclusions can be drawn between Circle of Courage components and these data points.

### ***Qualitative Findings***

In addition to the structured survey items, youth responded to open-ended questions about their experiences with the Circle of Courage

components. For example, following the mastery items, youth were asked, "Mastery means being good at something. What are you good at?" The two authors who completed all the interviews with the youths compared their interviewing experiences and reviewed the open-ended responses from all the youth. Responses at 12 and 24 weeks were compared and differences were noticed.

When youth were initially given an opportunity to describe their experiences with belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity at the 12-week interview, youth often asked for clarification about what was being asked and/or needed to be asked the prompting questions that followed (i.e., "Are you good at sports? Schoolwork? Music?"). At the 24-week interviews, youth were more likely to offer a response to the open-ended questions, often without additional prompts.

Besides the youth's increased ease in answering the open-ended questions, the responses youth provided suggested greater insight at the second administration. For example, about belonging, youth were asked what has been done to help them feel like they belong in their new home and school. At the 12-week interviews, most youth provided general responses such as "people are friendly." During the six month interviews, responses were more specific (i.e., "my homemates help me out with school and stuff," "my friends write me letters"). A similar trend was evident in talking about mastery. Initially, youth provided simple answers to what they are good at, like "video games," "math," or "sports." At the time of the 24-week interviews, youth answers suggested greater depth and self-awareness (i.e., "I am a good friend," "I am honest," "I make people laugh"). Where initially some youth may not have been able to provide a response or might say something like, "I am good at a lot of things," youth were more likely to name a specific strength at the second interview.

## *DISCUSSION*

Through the quantitative responses survey items related to the concepts of belonging and mastery, there is evidence that youth at Mooseheart generally experience these components of the Circle of Courage. Overall, youth feel accepted in their residential home. They enjoy learning new things, and this interest increases between 12 and 24 weeks of placement. An emerging sense of independence is demonstrated through the youths' confidence in someday being able to care for themselves.

These characteristics are representative of the ideas illustrated by the Circle of Courage.

Prior to completing the assessment tool with youth, Mooseheart staff identified ways in which the Circle of Courage components have already been integrated into program activities. For example, recent efforts to promote belonging resulted in creation of the Citizenship Ceremony and a “Welcome” sign for new youth. The results of this survey verify that these efforts made an impression on youth and were remembered. The high ratings for belonging statements are mirrored in the strong presence of belonging activities that youth report experiencing in their first 12 weeks of placement.

The qualitative responses from the youth suggest that the concepts of the Circle of Courage are integrated into the program at Mooseheart on some level. Most noticeably by week 24, youth appeared to be picking up on the vocabulary and meaning behind each quadrant. This suggests that as youth are in placement over time, these concepts could be utilized more to assist youth in building self-awareness and positive identity development. These values could be used as a framework for individual treatment planning and goal-setting to build on the strengths youth already have and to use in planning for the areas where improvement is needed.

These results can also be utilized to suggest areas for program growth. There is some concern about the decrease in agreement with the statement that “People at Mooseheart care about what kids think.” Youth in care may feel more empowered to state their ideas initially during the first 12 weeks of placement compared to the subsequent time period. Additional follow-up studies could capture whether this item continues to decrease as youth remain in care and feel less hopeful about being heard.

Generosity is a component that has received less attention in campus programming, which is evident in the lower scores for statements as well as pre-identified activities. Although all youth identified at least one way in which they helped out someone else during the previous three months, many of these efforts were insular. Only 8 of the 29 youth surveyed participated in any volunteering efforts outside of the residential setting. This may lead to a lack of connectedness to the larger community. Additional program development should focus on developing generosity among youth in care.

Results of this study should be interpreted with caution because of several limitations inherent in the research design. A small non-representative sample size limits the statistical power of analyses and the

generalizability of the study to other populations. Characteristics of the sample participants did not encompass the age range intended. Although the study was designed to include all new youth over 6 years old, the youngest youth was 8 years old and most participants were adolescents, with few elementary counterparts.

Timing of the survey administrations may have further biased the sample. One of the initial concerns that prompted this study was the rate of placement disruption for youth in care. Because multiple placement change is a risk factor for negative outcomes for youth, we wanted to discover whether the Circle of Courage values could effectively decrease placement disruption. Of the 41 youth initially considered for this study, four of the youth admitted to the program left prior to completing 12 weeks in care. Reasons for placement disruption were not always fully known. Because these youth did not participate in the Circle of Courage assessment, we are unable to conclude whether the values of this model would be effective in promoting placement stability. We were unable to make any meaningful generalizations from the three youth who participated in the 12-week assessment and then left placement.

The assessment tool was also very rudimentary. Without statistical validity or reliability, it was not possible to assert that the statements fully operationalize the concepts of belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity. At most, each statement may only reflect face validity in youth's perceptions of their experiences. Negatively worded items seemed confusing for many youth and may have increased measurement error. Additional development and testing of an assessment tool should be conducted in order to better understand and improve the psychometric properties.

While the study sought to examine a relationship between the endorsement of the Circle of Courage concepts and various indicators of youth success in placement, data points of these indicators were problematic. The youth behavior reports from which these data points originated varied in quality and completeness. These reports were each completed by a different direct care worker, which decreased reliability of these records. The lack of data variation in some data points (i.e., physical intervention and self-harm incidents) provided less opportunity to link placement success with the Circle of Courage. The attempt to measure family contact and its relationship to these values were also inconclusive. Future studies may benefit from recording the type of contact (telephone, off-campus visits, on-campus visits, etc.), as well as

accounting for interactions with other siblings in the same placement setting.

Despite the multiple limitations of this study, there is some evidence that the Circle of Courage values are positively associated with youth success in placement. Although outliers within the small sample size detract from mathematical correlation, results suggest that youth who earned privileges most frequently were also the youth who rated the Circle of Courage items above the mean. This finding offers support for additional focus on integrating the Circle of Courage into the placement milieu.

Following this study, Mooseheart Child City & School has continued to integrate the Circle of Courage philosophy into the residential program and on-grounds school. Innovative efforts to incorporate the four quadrants into the milieu include using the quadrants as a behavior matrix, and applying the Circle of Courage language in home, school, and recreation activities.

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### BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

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