

How Mentoring Rescues and Restores Resilient Learners

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The Live Your Dream Foundation

The presentation will focus on rescuing and restoring resilient learners in K-12 education with the primary focus being on K-5 early intervention. Among the areas discussed will be how mentoring assists students to overcome negative socio-economic factors and other distractions as long as the mentoring environment allows them to feel cared about, supported, and that their needs are being met. Research will be shared that demonstrates how effective structured mentoring and positive support can lead to positive interactions conducive to learning. The focus of this research is based on a mentoring strategy called Mentoring-Success and will demonstrate to participants how the concepts can be used in their own mentoring efforts.

Donald was a first grade student from a lower Socio-Economic-Status (SES) home who was experiencing his first session of mentoring with a volunteer adult from the community. The researchers watched him as he listened with rapt attention as the mentor read to him and encouraged Donald to try a few words himself. After the session was over Donald stunned us with this indignant comment as he pointed at a book. "No one ever told me there were stories in there!" The authors suddenly realized Donald came from one of those many homes with no books and no adults reading to their children. On another occasion we watched with surprise as a normally troublesome and inattentive second grader named Sandy sat entranced with her mouth open in amazement as a local firefighter read with her and described what he did for a job. We later found out this was the first person that Sandy had met who actually had a job, and it was also the first positive male role model she had encountered. The experiences described, and many more like them over the past 25 years have motivated the formation of the Mentoring-Success program.

In a typical upper SES home there are numerous books and educational materials available for young children. In the typical middle (SES) home there are 15 age appropriate books for reading to a child, while in a lower (SES) home there may be only one book if any that is age appropriate to read. (Bazillion Books 2012). Why is this such a critical statistic? A National Literacy Trust study has revealed that: "The presence of books in the home has a profound effect on all families, regardless of SES status, and that children raised in homes with adequate and age appropriate books advanced their level of education 2 to 3 years beyond those children who were raised without books in the home." (Clark & Rumbold, 2006). In addition, the world is changing rapidly and the ability to read is becoming a necessity for most cultural and social activities. If a child can't read sufficiently they will be cut off from most opportunities for success. According to a report concerning adolescent literacy published by the International Reading Association:

"Adolescents entering the adult world in the 21st century will read and write more than at any other time in human history. They will need advanced levels of literacy to perform their jobs, run their households, act as citizens, and conduct their personal lives. They will need literacy to cope with the flood of information they will find every where they turn. They will need literacy to feed their imaginations so they can create the world of the future. In a complex and sometimes even dangerous world, their ability to read can be crucial."(Moore, Birdyshaw, & Rycik, 1999).

We realize that lower and even middle SES families are facing difficult times. Our research is not meant to condemn them, but to establish the reality that children from these homes often face extreme challenges. While there are fortunately many lower SES parents doing a great job with their children, the evidence indicates that many more are overwhelmed and their children enter the educational system at a disadvantage. For example, research has shown that when a lower SES student enters school they have heard on average one-third the number of words that a student from a typical high SES home will have experienced (Nesbitt, 2009). Of the fewer words they do hear in the home, the ratio of positive, constructive, and encouraging words to negative, discouraging words is believed by observers to be as little as one positive to every three negative words. This is compared to the typical high SES student, where the numerous words they hear are often positive, encouraging, and instructive at a ratio of five-to-one positive words for every negative word that they hear. (Nesbitt, 2009).

According to the recent U.S. Census (2010) approximately 70% of the lower SES homes are single parent homes and have multiple children, meaning what little attention there may be is divided among other siblings. In a longitudinal study conducted by the University of Minnesota starting in 1972 and chronicled

in detail in the 2009 book *The Development of the Person* (Sroufe, Collins, England, Carlson, 2009) it is noted that if a mother or significant caregiver is attentive to the cries of the infant, when the child grows older they are more independent and also more secure in their relationships and interactions. The child whose cries were ignored has a more difficult time, and not only has behavior problems, but is also more disruptive and often times placed into special education. The odds of the lower SES student being the one ignored are enormous. What is the remedy? Children coming from a single parent, multiple-child setting can benefit greatly from a setting where they are cared for and their developmental needs are addressed, hopefully within the home, but if not then another learning environment is critical.

Additionally, from observations the environment referred to above is usually less structured and is more prone to stress producing events. Resulting in higher cortisol levels (the stress hormone) in the student, which in turn results in more difficulty learning and retaining information. Children who grow up in more stressful environments often find it harder to concentrate, harder to sit still and harder to rebound from discouraging events. They also find it harder to follow directions. All this can have a profound impact on their school performance. (Tough, 2012) While there are of course many exceptions to this scenario, with some lower SES families doing a tremendous job with their children, there can be little argument that a majority of lower SES students often start school with many strikes against them and a long uphill climb ahead if they are to succeed in school and life. It doesn't help if the school environment they enter into is a one size fits all setting, with little time available to be devoted to the individual learner's needs.

What if there was a program that looked at school from the student's perspective? What if there were carefully selected, award winning children's books being read to and with them by a carefully trained mentor? What if the student had chosen his/her own interest areas from over 120 possibilities (animals, sports, space, etc.) and the books were carefully calibrated by reading level so the student was able to confidently read the initial book with ease, and only then gradually moving up to his/her instructional level? What if the book also was chosen to teach the student a character trait (honesty, courage, empathy, etc.) or a life skill (decision making, problem solving, team work, etc) that will help them learn success oriented behaviors? What if in this carefully structured, but student centered learning environment, both the student and the mentor have been trained on giving positive, encouraging and instructive feedback to each other? What if, in other words, for this mentoring moment the learning was truly student centered, based on their individual interests and needs? Mentoring-Success was created to provide this attention and support.

Over the years we have seen such a structured, customized, focused mentoring program produce amazing improvement in student performance and behavior. Such an approach creates educational Velcro instead of educational Teflon. It creates most teachable, most reachable moments that provide the student with motivational insights into themselves and their ability to learn. It dispels the myth that nothing can be done to close the achievement gap between low, middle and high SES groups. The original program was called HOSTS (Help One Student to Succeed) and was very effective in using volunteer mentors to effectively improve the learning of lower (SES) children. It was validated as an effective instructional strategy by the US Department of Education. (Bryant, Edwards, LeFiles, 1995) Why did it work so well? The volunteer mentors love the structure and seeing the students succeed. Students love the customized approach that fits their interests, needs and learning style. Teachers love the fact that it is organized, time-on-task well spent and that they can see their students getting the intentional one-on-one attention they need and crave. School districts love the fact that tax paying volunteers can now be constructively involved in helping children succeed. But the biggest winners are the students who learn they can learn and that they are valued. The Donald's and Sandy's of the world we mentioned earlier can experience the positive learning environment that will help them succeed in life and school.

As we look further at the scenario described above, we must realize that part of reaching and encouraging discouraged learners and helping them become curious and upbeat means that we have to create an environment in which they can feel safe. This means creating an environment where they do not feel threatened or belittled. Peer pressure and other socio-economic concerns often distract discouraged learners to a degree where learning is not a priority. But given an environment where a student feels that they matter, and where they are paired with a caring mentor, think of the possibilities of what might happen?

As much as we want to dismiss the effects of socio-economic factors, they in essence give us an insight into the challenge we face. Lets look in more depth at the environment lower SES children often come from. We briefly mentioned earlier the impact of the sheer number of words directed to the child. The initial research on this concept was conducted in 1994 by Psychologists Betty Hart and Todd Risley of the University of Kansas. They conducted a study of the differences of verbal behavior directed to children of

professional people, working class people, and the underclass. What they found was that while children from higher SES settings hear on average 2,000 words an hour from their parents or other significant adults, middle SES or working class children have heard 1,300 words per hour directed to them, and low SES or underclass students hear less than 1,000 words an hour. By the age of three high SES children have heard over 30 million directly spoken words, while middle SES children have heard over 20 million words, and the typical low SES children in most cases have heard less than 10-15 million total words. (Nesbitt, 2009) This is before we even consider the nature and value of the words. Why do we emphasize the quality of the words? We have been avid students of the work done by researchers in the field of management as to the impact of types of words and experiences on the human mind.

In research that we believe has significant impact on children as well as adults, Nobel Prize winning psychologist Daniel Kahneman (Kahneman & Traversky, 1984)) studied the average waking day and found the average person has 20,000 different interactions or individual moments of awareness. These moments last only 2-4 seconds. Most of these are neutral and are soon forgotten. Others are either positive or negative, and these are often quite memorable. As our brains record each moment in our day, our mood and receptiveness to learning is determined by the ratio of positive to negative moments. A positive interaction would be described as encouraging, constructive or instructive, and respectful. A negative interaction would be one that is discouraging, destructive, and full of contempt. It has been discovered by researchers that the potential success and productivity of the individual can be accurately predicted by analyzing the person's positivity ratio. The Brazilian psychologist Marcial Losada has discovered what is now called the Losada Line. He says the tipping point is 2.9013 to 1 of positives to negative. It takes approximately 3 positives to make up for one negative interaction. He can walk into organizations, measure the positive or negative interactions taking place, and accurately predict the productivity, turnover, and profitability of the organization. He says the magic ratio is 6-1 for maximum success. (Losada & Heaphy, 2004). More evidence comes from John Gottman who video taped engaged and newly married couples for 15 minutes and then counted the positive and negative interactions between them. He was able to predict with 94% accuracy which couples would stay together versus divorce over ten years. His magic ratio was 5-1 positive to negative to have an effective relationship. (Gottman, 1993))

From our years of observation, we believe besides the reduced number of words in a lower (SES) environment that there is also a great disparity in the type of words lower SES children hear. We believe their positivity ratio is seldom 3 to one. We believe successful children hear a ratio of 5 to 1 positive encouraging words to negative, middle SES children are on average somewhere around 3 to 1, which is considered break even. Lower SES children often hear 1 positive to every 2 or 3 negative words. We realize this is not true of all homes, but the observed behavior of children leads us to believe it is more often the situation than not. Psychologists have known for years that the degree of encouragement a child receives encourages intellectual exploration and confidence, while discouragement leads frustration and lack of confidence. We believe this is an exciting area for research.

Paul Tough (2012), *How Children Succeed*, talks about character and decision making. Often referred to as "Executive Functions", which has become somewhat of a buzz word in higher SES school districts. Two of the most important executive functions are cognitive flexibility and self-control. It is now known these can both be inhibited by excessive stress. Research findings say that one of the largest determinants of success and learning is the amount of stress the learner encounters. Children from both high and low SES environments struggle with stress, but often in different ways. With high SES children it is the stress of expectations, while with lower SES children it is often the stress of living in a poor or less affluent situation, where it is a struggle to meet the most basic of human needs and violent crime may be more prevalent. Simply being able to manage stress and exhibit self control, regardless of whether or not you are rich or poor, is a strong indicator of being able to achieve or function. Executive function is malleable, and the less stress that someone has in his/her life in early childhood, the better are the chances of achieving at a higher level of executive function. (Tough, 2012)

So what can be done? We believe that early intervention with structured, customized, focused mentoring. That teaches some key life skills to help children deal with stressful environments can help rescue and restore resilient learners. We purposely use the word resilient because who can deny watching a busy pre-school child of any culture eagerly exploring the environment that we are hard wired to acquire skills, to work, to want to accomplish things? We need to do all we can to provide as many children as possible with the positive encouragement and life skills that high SES children often receive in their environment.

What are some of these skill sets? What is communicated in those 30 million words that help improve the success rate of children? Some scholars refer to them as 21st Century Life Skills. () We call them strategies

of success. There is no doubt that to succeed in the rapidly evolving information age these skills will be even more valuable than they are today. We can find little evidence that they are being taught to any degree in lower SES school settings today. We have observed that most of them are passed on in the 30 million words of encouragement that successful children hear and observe. Some of the ones we teach in our Mentoring-Success program are:

- Encouragement skills (praising, providing feedback, receiving feedback)
- Critical Thinking (Higher order thinking skills)
- Problem Solving/decision making, using good judgment
- conflict resolution
- Goal Setting
- Productivity/team work/collaboration
- Skills of resilient learners (Adversity Quotient), social skills (Emotional Quotient), learning how to learn.
- Study skills

Can these elements of success be taught? As described earlier, in Mentoring-Success we use award-winning children's literature, carefully selected to provide an enriching and fun reading experience. Each resource must be analyzed for proper reading and comprehension level as well as age, gender, ethnicity, interest area, and life skill or character trait. These are matched to the student's reading level as identified by the school. By talking to the student we also identify their special areas of interest such as sports, animals, etc. Then in conjunction with the teacher and/or parent (s) we also identify life skills and character traits they may need help in learning. Once this requirement is met, recent breakthroughs in neuroscience research on mirror neurons and brain plasticity tell us that yes they can learn such topics. The exciting research on mirror neurons tells us that a complex system of mirror neurons in our brain helps us learn by observing as well as by doing. As our brain observes activity it actually rewires itself. Children may not have the words to express complex activity, but their brain can observe it as they read and interact with mentors. The impact of positive role models and mentors can be dramatic. (21st Century Learning, 2009)

By having a mentor who is trained to give encouragement and positive feedback we take the student to a higher plane of learning. The mentor is also modeling the behaviors of success which also help to reinforce the teaching of character traits and success strategies, and influences a positive learning environment. As emphasized earlier the students have to feel that they are cared about, and that they are loved. You have to create a level of emotional support. When using mentoring in an educational setting we recommend using the 5-C model from Mark Lepper of Stanford. Lepper says an effective mentoring effort has the following elements:

- 1) The students feel they are in control.
- 2) The person being mentored feels challenged.
- 3) The student's confidence is built up as they are given encouragement.
- 4) Curiosity is created by asking open ended and probing questions.
- 5) Contextualize: the mentoring engages the student in real world situations or problems. (Lepper & Wolverson, 2001))

This will allow the student to begin to build trust and let their defenses down so that the mentor can build a productive learning relationship with them.

As mentioned earlier, one of the key skills that both a mentor and the student can learn to use is that of proper encouragement. The following simple recipe has been developed by The Leadership Mentoring Institute of Vancouver, Washington, to help Mentoring-Success teach this essential mentoring and life skill to both mentors and protégés.

7. Be sincere. If you can't be sincere say nothing at all!
8. Be specific. Detail exactly what was accomplished.
9. State the benefit. Exactly how what was done help or improve the situation?
10. Shape the praise. Some people like verbal praise, some a pat on the back, others a simple note.

Study the person and tailor the praise to the person.

11. Make it as soon as possible. “Catch them while they are still sweating!”
12. Share the praise. Let other people know about good performance.

There are numerous children’s books that also deal with all of the success skills we teach.

Each skill has been broken down into deceptively simple steps that can still teach the essence of the practice. Then each skill is cross referenced to an appropriate book or game. Such a simple recipe can be taught to children as early as kindergarten as long as it is acted out and modeled for them. They then practice this with each other and their mentors and we hope they would get the practices reinforced in the classroom.

Can the character traits and strengths we refer to above really be taught? Paul Tough in his classic *How Children Succeed* says the following: “...the character strengths that matter so much to young people’s success are not innate; they don’t appear in us magically, as a result of good luck or bad genes. And they are not simply a choice. They are rooted in brain chemistry, and they are molded, in measurable and predictable ways, by the environment in which children grow up. That means the rest of us—society as a whole—can do an enormous amount to influence their development in children.” (Tough, 2012). There is much more that can be said about establishing effective mentoring programs for young children. But the good news is that early intervention of the right kind can have a significant impact. A well structured, customized, focused approach can do much to determine whether a child’s future will be hopeless or hopeful.

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- 11) Contextualize: the mentoring engages the student in real world situations or problems. (Lepper & Wolverson, 2001))

This will allow the student to begin to build trust and let their defenses down so that the mentor can build a productive learning relationship with them.

As mentioned earlier, one of the key skills that both a mentor and the student can learn to use is that of proper encouragement. The following simple recipe has been developed by The Leadership Mentoring Institute of Vancouver, Washington, to help Mentoring-Success teach this essential mentoring and life skill to both mentors and protégés.

13. Be sincere. If you can't be sincere say nothing at all!

14. Be specific. Detail exactly what was accomplished.
15. State the benefit. Exactly how what was done help or improve the situation?
16. Shape the praise. Some people like verbal praise, some a pat on the back, others a simple note. Study the person and tailor the praise to the person.
17. Make it as soon as possible. "Catch them while they are still sweating!"
18. Share the praise. Let other people know about good performance.

There are numerous children's books that also deal with all of the success skills we teach.

Each skill has been broken down into deceptively simple steps that can still teach the essence of the practice. Then each skill is cross referenced to an appropriate book or game. Such a simple recipe can be taught to children as early as kindergarten as long as it is acted out and modeled for them. They then practice this with each other and their mentors and we hope they would get the practices reinforced in the classroom. Can the character traits and strengths we refer to above really be taught? Paul Tough in his classic *How Children Succeed* says the following: "...the character strengths that matter so much to young people's success are not innate; they don't appear in us magically, as a result of good luck or bad genes. And they are not simply a choice. They are rooted in brain chemistry, and they are molded, in measurable and predictable ways, by the environment in which children grow up. That means the rest of us—society as a whole—can do an enormous amount to influence their development in children." (Tough, 2012). There is much more that can be said about establishing effective mentoring programs for young children. But the good news is that early intervention of the right kind can have a significant impact. A well structured, customized, focused approach can do much to determine whether a child's future will be hopeless or hopeful.

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