

ENGAGE STUDENTS TO EMBRACE CIVILITY

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Chapter 6.

Positively Powerful— Empowerment of Students

This Chapter addresses issues that are of specific importance to supporting students who are more frequently targeted, including those who are both targeted and are being hurtful. The insight presented in this Chapter can also support all students in becoming more personally empowered. This is especially helpful as a way to increase the personal power of students to step into hurtful situations to help achieve a resolution. The Chapter then presents seven powerful strategies that are grounded in resilience and Positive Psychology insight that can support all students in becoming more resilient and positively empowered.

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Overall Empowerment Approach.** The objective of the positively powerful approach is to help young people gain greater dandelion-like qualities--the ability to grow and bloom anywhere. Students who are treated badly are often considered “misfits.” These students may always face the possibility they will be treated badly. We must support these students to reduce the level of hurtful actions directed to them, respond effectively when this does occur, and not be unduly emotionally harmed as a result.
- **Positively Powerful Strategies.** There are a common set of factors that predispose children to positive outcomes in the face of significant adversity. These factors include the following: The availability of at least one stable, caring, and supportive relationship between a child and the important adults. A sense of mastery over their life circumstances. Strong executive function and self-regulation skills. Affirming faith or cultural traditions.
 - **Objective.** The objective of Positively Powerful strategies is to support students’ resilience when things get tough and to increase their positive and happy feelings of empowerment. Each Positively Powerful Strategy will help students to form neural pathways that will help them to become more resilient and empowered. To build these strengths it is important for them to strive to focus on the positive. The goal is to increase the amount of time that they are focused on the positive things happening in their life, the strengths they are building, and the successes they are having. The Positively Powerful Strategies presented in this Chapter are:
 - **Make Positive Connections.** I maintain positive connections with good friends and trusted adults.
 - **Reach Out To Be Kind.** I reach out to be kind to others. I know this makes us both feel happier.
 - **Build and Use My Strengths.** I have many positive strengths. I use my strengths every day and when things get tough. I build new strengths and a positive future for myself.
 - **Be Thankful.** I focus on the good things happening in my life. I am thankful and express my gratitude.
 - **Be Mindful and Remain Calm.** I take time each day to achieve calmness and focus. If things get tough, I remain calm.

- **Keep My Personal Power.** I hold myself tall and strong. I do not allow what happens to me control how I think about myself or respond.
 - **Think Things Through.** In any challenging situation, I think things through to decide what is best to do.
- **The Magic 5:1 Ratio.** For these strategies to work will require constant intentional repetition for a period of time. Only then will they start to see positive results. It is said that it takes five “positives” to undo one “negative.” Keeping a daily journal is helpful. They can use transitions strategies to focus on positive actions, such as reminding themselves to hold themselves tall as they walk to class, breathe deeply to achieve mindfulness when they sit down in a new class.
- **Positively Powerful Happiness Thinking Questions.** The Positively Powerful Happiness Thinking Questions are the first four Positively Powerful strategies: Who did you have a positive connection with? Who were you kind to? What did you do that you are proud of? What happened to make you happy? These questions can be used as a class mindfulness activity, students could choose to respond to one of these questions in a Community Circle, students could keep a Happiness Questions Journal.
- **Positively Powerful Check In-Check Out.** Schools can establish a Positively Powerful CI-CO approach for any student experiencing significant challenges. As with a traditional CI-CO, students have some time they can check in with a Positively Powerful CI-CO mentor in the morning. Then, they also check out at the end of the day. The Positively Powerful CI-CO should be seen as a way to significantly enhance the student’s experiences with positive.
- **Make Positive Connections. I will maintain positive connections with good friends and trusted adults.**
 - **Research Insight.** Positive connections with both good friends and trusted adults are important for student’s emotional well-being and happiness. Students who have good friends appear to experience less distress if treated badly. Having a close connection with a trusted adult is the foundation for youth resilience.
 - Students who are bullied, but who have supportive friends, experience less distress.
 - The importance of positive connections with trusted adults cannot be overemphasized. The single most common finding in research on adversity and resilience is that children who end up doing well have had at least one stable and committed relationship with a supportive parent, caregiver, or other adult.
 - **Core Insight for Students.** Good friends and trusted adults are people I can have fun with and who will provide me with support if things get tough. To have good friends, it is important that I am a good friend. To find new friends, I can be active doing the things I enjoy doing. I can find good friends and trusted adults who I feel comfortable talking with when things get tough and who will help me think things through to decide what I should do.
 - **School-Based Strategies to Support Students Positive Connections.** Strategies to increase students’ positive connections at school include:
 - **Relationship Mapping.** Ensure every student has one or more staff members who are committed to maintaining a close connection with them.
 - **Community Circle Time.** Community Circle time in classrooms, advisories, or homerooms will both increase positive staff-student connections and positive student-student connections.
 - **Positive Acknowledgement.** The ideal is that students regularly receive 5 positive comments to every 1 negative comment or correction. Strategies include: Positively acknowledge using Social Emotional Growth Mindset language that acknowledges effort, strategy, and persistence. Audio record a class session and then go over the recording to note how many comments are positive, negative or correction, or instruction. Greet students as they enter the room. Whenever a student responds to a question, positively acknowledge their response. Be sure to note when students who have greater challenges are engaged in positive behavior. Be at the door as students leave and positively acknowledge their accomplishments. If a redirection is necessary, following this with a positive acknowledgement and appreciation of the student’s compliance. If a student starts to get agitated and then is able to self-calm, specifically note this accomplishment.

- **Positively Powerful CI-CO Strategy.** At the after school connection, ask the student: What friends did you have a positive connection with today? What trusted adult at school did you have a positive connection with today?
- **Reach Out to Be Kind. I will daily reach out to be kind to others. I know this will make us both feel happier.**
 - **Research Insight.** Being kind to others results in a significant increase in feelings of happiness—creating greater feelings of happiness than spending on themselves. Kindness is contagious—witnessing kindness leads other people to be kind. Witnessing acts of kindness increases hormones that lead to better health, self-esteem, and optimism. Being kind helps people feel stronger, more energetic, calmer, less depressed, and leads to increased feelings of self-worth.
 - **Peer Acceptance.** Prosocial behavior is associated with academic achievement and social acceptance in adolescents. Instructing students to consistently be kind to others can result in their having higher levels of peer acceptance. Encouraging all students to be kind can significantly improve school climate.
 - **Core Insight for Students.** Every day, I will reach out to be kind to others and spread kindness online by posting or sending positive comments to others. I know that that when I reach out to be kind, this increases happiness of the other person and my own happiness. Being kind to others will build a kind community around me. Being kind to others sets me on a path to a positive future of being of service and contributing to good in the world.
 - **Kindness Activities in School.**
 - **School-Wide Kindness Activities.** Search on “kindness, schools.” One activity of a Student Leadership Team should be on implementing school-wide kindness activities (Chapter 10).
 - **Students with Challenges Positive Action Plan.** Strongly encourage Targeted Students and Marginalized Hurtful Students to reach out to be kind to others at least 3 to 5 times a day. If they use social media, encourage them to intentionally post a kind comment on 3 to 5 other students’ profiles every day (Chapter 11).
 - **Accountability Process.** Require both Hurtful Students and Hurtful Supporters to remedy the harm to the school community by reaching out to be kind to others 3 to 5 times times a day and keeping a log that is provided to the school (Chapter 11).
 - **Positively Powerful CI-CO Strategy.** In the morning, remind the student to reach out to be kind at least 3 to 5 times that day. At the end of the day, ask the student to describe the times they were kind.
- **Build and Use My Strengths. I have many positive strengths. I use my strengths every day and when things get tough. I build new strengths and a positive future for myself.** I maintain a positive presence.
 - **Research Insight.** Students who focus on their strengths and future directions are more resilient in response to challenges. The Build and Use My Strengths strategy draws on the research insight into Character Strengths and Social Emotional Growth Mindset, set forth in Chapter 4. In addition, students who focus on their future possibilities are more resilient in the face of experiencing being treated badly.
 - **Core Insight for Students.** I use my strengths every day and when things get tough. I know that situations and people can change and that every day in every way I can become better and better. I build new strengths and focus on my positive future. I use my strengths to create personal goals, take steps to achieve those goals, and effectively respond to challenges along the way. I make a positive difference in the world.
 - **Strengths, Growth, and Future Directed Activities in School.**
 - **Character Strengths.** Have secondary students complete the VIA Institute on Character Character Strengths survey or the shorter survey is provided. Use Community Circles to discuss these strengths. Whenever there is a discussion on challenges ask students how they could use different strengths in this situation. A class or the

entire school could focus on one character strength a week. When discussing any issue of concern with a student ask what their strengths are and how they might use a personal strength to find a resolution.

- **Social Emotional Growth Mindset.** There are a significant number of resources for schools and teachers on fostering a Growth Mindset. However, many of these resources focus solely on academic performance or intelligence. Expand this concept to clearly incorporate social emotional growth.
- **Positively Powerful CI-CO.** In the morning, remind the student to use one of their strengths that day. Perhaps discuss which strength they will try to use. At the end of the day, ask the student to how they used one of their strengths and how this made them feel. Alternatively, ask them what they did that they were proud of. Encourage a change in student language to reflect an opportunity for growth on both their ability to maintain positive relationships, become happier, and self-regulate when things get tough.
- **Be Thankful. I focus on the good things happening in my life. I am thankful and express my gratitude.**
 - **Research Insight.** Students who have positive feelings about themselves are less likely to demonstrate perceived weakness that could lead to their being targeted and better situated to avoid thinking badly of themselves if this occurs. A consistent focus on the good things happening in their lives can help to support these positive feelings. Gratitude is associated with psychological well-being.
 - **Hardwiring Happiness Strategy.** It is possible for people to rewire their brain to be more happy. **Step 1. Have a Good Experience.** Either notice that something good has happened or create a positive experience for yourself. **Step 2. Enrich It.** Keep thinking about this experience for at least 10 seconds or longer. Feel the positive experience in your body. Enjoy it. Think about how wonderful this is. Really take the time to feel good. **Step 3. Absorb It.** Think about this positive experience as being absorbed by you— traveling deep into your mind and warming your heart. Bring the experience deeply into your being.
 - **Core Insight for Students.** I am thankful for the good things that are happening to me every day. I take the time to notice people who make me feel happy, great things that happen, and what I do that I am proud of. I bring the happiness from those good things that happen into my heart. I keep a gratitude journal to maintain a focus on the positive things happening in my life.
 - **Gratitude Activities in School.**
 - **Gratitude Activities.** A search on the terms “gratitude, schools” will yield many sites with creative suggestions. The Greater Good Science Center is an excellent source of insight into gratitude and gratitude activities in schools. Another activity of a Student Leadership Team should be on implementing school-wide gratitude activities (Chapter 10).
 - **Positively Powerful CI-CO.** In the morning, remind the student to pay attention to the things that happen that make them feel good. At the end of the day, ask the student to describe a positive thing that happened and to take a moment to feel the positive feelings again. If someone has done something that made this student feel good, encourage the student to write a note of thanks to provide to the person the following day.
- **Be Mindful and Remain Calm. I take time each day to achieve calmness and focus. If things get tough, I remain calm.**
 - **Research Insight.** The ability to self-regulate is an essential skills when one is treated badly. This can help the Targeted Student remain calm so as not to reward the student being hurtful. Self-regulation is also important to reduce the potential for impulsive retaliation. The practice of mindfulness creates the neural pathways to improve students’ ability to self-regulate when things get tough.
 - **Mindfulness.** Research in mindfulness has identified a wide range of benefits in different areas of psychological health, such as helping to decrease anxiety, depression, rumination, and emotional reactivity. Research has also shown mindfulness helps to increase well-being, positive affect, and concentration. In educational settings, mindfulness practices improved social-emotional skills, executive functions, and decreased test stress in students, as well as reduced stress and burnout in teachers.

- ▶ **Self-Regulation.** Concerns of students not able to self-regulate and are disruptive are frequent in schools, especially as students have come back to the school environment after the pandemic. Schools must have a comprehensive approach to support student self-regulation.
 - **Stages of Behavior Escalation.** In 2004, Colvin enunciated a framework called the *Stages of Behavior Escalation*. This approach is connected with PBIS, thus grounded in behaviorism. This approach must be updated with insight into trauma and Social Emotional Growth Mindset.
 - **Trauma Informed.** It is helpful to have a trauma informed understanding of what is happening when a student becomes dysregulated. When a student triggers and starts to become dysregulated, their Anterior Cingulate Cortex and Prefrontal Cortex is in the process of, or has become, disconnected. The message their brain is telling them is, “You are not safe.” Their ability to regulate their emotions and problem solve has been undermined. They need support to regain the feeling of being safe.
 - **Social Emotional Growth Mindset.** Students must be assured that they can change how they react when something has triggered them. The goal is to “flatten the curve”—to go from trigger, to slight escalation, back to calm—without ever climbing up to the peak. Students absolutely require the assurance that they can do this.
 - **Updated.** This insight must be integrated into the Stages of Behavior Escalation to allow for a better understanding of what is happening and strategies to empower students to be able to independently self-regulate. The key to assist students to gain more effective self-regulation is to help them to understand triggers them. Then, when something they know is likely to trigger them starts to happen, they can take steps to avoid going from a trigger to an outburst—to flatten the curve.
- **Core Insight for Students.** When I stay calm, I can handle the rough spots in life. I take time every day to become calm and mindful. I know what triggers me to get upset and know what I can do when this happens so I can stay calm and in control. If things get tough, I take a deep breath to stay calm and walk away to a place that is safe. If I get angry online, I do not respond until I have calmed.
- **Mindfulness and Self-Regulation Activities in School.**
 - ▶ **Mindfulness Practices in Schools.** There are many sites that provide excellent guidance on establishing mindfulness practices in schools. These include: Mindfulness in Schools Project. Mindful. Mindful Schools.
 - ▶ **Happiness Thinking Mindfulness.** One very simple practice is to simply have students practice mindfulness for a minute upon coming into class after a transition. A minute of silence for self-calming. A short guided meditation using the Positively Powerful Happiness Thinking Questions was set forth above.
 - ▶ **De-escalation Strategies.** All school staff and students should be trained to understand the process by which anyone might become dysregulated and in effective de-escalation strategies. All staff require training in strategies to intervene when students appear to have triggered and may be headed towards an outburst and when they have become dysregulated. The strategies that must be avoided can be remembered by this term: TACOS: Threats. Arguments. Commands or criticism. Orders. Shaming.
 - ▶ **Social Emotional Growth Mindset.** Every student will have different ways that are best for them to self-regulate. When a student is calm, then them to think things through to determine what tends to trigger them and the best ways are for them to self-regulate when they have triggered. Laminate the list of self-regulation strategies they have chosen and have it on their desk. It will be especially important to positively acknowledge student’s success in self-regulation.
- **Positively Powerful CI-CO.** Have a brief mindfulness activity in the morning using the Positively Powerful Thinking Questions. Remind them of the transitions strategy to calm themselves when entering each new situation. Discuss self-regulation strategies and make a plan. On a daily basis ask if they had any challenges and how they responded. Rethink strategies if necessary. Celebrate success.
- **Keep My Personal Power. I hold myself tall and proud. I do not allow what happens to me control how I think about myself or respond.**

- **Research Insight.** To effectively address the concerns of hurtful behavior directed at, and sometimes by, students, it is necessary to increase students' level of personal power. This can be addressed both by a focus on how they are holding themselves physically and what they think when something challenging does happen to them. There are three strategies students can use that can help them to better keep their personal power, especially in situations where someone is trying to take their power from them.
 - **Hold Myself Tall.** Adopting a pose that indicates power—a “power pose”—can result in increased feelings of confidence. It is possible to “fake it” by assuming a power pose, which will then help a person “make it” by feeling more confident.
 - **Control My Thinking.** Students will never be able to control when or if someone might treat them badly. They will never be able to control whether or if other bad things might happen to them. But they do have the ability to control their thinking about how they feel about themselves and how they respond in these challenging situations. This is how they can keep their personal power. This is the underlying premise of Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy, is that harmful consequences are not just caused by the bad adversities that happen to us, but also by our beliefs about those adversities. While we can't control what might happen, we can control our beliefs.
 - **Maintain a Positive Presence.** They can maintain a positively powerful presence by being known to be kind, respectful, and inclusive. When they use social media, they need to be careful about what they post or send because this can be forwarded to anyone and become permanent.
- **Core Insight for Students.** I hold myself tall and am proud of who I am. I know that while I can't control what might happen to me, I can control what I think about myself and how I respond. I maintain a positive presence by being known as kind, respectful, and inclusive. I take care about what I post or send using social media, because this can be forwarded and become permanent. I maintain my positively powerful personal presence.
- **Personal Power Activities in School.** An excellent TedTalk by Cuddy on power posing provides greater insight into standing or holding oneself tall. This TedTalk is quite appropriate for secondary students to watch and discuss. Have younger students practice “feeling small” and “holding themselves tall and proud. The Control My Thinking approach should be transmitted more informally.
- **Positively Powerful CI-CO.** In the morning, practice “holding themselves tall.” Remind them of the transitions strategy. Remind them every day to keep their personal power—never give any other person the power to control what they think about themselves and respond.
- **Think Things Through. In any challenging situation, I think things through to decide what is best to do.**
 - **Research Insight.** When students gain effective problem solving skills they are more resilient in figuring out how to respond if they are faced with any kind of a challenge. When they think things through, this is the opposite of acting without thinking.
 - **Effective Problem Solving.** Four key interpersonal cognitive problem solving skills are: Means-ends thinking to reach a stated interpersonal goal by planning a step-by-step, sequenced means to reach that goal. Alternative solution thinking to identify alternative solutions to a stated problem. Consequential thinking to consider what might happen in certain situations. Weighing pros and cons to decide whether to carry out an interpersonal act.
 - These are the steps that are necessary to engage in effective problem solving: What is the Situation? What do I want to accomplish? What strategies could I use? Is each in accord with my values and does each use my strengths? For each, what might happen? What is my best choice? How should I proceed? Did this work? What else could or should I do? Many times it is helpful to make a positive connection with a friend or trusted adult to think things through. They can also use this think things through strategy as part of a team.
 - **Core Insight for Students.** I can think things through to decide what to do. I ask these questions: What happened? What is my goal? What could I do? What might happen if I do this? I pick the best strategy, realizing that this might not work. I keep thinking things through until I succeed. I ask a good friend or trusted adult to help me think things through.

- **Personal Power Activities in School.** Effective problem solving using the above strategy should be integrated into all aspects of instructional activities. The problem solving approach set forth above can be a valuable guide.
- **Positively Powerful CI-CO.** In the morning, ask if there are any challenges or problems they anticipate having to deal with during the day. Then, think things through to develop a strategy they can implement. At the end of the day, ask what challenges arose and how they thought things through to figure out what to do.

OVERALL EMPOWERMENT APPROACH

Essentially, the objective of the positively powerful approach is to help young people gain greater dandelion-like qualities--the ability to grow and bloom anywhere. Dandelion-like qualities are the essence of resilience.

This Chapter provides guidance on how to increase the resilience and empowerment of all students, especially those who are being more routinely treated badly. As was discussed in Chapter 1, students who are treated badly are often considered “misfits.” They have aspects of their identity that, because of hurtful society norms, result in being looked upon as “less desirable.” This includes both Targeted Students and Marginalized Hurtful Students.

Many of these students are within an identity group that is marginalized in our society. Most of these identity aspects are simply not going to change. With the recent rise in white nationalism, it appears that society has a long way to go in changing its norms of inclusion.

Nevertheless, as it is not possible for most students to change their identities and we remain a long way from social acceptance. This creates a reality that some students will always face the possibility that they will be treated badly—if not in school, elsewhere in society.

These students also face the toxic stress of knowing what is happening elsewhere that is harmfully impacting those who are within their identity group. Every shooting of a black person by a police officer, every statute that places restrictions on transgender youth, every political leader who argues against “woke” curriculum creates a moment of toxic stress for these students.

Thus, our challenge as educators is to empower students who are more likely to be targeted with a sufficient level of resilience and empowerment so that these anticipated negative incidents do not cause undue harm to their well-being. A primary focus in the effort is to support these students to reduce the level of hurtful actions directed to them, respond effectively when this does occur, and not be unduly emotionally harmed as a result.

However, a focus on student empowerment must go beyond just the students who are more often targets of hurtful behavior, including both Targeted Students and Marginalized Hurtful Students. All students will be benefitted by an increase in their personal power. This includes Dominance Motivated Hurtful Students who can hopefully see a more positive path to achieve the leadership goals they have, as well as Witnesses who are more likely to step in to help when they see a hurtful incident unfolding.

This Chapter sets forth the core insight into these issues and strategies to increase students’ resilience, empowerment, and happiness. This insight can support all students.

Positively Powerful Strategies

The National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, associated with the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University is a multidisciplinary, multi-university collaboration designed to bring the science of early childhood and early brain development to bear on public decision-making.¹ This statement on the foundations of resilience is from their excellent Working Paper 13.²

¹ <https://developingchild.harvard.edu>.

² National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2015). Supportive Relationships and Active Skill-Building Strengthen the Foundations of Resilience: Working Paper No. 13. <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/supportive-relationships-and-active-skill-building-strengthen-the-foundations-of-resilience/>

Multiple lines of research have identified a common set of factors that predispose children to positive outcomes in the face of significant adversity. These factors encompass strengths that derive from the child, the family, peer and adult relationships, and the broader social environments that build and support sturdy brain architecture. When these positive influences are operating effectively, they “stack the scale” with positive weight and optimize resilience. When these positive factors are absent, disrupted, or undermined, there is little to counterbalance the negative effects of significant adversity, thus creating the conditions for poor outcomes and diminished life prospects. These counter-balancing factors include the following:

- *The availability of at least one stable, caring, and supportive relationship between a child and the important adults in his or her life. These relationships begin in the family, but they can also include neighbors, providers of early care and education, teachers, social workers, or coaches, among many others.*
- *Helping children build a sense of mastery over their life circumstances. Those who believe in their own capacity to overcome hardships and guide their own destiny are far more likely to adapt positively to adversity.*
- *Children who develop strong executive function and self-regulation skills. These skills enable individuals to manage their own skills and emotions and develop and execute adaptive strategies to cope effectively with difficult circumstances.*
- *The supportive context of affirming faith or cultural traditions. Children who are solidly grounded within such traditions are more likely to respond effectively when challenged by a major stressor or severely disruptive experience.*

The objective of these Positively Powerful strategies is to support students’ resilience when things get tough and to increase their positive and happy feelings of empowerment. Resilience means "bouncing back" from difficult experiences and the ability to feel happy and be successful, even after something difficult or bad has happened.³ Becoming empowered is a process of becoming strong and confident—allowing them to control their life and make their own decisions.

Each of these Positively Powerful Strategies will help students to form neural pathways that will help them to become more resilient and empowered. If they take the time to intentionally develop these inner strengths this can help them recover from pain they have experienced, cope with new challenges, maintain their emotional well-being, and move forward to a happy and successful life.

To build these strengths it is important for them to strive to focus on the positive. The goal is to increase the amount of time that they are focused on the positive things happening in their life, the strengths they are building, and the successes they are having. When they intentionally focus on these positive experiences, their brain will develop neural pathways that will make lasting positive changes in how their brain functions. These positive focused neural pathways will support their ongoing success and happiness. By intentionally focusing on the positive, they are building the neural pathways in their brain that will support their positive future.

The Positively Powerful Strategies that will be presented in this Chapter are:

- **Make Positive Connections.** I maintain positive connections with good friends and trusted adults.
- **Reach Out To Be Kind.** I reach out to be kind to others. I know this makes us both feel happier.
- **Build and Use My Strengths.** I have many positive strengths. I use my strengths every day and when things get tough. I build new strengths and a positive future for myself.
- **Be Thankful.** I focus on the good things happening in my life. I am thankful and express my gratitude.
- **Be Mindful and Remain Calm.** I take time each day to achieve calmness and focus. If things get tough, I remain calm.
- **Keep My Personal Power.** I hold myself tall and strong. I do not allow what happens to me control how I think about myself or respond.
- **Think Things Through.** In any challenging situation, I think things through to decide what is best to do.

³ Id.

The Magic 5:1 Ratio

These Positively Powerful Strategies have been demonstrated by the research outlined in the following sections to be effective. However, they will not work immediately. For these strategies to work will require constant intentional repetition for a period of time. Only then will they start to see positive results.

There appears to be a “magic formula.” It is said that it takes five “positives” to undo one “negative.” Every time they have a negative experience or thought, they should strive to counter the negative neural pathways this may have established by focusing on five positive things.

I have heard about this “magic 5:1 ratio” often—never with citations. The original research apparently arose in the arena of marital relationships.⁴ As explained:

To understand the difference between happy and unhappy couples, Dr. Gottman and Robert Levenson began doing longitudinal studies of couples in the 1970s. They asked couples to solve a conflict in their relationship in 15 minutes, then sat back and watched. After carefully reviewing the tapes and following up with them nine years later, they were able to predict which couples would stay together and which would divorce with over 90% accuracy.

Their discovery was simple. The difference between happy and unhappy couples is the balance between positive and negative interactions during conflict. There is a very specific ratio that makes love last.

That “magic ratio” is 5 to 1. This means that for every negative interaction during conflict, a stable and happy marriage has five (or more) positive interactions.⁵

There are several strategies students could be coached to use to increase their positive focus. These include:

- **Keep a Daily Journal.** It is recommended that students obtain a notebook to keep as their Journal. For many of these strategies, it will be suggested that they either take specific actions during the day, accomplish certain tasks, or reflect on what happened. It is helpful to write this on paper, rather than in digital format. This appears to help rewire their neural pathways when they write on paper. Alternatively, this journaling can take place in a Positively Powerful CI-CO interaction at school.
- **Use Transitions Strategies.** Students can use transition times to remind them to focus on certain positive actions. Transition times are the times when they are changing activities—like going from one class to another or leaving home to go to school. Some examples:
 - **Keep Their Personal Power.** They do this by holding themselves tall—paying attention to their physical posture. Just before they walk into school or get out of their seat to go to a new class, remind themselves to hold themselves tall.
 - **Be Mindful.** They do this by maintaining calmness. Remind them that when they sit down in class to take just a minute to breathe deeply to achieve mindfulness.
 - **Reach Out to be Kind.** Encourage them to reach out to be kind to someone every day. They can also do this online. Every time they look on social media site, they can take the time to positively comment on someone’s post or to send a message of thanks to someone.

What is happening in their brain every time they think to themselves, “hold myself tall,” take a minute to achieve mindfulness, or Reach Out to Be Kind, is that a new positive neural pathway has been formed.

Positively Powerful Happiness Thinking Questions

The Positively Powerful Happiness Thinking Questions are the first four Positively Powerful strategies.

- Who did you have a positive connection with?
- Who were you kind to?

⁴ <https://www.gottman.com/about/research/>; <https://www.johngottman.net/research/>

⁵ Benson, K. (undated) The Magic Relationship Ratio, According to Science. The Gottman Institute. <https://www.gottman.com/blog/the-magic-relationship-ratio-according-science/>.

- What did you do that you are proud of?
- What happened to make you happy?

Several classroom strategies could be used in classrooms, homerooms, or advisories to focus on the Positively Powerful Happiness Thinking Question.

- Have the students engage in the Positively Powerful Thinking Questions as a class mindfulness activity, that is presented in the section Be Mindful and Calm below. Alternatively, this guided mindfulness session could be used with the entire school at the beginning of the day—asking to reflect on the previous day.
- Have a number of craft sticks and on each write the Positively Powerful Thinking Questions. Pass the sticks around during a Community Circle. Each student can pick one stick provide a response to the Question on that stick. If they do not have a response to this Question, they should be allowed to select another stick. Or if they have a burning desire to provide a response to a specific Question, allow them to do so.
- Have Positive Thinking Journal for every student. At the end of the day in elementary school ask them to write in this journal. “Today I: Made a positive connection with ... Reached out to be kind to ... Am proud that I ... Was happy because ...” Younger students could draw a picture.

Positively Powerful Check In-Check—Check-Out

Concerns about the use of CI-CO behavior cards were addressed in Chapter 3. It is recommended that schools consider the establishment of a Positively Powerful CI-CO approach for any student experiencing significant challenges. This includes Targeted Students and Marginalized Hurtful Students. The Positive Action Plan set forth in Chapter 11 is version of this practice.

As with a traditional CI-CO, students have some time they can check in with a Positively Powerful CI-CO mentor in the morning. Then, they also check out at the end of the day.

Keep in mind the “Magic 5:1 Ratio.” The Positively Powerful CI-CO should be seen as a way to significantly enhance the student’s experiences with positive. Reflect on how many negatives each of these students have experienced in their lives. For every negative, they need to experience 5 positives.

POSITIVELY POWERFUL STRATEGIES

The following are the seven Positively Powerful strategies.

Make Positive Connections

I will maintain positive connections with good friends and trusted adults.

Positive connections with both good friends and trusted adults are important for student’s emotional well-being and happiness. Students who have good friends appear to experience less distress if treated badly. Having a close connection with a trusted adult is the foundation for youth resilience.

Friendships Insight

Research has clearly documented that students who are bullied, but who have supportive friends, experience less distress.⁶

⁶ Salmivalli, C. (2010) Bullying and the Peer Group: A Review. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*. 15, 112-120.

There have been relatively few studies that have examined the link between friendship and important outcomes. A recent study by Lu and colleagues studied the importance of adult friendships through around the world.⁷ This introduction to the importance of friendships also clearly holds true for young people:

Friendships enrich our lives in many ways. Friends give us both practical and emotional support when we need it. As a result, there are many emotional and physical health benefits of friendships—the more people prioritize friendships, the happier and healthier they are.

...

There is a reliable link between social support and mental and physical health across the lifespan, and one important source of support is our friends. Friends provide us with a strong sense of companionship, mitigate feelings of loneliness, and contribute to our self-esteem and life satisfaction. Perceiving greater support from friends is associated with a greater sense of purpose and control over one's life. In terms of predicting health, friendship occasionally predicts health to an equivalent and, in some cases, larger degree compared to spousal and parent-child relationships. Friends also help individuals institute healthy behaviors in their own lives. ...

However, friendship is not universally good for individuals—depression and negative health behaviors can also spread through friend networks. ... In sum, friends play a significant role in people's mental and physical well-being, for better and for worse.

Insight on Friendships to Impart to Students

The following is language that can be used to discuss friendships with students.

Having good friends can help you feel great about yourself and have more fun in your life. Having good friends also is very helpful if you are facing any challenges. Being able to get support from friends and talking through what has happened to decide what you might need to do can be exceptionally helpful.

To have good friends, you have to put forth the effort. No one is going to come knocking on your door to ask you to be your friend. When interacting with people, remember to smile and Reach Out to Be Kind. Smiling is an invitation to others that you want to interact with them.

Strive not to keep yourself in a “bubble.” Present yourself as someone who wants to get to know other people. When you are around people, avoid focusing on your smart phone.

Be the friend that you want to have. Treat people the way you want to be treated. Be available to your friends when they need you. Make sure you are giving as much to the other person as you are getting from them. Be encouraging. Let your friends know that you believe in them and support them.

The biggest barrier to finding new friends is fear of rejection. The best way to deal with that fear is to not place a high priority on achieving closer relations with everyone you interact with. Just focus on getting to know others better and reaching out to be kind to them. If a friendship happens, this is great. If it turns out that this person is not interested in a closer relationship, that is also fine. You can both get to know each other—without any more extensive expectations.

The best way to find new friends is by engaging in activities that you are interested in. Get involved in these activities with the idea of enjoying the activity—and possibly making a new friend. Do not create pressure for yourself that you intend to make a new friend. Just enjoy being with people who have fun doing the same things you like to do.

Give your friends space. Everybody needs time by themselves. Don't expect too much of your friend's time and attention. Don't be offended if they turn you down because they are busy or need some alone time. If you keep up with your own interests and have a wider circle of friends, you can share time with one or more friends depending on the circumstances.

Realize that friendship break-ups happen. This is a normal part of life. This does not mean that anything is wrong with either of you. If you have a friendship break-up, do not allow your pain to turn to anger and attack. Let go of your feelings of hurt by forgiving the other person. Forgiveness is something you do for yourself, to allow you to release and let go.

⁷ Lu., P., Oh, J., Leahy, K. & Chopic, W.J. (2021) Friendship Importance Around the World: Links to Cultural Factors, Health, and Well-Being. *Front Psychol.*, 18 January 2021 | <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.570839>. (citations omitted)

As hard as it may be, accept that the friendship is over, acknowledge it was meaningful, and take time to feel sad. Practice something kind to say about what happened if someone asks. Keep yourself busy doing things that you enjoy. Be open to meet new people.

Positively Powerful Strategies

- **Think About What Friendship Means to You.** What qualities would you like to have in a friend? Do you consistently act in this way with your friends and others?
- **Conduct a Friendship Audit and Create an Action Plan.** Who are your current friends? What interests do you share? What are the strengths of these friendships? What are any weaknesses? How can you build on these strengths? How can you make new friends? Create an action plan to increase your positive friendships.
- **Enjoy Your Interests to Find New Friends.** What are you interested in and what do you like to do? Is there a club at school you might want to join or a class you might want to take? Is there an after-school center, program, or class you could go to?

Trusted Adults Insight

The importance of positive connections with trusted adults cannot be overemphasized.⁸ This statement is from the Harvard Center on the Developing Child's Working Paper 13. It is my strong recommendation that this paper be distributed to school staff.

Decades of research in the behavioral and social sciences have produced a rich knowledge base that explains why some people develop the adaptive capacities to overcome significant adversity and others do not. Whether the burdens come from the hardships of poverty, the challenges of parental substance abuse or serious mental illness, the stresses of war, the threats of recurrent violence or chronic neglect, or a combination of factors, the single most common finding is that children who end up doing well have had at least one stable and committed relationship with a supportive parent, caregiver, or other adult. These relationships provide the personalized responsiveness, scaffolding, and protection that buffer children from developmental disruption. They also build key capacities—such as the ability to plan, monitor and regulate behavior, and adapt to changing circumstances—that enable children to respond to adversity and to thrive. This combination of supportive relationships, adaptive skill-building, and positive experiences constitutes the foundations of what is commonly called resilience.⁹

The CDC has also identified “connectedness” as key to addressing the concerns of youth suicide, which is an identified risk for students being and engaging in bullying.

(R)evue of studies to date suggests that connectedness affects STB (suicide thoughts and behavior) through one or more of the following routes: (1) expanding intergenerational social networks; (2) heightening opportunities for soliciting and activating assistance from others or systems (e.g., schools, families, or other social systems); (3) enhancing the likelihood that worrisome affect and behavior, including early signs of distress or more direct warning signs for suicidal behavior, will be noticed and proactively addressed by proximal systems (parents, peers, schools); (4) increasing exposure to positive coping and help-seeking norms; (5) increasing positive emotion and, as a consequence, cognitive flexibility and emotion regulation capacity; and (6) enhancing opportunities for experiencing belonging and utility in a community of others.¹⁰

Insight on Connecting with Trusted Adults to Impart to Students

The following is language to discuss the importance of trusted adults with students.

Trusted adults are people you can turn to when you have a problem, when something bad is happening to you, or when you have embarrassing or difficult questions you need to ask someone you can trust. Trusted adults are also important for the positive times. They are someone you can learn from. You can share news of your successes with them and talk about your future plans.

⁸ National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2015). Supportive Relationships and Active Skill-Building Strengthen the Foundations of Resilience: Working Paper No. 13. <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/supportive-relationships-and-active-skill-building-strengthen-the-foundations-of-resilience/>

⁹ Id., at 1.

¹⁰ Whitlock, J. Wyman P.A., Moore S.R. (in press) Connectedness and Suicide Prevention in Adolescents: Pathways and Implications. Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior, The American Association of Suicidology. <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/sltb.12071/abstract>.

It is generally best if you are able to identify a number of trusted adults who you could talk to in different situations. Trusted adults may include your parents or caregivers, grandparents, or other family members. They can also include a teacher, school counselor, coach, organization leader, faith leader, neighbor, and others.

To find trusted adults, it is necessary that you take the steps to reach out. Consider this a form of a quest—a quest to find some adults you can trust to support you. Some helpful standards are:

- A trusted adult is someone who you can talk to about anything and who you feel happy to be around
- A trusted adult is someone you feel comfortable talking with about something that makes you feel uncomfortable or confused—or a problem you might be having.
- A trusted adult should be a good listener—someone who will listen to your opinions and ideas, seek to understand your perspective by asking questions. They will honor your feelings, rather than tell you to stop feeling the way you do.
- A trusted adult should help you think things through and not immediately tell you their conclusion and directions about what they think you should do.

Before you decide to share information that is more sensitive with an adult you are not yet sure you can trust, try having a conversation with them about something that is not really important or personal, but about which they may have a difference of opinion. After this conversation, ask yourself: Did this adult truly listen to me? Did this adult accept my opinions?

Then, imagine yourself revealing something difficult or embarrassing to this adult. How would you feel sharing this information? Do you think this adult will listen to you? Would this adult support you to think things through—or would this adult try to take over and tell you what to do?

If you start to share more sensitive information with an adult you are not yet sure you can trust, do so slowly. Be very watchful for warning signs. Is this person listening to you with an open mind? Or are there signs that they might be wrongly judging you—a questioning look, a defensive body posture, statements that include "should," or a disapproving tone?

If any of these warning signs appear, stop explaining the situation, wait for this person to make one statement of "what you should do," thank this person for their guidance, change the subject, and find a reason to leave.

Then, find a trusted adult you can trust. When you do find a trusted adult, reach out when things get tough. Also, share your good news. If a trusted adult has been helpful to you, be sure to thank this person. A thank you note would be gratefully received.

Positively Powerful Strategies

- **Envision What You Want in a Trusted Adult.** Think of a conversation you had in the past with an adult where you walked away feeling that you were thoroughly heard and respected and the guidance and support you received made you feel empowered. What were the characteristics and qualities of the adult you spoke with that led you to feel heard and empowered? What did this adult do that made you feel heard and respected? What did this adult do that made you feel empowered?
- **Conduct a Trusted Adult Audit and Create an Action Plan.** Do you have a sufficient number of adults in your life you trust you can talk to about serious concerns? If not, go on a quest to find one or several trusted adults, using the guidance provided above. Create an action plan to make a good connection with several trusted adults.

Positive Connections Activities in Schools

Relationship Mapping

It is essential to ensure that every student has one or more staff members who are committed to maintaining a close connection with them—being the person who really cares about them at school. For students who are identified as being at a higher risk, several staff members should be specifically assigned to be mentors for these students.

The Harvard Graduate School Of Education's Making Caring Common's Relationship Mapping Strategy is an excellent approach.¹¹ This following relationship mapping process is based on their approach:

- Staff should be provided with a list of the names of all students on a chart and sticky dots:
 - **Red Dot.** Students known to be at greater risk either because they have behavior challenges, appear to be experiencing emotional challenges, have frequent absences or missing work, or bring bullied or are both being bullied and being hurtful.
 - **Orange Dot.** Students possibly at risk. This should include all students who are or may be within an identity group that is more likely to be treated badly.
 - **Yellow Dot.** Name of staff member who has some connection with the student.
 - **Green Dot.** Name of staff member who has a good connection with the student.
- All students must have at least one identified Green staff member. For any student who does not have a Green staff member, this student's status should be change to Orange. This is a student who should now be considered possibly at risk. Look to see if there are any staff who have at least a Yellow relationship. Orange students must have two Green staff members. Red students must have three Green staff members. Newly entering students should be added to this relationship map.
- Staff members should be required to check in regularly with their assigned students—taking the time to form a solid relationship.

Community Circle Time

A regular Community Circle time in classrooms, advisories, or homerooms will both increase positive staff-student connections and positive student-student connections. Community Circles are strongly recommended as a Restorative Practice. Community Circles are an important means by which a positive community can be established.

Positive Acknowledgement

The ideal is that students regularly receive 5 positive comments to every 1 negative comment or correction. This is especially important for students who are at higher risk. This requires constant focus on positive acknowledgement.

School staff must know that this formula is “magic.” Focused staff attention on increasing positive acknowledgement and connections, especially of those students with greater challenges, will have magical results in improving emotional well-being and resilience of these students. It is important that positive acknowledgements be phrased in a Social Emotional Growth Mindset manner. Have some poster paper in the teacher's lounge that has suggestions of positive acknowledgements that are set forth in a Social Emotional Growth Mindset manner—not just related to intelligence, also positive attitudes, behaviors, and relationship activities. These are some strategies:

- Be specific. Positively acknowledge using Social Emotional Growth Mindset language. Acknowledge effort, strategy, and persistence even if this did not result in a positive outcome.
- Audio record a class session and then go over the recording to note how many comments are positive, negative or correction, or instruction. Periodically do this to improve on performance.
- Greet students as they enter the room, as this provides one positive connection to each entering student.
- Whenever a student responds to a question, positively acknowledge their response.
- Have in mind the students in each class who have greater challenges and be sure to note when they are engaged in positive behavior. Strive for a 5:1 ratio every class session with these higher risk students. Be sure to note the higher risk students who are more quiet.

¹¹ <https://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/resources-for-educators/relationship-mapping-strategy>.

- If a student is perceived to be getting off task, positively acknowledge the behavior of a student who is close to this student. Then, if this student shifts to on-task behavior, positively acknowledge this.
- Be at the door as students leave and positively acknowledge their accomplishments. Focus specifically on any students with greater challenges. This can be in the form of a question and positive response: “What did you do today you are proud of? Yeah, I noticed this. Nice job.”
- If a redirection is necessary, following this with a positive acknowledgement and appreciation of the student’s compliance.
- If a student starts to get agitated and then is able to self-calm, specifically note this accomplishment. If a student struggled during the day and overcame this, positively acknowledge this both at the time and at the end of the day.

Positively Powerful CI-CO Strategy

At the after school connection, ask the student: What friends did you have a positive connection with today? What trusted adult at school did you have a positive connection with today?

Reach Out to Be Kind

I will daily reach out to be kind to others. I know this makes us both feel happier.

There are many positive benefits to engaging in acts of kindness, including better health, self-esteem, and optimism. Being kind also increases peer acceptance.

Kindness Insight

Research has identified that being kind to others results in a significant increase in feelings of happiness—creating greater feelings of happiness than spending on themselves.¹²

The Random Acts of Kindness Foundation provides great insight on kindness on their website.¹³ The research they follow has documented this insight and these positive benefits of kindness. They have documented these outcomes from engaging in kindness:

- *Kindness is contagious--witnessing kindness leads other people to be kind.*
- *Witnessing acts of kindness increases hormones that lead to better health, self-esteem, and optimism.*
- *Being kind helps people feel stronger, more energetic, calmer, less depressed, and leads to increased feelings of self-worth.*
- *When you are kind to another person, your brain’s pleasure and reward centers light up, as if you were the recipient of the good deed.*
- *Being kind stimulates the production of feel-good and pain killer hormones and lower stress hormones.*
- *Being kind can significant increase positive moods, relationship satisfaction and decrease social avoidance in socially anxious individuals.¹⁴*

It has been found that prosocial behavior is associated with academic achievement and social acceptance in adolescents.¹⁵ One study assessed the impact on peer acceptance when students were encouraged to engage in acts of kindness. This study demonstrated that students who were instructed to perform kind acts for others every day experienced significant increases in peer acceptance.¹⁶ As the researchers explained:

¹² Buchanan, K. E. & Bardi, A. (2010) Acts of Kindness and Acts of Novelty Affect Life Satisfaction. The Journal of Social Psychology Vol. 150, Issue 3 and Aknin, L.B., Dunn, E.W. & Norton, M.I. (2012) Happiness Runs in a Circular Motion: Evidence for a Positive Feedback Loop between P, Issue 2rosocial Spending and Happiness. Journal of Happiness Studies. Vol 13, Issue 2, pp. 347-355.

¹³ <https://www.randomactsofkindness.org/>.

¹⁴ Random Acts of Kindness, Kindness Health Facts http://downloads.randomactsofkindness.org/RAK_kindness_health_facts.pdf

¹⁵ Caprara CV, Barabaranelli C, Pastorelli C, Bandura A, Zimbardo PG (2000) Prosocial foundations of children’s academic achievement. Psychol Sci 11: 302–306.

¹⁶ Layous K, Nelson SK, Oberle E, Schonert-Reichl KA, Lyubomirsky S (2012) Kindness Counts: Prompting Prosocial Behavior in Preadolescents Boosts Peer Acceptance and Well-Being. PLoS ONE 7(12).

Research suggests that goals for happiness, prosociality, and popularity may not only be compatible but also reciprocal. Happy people are more likely to engage in prosocial behavior and have satisfying friendships. Similarly, students who are well-liked by peers (i.e., sociometrically popular) are also helpful, cooperative, and emotionally well-adjusted. Past studies indicate that the link between happiness and prosociality is bidirectional—not only do happy people have the personal resources to do good for others, but prompting people to engage in prosocial behavior also increases well-being

The hypothesis of the researchers was that because prosocial behavior has a strong positive association with peer acceptance, and this relationship is likely bidirectional. Children who feel accepted are more likely to do kind things for others, and, in turn, children who do kind things for others might gain increased acceptance by their peers. So they assessed this.

The study focused on 9 to 11 year old students. They measured students' life satisfaction and peer acceptance. Then they instructed one group of students to perform acts of kindness to others, whereas the other group kept track of the places they visited. Students in both groups showed increases in life satisfaction. Of greatest importance, the level of peer acceptance of the students who engaged in acts of kindness increased significantly. As the researchers noted:

Our study demonstrates that doing good for others benefits the givers, earning them not only improved well-being but also popularity. Considering the importance of happiness and peer acceptance in youth, it is noteworthy that we succeeded in increasing both among preadolescents through a simple prosocial activity. Similar to being happy, being well-liked by classmates has ramifications not only for the individual, but also for the community at large. For example, well-liked preadolescents exhibit more inclusive behaviors and less externalizing behaviors (i.e., less bullying) as teens. Thus, encouraging prosocial activities may have ripple effects beyond increasing the happiness and popularity of the doers. Furthermore, classrooms with an even distribution of popularity (i.e., no favorite children and no marginalized children) show better average mental health than stratified classrooms, suggesting that entire classrooms practicing prosocial behavior may reap benefits, as the liking of all classmates soars. Teachers and interventionists can build on our work by introducing intentional prosocial activities into classrooms and recommending that such activities be performed regularly and purposefully.¹⁷

Clearly, encouraging all students to increase engaging in kind act can significantly improve school climate. However, increasing the acts of kindness those students who have greater challenges in how they are treated by others appears to be a positive path to increase their level of peer acceptance.

Insight on Kindness to Impart to Students

The following is language that can be used to discuss kindness with students.

One of the best ways you can improve your relationships with other students, reduce the potential of being treated badly, and improve your own happiness is to intentionally reach out to be kind to other students frequently during the day.

Research has documented many positive benefits of being kind to others. Being kind to others:

- Can significant increase your happiness.
- Can help you feel stronger and less depressed.
- Can increase your feelings of self-worth.
- Makes you feel as good the person you were kind to.
- Encourages other people to be kind and, in this way, contributes to establishing a community based on kindness.

You can use this insight to improve your relationships in school—simply by consistently making a practice of being kind to others.

A really helpful thing that researchers have found about kindness is that the more you reach out to be kind to others, the more others will like and accept you. If you occasionally experience other students being hurtful to you or you are sometimes excluded by others, one of the best things you can do is to make a commitment to consistently being kind to others.

¹⁷ Id.

Of course it is important you are kind to your friends and those within your social group. What about other students? You can reach out to be kind to someone you would like to become friends with, students in other social groups, and students who are more often excluded or treated badly.

If a student who sometimes treats you badly is not being hurtful right now, being kind to this person can reduce the potential that they will be hurtful in the future. Being kind to the friends of a student who has been hurtful, at a time that hurtful student is not present, can increase the potential this student's friends will tell them to stop being hurtful.

Positively Powerful Strategies

- **Think About Kindness.** Think of a recent time when you reached out to be kind. How did the person you were kind to respond? How did this make you feel?
- **Use the Copper Penny Strategy.** Get five bright copper pennies and begin the day with those pennies in your left pocket. When you intentionally reach out to be kind to someone, transfer one of those pennies over to your right pocket. This will help you keep track.
- **Reach Out to be Kind Using Social Media.** Every day, make an intentional point of posting a positive or supportive comment on the social media posts of others— especially if any person posts about some challenge they are having. Don't just "like" the post. Take the time to write something warm and supportive. Make this a daily practice.
- **Reach Out to be Kind During Transitions.** As you walk to a new class, reach out to be kind to a number of people. When you sit down in your new class, reflect on how you feel.
- **Try This Experiment.** On a scale of 1 to 5, rate the current quality of your relationships with other students: 1. Not at all good. 2. Not that good. 3. Middling. 4. Sort of good. 5. Really good. Implement the reach out to be kind strategy at least five or more times a day both in person and using social media. Do this for 30 days. Now rate the quality of your relationships with other students.
- **Write in Your Journal.** At the end of the day write in your Journal. What did you do to be kind? How did this person respond? How did this make you feel?

Kindness Activities in Schools

The Random Acts of Kindness Foundation has kindness lesson plans for K-12 educators.¹⁸ They also have recommendations for school kindness activities that a Student Leadership Team could implement. Chapter 10 discusses the establishment of a Student Leadership Team. The principle activities of this Team should be on implementing school-wide kindness campaigns. There are plenty of ideas online. Search "kindness, schools."

For every student who is having challenges with being treated badly—both being treated badly and being hurtful, or is having other challenges with disruptive behavior—strongly encourage them to reach out to be kind to others at least 3 to 5 times a day. If they are secondary students and use social media, encourage them to intentionally post a kind comment on 3 to 5 other students' profile every day.

The Accountability Process described in Chapter 11 is for both Hurtful Students and Supporters. In addition to developing a remedy of harm for the student who they were hurtful to, they should be required to remedy the harm to the school community. A recommended strategy to do this is to require that for a period of time that they must reach out to be kind to others 3 to 5 times a day. They should be required to keep a log of these kindness acts and report on a daily or weekly basis—for how long the school leader deems might be necessary to influence them to change their hurtful behavior.

¹⁸ http://rak-materials.s3.amazonaws.com/cde/en/RAK_educator_guide.pdf

Positively Powerful CI-CO Strategy

In the morning, remind the student to reach out to be kind at least 3 to 5 times that day. At the end of the day, ask the student to describe the times they were kind: Who they were kind to? What they did to be kind? How this made them feel?

Build and Use My Strengths

I have many positive strengths. I use my strengths every day and when things get tough. I build new strengths and a positive future for myself.

Students who focus on their strengths and future directions are more resilient in response to challenges. The Build and Use My Strengths strategy draws on the research insight into Character Strengths and Social Emotional Growth Mindset, set forth in Chapter 4. In addition, students who focus on their future possibilities are more resilient in the face of experiencing being treated badly.

Additional Focus on the Future Insight

One additional research-based approach is also relevant. As noted earlier, in a research study, those students who were bullied, but who had positive outcomes, were found to have maintained a sense of future possibility that supported them in staying in school, despite the bullying. They maintained a focus on the promise of better things to come.¹⁹

A new effective, intervention approach has been developed for adults suffering from depression that does incorporate this future thinking approach, Future Directed Therapy (FDT).²⁰ As explained by the researcher who developed this approach.

The theoretical model of human behavior behind FDT is based on three primary concepts: (1) The desire to thrive is the primary drive of all human beings because it promotes the evolutionary process. (2) Thought and behavior are limited resources that humans utilize to promote their thriving. (3) Preparing for the future is essential to thriving and much of human functioning has evolved for the purpose of creating the future.²¹

Essentially, the FDT process involves helping people understand how their thinking actually produces the future and how they can develop more positive thinking patterns. Additionally, participants are guided in developing practical skills for creating and achieving goals, planning, problem solving, learning to take action, and effectively dealing with obstacles or disappointments.

The Build My Strengths strategy should be implemented with the think things through strategy, discussed below. Students should be guided to think things through to develop goals and strategies to build their strengths with a focus on their positive future.

Insight on Character Strengths to Impart to Students

The following is language to discuss character strengths with students.

A team of social scientists from around the world engaged in a collaborative project to identify and classify the important human strengths they thought led to goodness in human beings—across cultures, nations, and beliefs. The strengths they identified are called Character Strengths.

The VIA Institute on Character has a free Character Strengths Inventory for teens on its website that you can complete (Search: VIA Character.) This survey will help you to identify your top Character Strengths. (Provide a list of the strengths to the students, or the more brief survey that is included as an Appendix on the Embrace Civility website.

¹⁹ Seeley, et. al., supra.

²⁰ <http://futuredirectedtherapy.com/>.

²¹ Vilhauer J, Young S, Kealoha C, et al. Treating major depression by creating positive expectations for the future: a pilot study for the effectiveness of future directed therapy (FDT) on symptom severity and quality of life. CNS Neurosci Therapeut. 2011:1–8. <http://futuredirectedtherapy.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/FDT-and-MDD-CNS-published-version.pdf>.

Everyone has different strengths. You can also develop new strengths. Whenever you intentionally use one of your strengths this will most likely increase your happiness.

Positively Powerful Strategies

- **Each Day Use One of Your Strengths.** Every day, pick a one of your Character Strengths to use in a new way.
- **Build a New Strength.** Look over the list of strengths and those you already have. Pick a new strength do you want to build. Create an action plan to build this strength.
- **Use Your Strengths When Things Get Tough.** Think of the ways that you could respond in situations where things have gotten tough or you are becoming distressed. If you use one of your strengths at this time, this will help you be more effective in responding. Think about and practice ways you can use each of your top strengths in situations where you are facing a challenge or are about to get upset.
- **Write in Your Journal.** At the end of the day, write in your Journal about the Character Strengths you used and what you did. Also note how this makes you feel.

Insight on Social Emotional Growth Mindset to Impart to Students

The following is language to discuss Social Emotional Growth Mindset with students.

Our “mindset” is our way of perceiving things. Everyone has a mindset that shapes how they perceive the world and others around them. We may look at the world in a way that makes us feel strong and happy or in a way that makes us feel frustrated and weak.

People with what is called a Growth Mindset know the things that are happening to them can get better. They also know that they can change and get better. They keep trying, even when things are tough. People with a Fixed Mindset feel as if they are stuck with the way things or they are. So if things are not working the way they want, they are more likely to give up.

The kind of mindset you may have is not always the same. You could have a Growth Mindset in one area of your life and then more of a Fixed Mindset in another area. There may also be times in your life when things are going really well and you more consistently have a Growth Mindset. It is harder to keep a Growth Mindset when things are not working well.

When you try to do something that is new, this is when your brain has the opportunity to grow. Learning something new is hardest the first time you try something. Your brain is like a muscle that gets stronger every time things you repeat a new skill.

When something is difficult, you may get into Fixed Mindset thinking. You may feel frustrated and think about quitting. This is when you can change your thinking to a Growth Mindset.

There is a magical word that you can use to help maintain a Growth Mindset. That word is “yet.” You can add the word “yet” onto the end of almost any sentence when feel like you are failing. If you think “I can’t do this,” change your statement to, “I haven’t be able to do this yet.”

Having either a Growth or Fixed Mindset profoundly affects the way that people respond to failure. People with a Fixed Mindset view failure as a result of their lack of ability. They feel like giving up. People with a Growth Mindset see failure as the opportunity to have figured out what was not going to work. People with a Growth Mindset use failure to expand their abilities. “Well, that clearly did not work. What else could I try?”

Positively Powerful Strategies

- **Pay Attention to Your Thinking.** Does your thinking focus on growing into the future or are you more focused on your what is now?
- **Have Fun with Challenges.** Challenges are fun and exciting. Easy tasks are boring. When you struggle to learn or do something, this is when you can have great accomplishments.

- **Use the Word “Yet” When You Have Not Yet Succeeded.** Shift from, “I can’t do this,” to, “I can’t do this yet.”
- **Embrace Your Mistakes and Failure.** Making mistakes and failing is part of learning. This is how you can learn and grow.

Strengths and Growth Mindset Activities in Schools

Character Strengths

Have secondary students complete either the VIA Institute on Character Character Strengths survey or the shorter survey provided in an Appendix that is on the Embrace Civility website. This provides an indication of what each student’s strengths are. There are no “right answers” on this survey. Everyone has different strengths. Even the brief survey may be too complex for elementary students.

Teachers can use Community Circles in classrooms, homerooms, or advisories to discuss each these strengths. Students can do a collage art project that illustrates their personal strengths. They can go on a scavenger hunt to find the names of students who they share personal strengths with.

Whenever there is a class discussion on challenges or to address a general concern, students could be asked how they could use different strengths in this situation. For example, “If one of your strengths was humor, how could you use this strength in a hurtful situation?” Alternatively, in a discussion about challenges, the teacher could have a set of cards with each strength. In discussing a common concern in circle, the teacher could ask students to pull out 4 or so cards. Then the entire class could think things through to identify how that strength could be used to resolve the specific situation.

A class or the entire school could focus on one character strength a week. The Student Leadership Team could read a quotation each morning in morning announcements that relates to the Strength of the Week. Every student could be encouraged to find a way to use this strength. This can be discussed in circle. Younger students could do an art project illustrating this strength. Students could be encouraged to find examples of someone using this strength in their studies, especially in humanities classes.

In any intervention with a student who has an issue of concern, the teacher or school leader can ask that student what their strengths are and how they might use a personal strength to find a resolution for this problem situation.

Social Emotional Growth Mindset

There are a significant number of resources for schools and teachers on fostering a Growth Mindset.²² However, many of these resources focus solely on academic performance or intelligence. It is exceptionally important to expand this concept to clearly incorporate social emotional growth. Strategies for school staff include:

- **Have a Social Emotional Growth Mindset Yourself.** To encourage a Social Emotional Growth Mindset in students, it is important for educators to have a Social Emotional Growth Mindset themselves. To have a Social Emotional Growth Mindset means having a strong conviction that all students can improve in their abilities to maintain positive relationships.
- **Focus on Effort, not Success in Relationships.** Positively acknowledge students for their effort in seeking to maintain positive relationships, as well as their effort in seeking to self-regulate, rather than their success. Focus on the process they take and the effort they make, not the end result.
- **Pay Attention to Words.** Frame language for students that fosters a Social Emotional Growth Mindset. There are many posters and worksheets that focuses on encouraging Growth Mindset language—unfortunately, the vast amount of this is focused on academic performance, not relationships.

²² Hildrew, C. (2018). *Becoming a growth mindset school: The power of mindset to transform teaching, leadership and learning*. Routledge; Gerstein, J. (2014). *The educator with a growth mindset: A staff workshop*. User Generated Education. Retrieved October 25, 2021, from <https://usergeneratededucation.wordpress.com/2014/08/29/the-educator-with-a-growth-mindset-a-staff-workshop/>; Brock, A., & Hundley, H. (2017). *The growth mindset playbook: A teacher’s guide to promoting student success*. Ulysses Press.

- **Focus on “Teachable Moments.”** Struggles and failure in maintaining personal relationships and self-regulation provide the best opportunity to foster a Social Emotional Growth Mindset. Use these as “teachable moments” to reflect and encourage different or expanded skills.

Positively Powerful CI-CO

In the morning, remind the student to use one of their strengths that day. Perhaps discuss which strength they will try to use. At the end of the day, ask the student to how they used one of their strengths and how this made them feel. Alternatively, ask them what they did that they were proud of.

In all conversations with students focus on their language. Identify when they are using Fixed Mindset language in relation to relationship activities. Encourage a change in their language to reflect an opportunity for growth on both their ability to maintain positive relationships, become happier, and self-regulate when things get tough.

Be Thankful

I focus on the good things happening in my life. I am thankful and express my gratitude.

Students who have positive feelings about themselves are less likely to demonstrate perceived weakness that could lead to their being targeted and better situated to avoid thinking badly of themselves if this occurs. A consistent focus on the good things happening in their lives can help to support these positive feelings.

Gratitude Insight

The Greater Good Science Center, that was introduced in Chapter 4, provides an excellent white paper on gratitude. This white paper noted the benefits:

Research suggests that gratitude may be associated with many benefits for individuals, including better physical and psychological health, increased happiness and life satisfaction, decreased materialism, and more.

A handful of studies suggest that more grateful people may be healthier, and others suggest that scientifically designed practices to increase gratitude can also improve people’s health and encourage them to adopt healthier habits.

Many more studies have examined possible connections between gratitude and various elements of psychological well-being. In general, more grateful people are happier, more satisfied with their lives, less materialistic, and less likely to suffer from burnout. Additionally, some studies have found that gratitude practices, like keeping a “gratitude journal” or writing a letter of gratitude, can increase people’s happiness and overall positive mood.

In recent years, studies have examined gratitude’s potential benefits for children and adolescents. For example, studies have found that more grateful adolescents are more interested and satisfied with their school lives, are more kind and helpful, and are more socially integrated. A few studies have found that gratitude journaling in the classroom can improve students’ mood and that a curriculum designed to help students appreciate the benefits they have gained from others can successfully teach children to think more gratefully and to exhibit more grateful behavior (such as writing more thank you notes to their school’s PTA).²³

Hanson, author of *Hardwiring Happiness*, has outlined the research that demonstrates that it is possible for people to rewire their brain to be more happy.²⁴ The approach Hanson recommends involves an intentional focus on positive experiences to change our brain. Hanson calls this approach the HEAL method—Have, Enrich, Absorb, Link. A version of this approach is included in the guidance for students below. However, I have omitted the Link portion of the strategy because this requires mental gymnastics of linking positive feelings to past sadness.

In pre-post intervention study that involved adult participants who took an online class to learn the HEAL method, the participants reported significant increases in composite measures of cognitive resources, positive emotions, and total

²³ Summer Allen, Ph.D. (2019) The Science of Gratitude. A white paper prepared for the John Templeton Foundation by the Greater Good Science Center at UC Berkeley. https://ggsc.berkeley.edu/images/uploads/GGSC-JTF_White_Paper-Gratitude-FINAL.pdf _ga=2.132158348.385669189.1654547242-1849723812.1654547242

²⁴ Hanson, R. (2013). *Hardwiring happiness: The new brain science of contentment, calm, and confidence*. Harmony. Please also watch the TedTalk by Dr. Hanson: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jpuDyGgIeh0>

happiness, and decreases in a composite measure of negative emotions. These results persisted two months after the course ended.²⁵

Insight on Gratitude to Impart to Students

The following is language to discuss gratitude with students.

Our brain naturally wires itself to focus more on negative experiences than positive ones. If you have faced a lot of challenges, you may have created many negative neural pathways. These negative neural pathways will cause you to more frequently focus on negative things. A problem is that when people often focus on the negative, more negative things are more likely to happen to them.

Even if you have not experienced a lot of challenges, you can become happier when you focus on the good. The best way to maintain positive feelings is to focus on positive experiences and be grateful for those experiences.

You can rewire your brain to be more happy. When you intentionally focus on the good, this will help your brain build neural pathways to support greater happiness. As a result, more positive things are more likely to happen.

This is a strategy you can use to focus on the good.

- **Step 1. Have a Good Experience.** Either notice that something good has happened or create a positive experience for yourself.
- **Step 2. Enrich It.** Keep thinking about this experience for at least 10 seconds or longer. Feel the positive experience in your body. Enjoy it. Think about how wonderful this is. Really take the time to feel good.
- **Step 3. Absorb It.** Think about this positive experience as being absorbed by you—traveling deep into your mind and warming your heart. Bring the experience deeply into your being.²⁶

Strive to focus on five positive experiences for every negative experience or negative thought. This means that every time you experience a negative incident or think a negative thought, strive to shift your focus to five positive things. This can help to prevent the negative experience from becoming wired as a negative neural pathway.

The more you can maintain positive feelings about yourself, the less likely you will act in ways that demonstrate a perceived weakness that could lead to your being treated badly. Also, the less likely you will be to think badly about yourself if you experience a distressing situation or someone is hurtful. -

Positively Powerful Strategies

- **Send a Note of Gratitude.** Send a private message or write a thank you note and send this to a person who did something for you.
- **Focus on the Good as You are Transitioning.** As you are getting ready to leave one class for another, stop and think about one thing that happened in this class that made you feel good. Enrich this feeling and absorb it.
- **Focus on the Good in Response to a Distressing Experience.** If you experience something distressing, pull out a notebook and a pen and write down five recent positive experiences or things for which you are grateful. For each of these positive experiences, take a brief moment to enrich your positive feelings and absorb them. Then, if you find yourself thinking about the negative incident again, look at what you wrote and intentionally shift back to positive thinking.
- **Write in Your Journal.** In the evening, when you are writing in your Journal, be sure to write down five positive things that happened to you during the day. The act of writing itself provides another way to enrich and absorb the positive experiences.

²⁵ Hanson, R., Shapiro, S., Hutton-Thamm, E., Hagerty, M.R. & Sullivan, K.P. (2021) Learning to learn from positive experiences. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17439760.2021.2006759>

²⁶ The “L” in Hanson’s HEAL approach is this: **Step 4. Link Positive and Negative Material Together.** This step is considered optional by Hanson. The idea is to strongly feel this positive experience, briefly bring to mind a negative thought, and then let go of the negative thought and just focus on the positive experience. It is my perception that this approach would be challenging to convey to students.

- **Try This Experiment.** Rate how happy you are feeling on a scale from 1 to 5. 1: Not at all happy. 2. Not that happy. 3. Middling. 4. Sort of happy. 5. Really happy. Take the time to write in your Journal five thoughts that focus on the good. For each of these thoughts go through the two steps of enriching and absorbing. Now, rate how happy you feel.

Gratitude Activities in Schools

A search on the terms “gratitude, schools” will yield many sites with creative suggestions. A concern is that a primary focus of many sites relates to the Thanksgiving holiday in the US, a time for which the indigenous students are likely not feeling grateful. The Greater Good Science Center is an excellent source of insight into gratitude and gratitude activities in schools.²⁷

The Greater Good Science Center recently collaborated with Emmons, a highly regarded researcher in gratitude in the creation of a new book, *The Gratitude Project: How the Science of Thankfulness Can Rewire Our Brains for Resilience, Optimism, and the Greater Good*.²⁸ This book is a collection of essays written by positive psychologists and public figures. It delves deeply into the neuroscience and psychology of gratitude, and explores how gratitude can be developed and applied for the positive benefit of all.

Positively Powerful CI-CO

In the morning, remind the student to pay attention to the things that happen that make them feel good. At the end of the day, ask the student to describe a positive thing that happened and to take a moment to feel the positive feelings again. If someone has done something that made this student feel good, encourage the student to write a note of thanks to provide to the person the following day.

Be Mindful and Remain Calm

I take time each day to achieve calmness and focus. If things get tough, I remain calm.

The ability to self-regulate is an essential skills when one is treated badly. This can help the Targeted Student remain calm so as not to reward the student being hurtful. Self-regulation is also important to reduce the potential for impulsive retaliation. The practice of mindfulness creates the neural pathways to improve students’ ability to self-regulate when things get tough.

Mindfulness Insight

Often students who are treated badly overreact in response, which appears to lead to additional experiencing of hurtful behavior. Sometimes, they retaliate. Self-regulation is an important component of resilience. The practice of mindfulness helps people achieve calmness and focus—which builds the capacity of their brain to better self-regulate.²⁹

The University of California—Los Angeles Mindful Awareness Research center is conducting a wide range of research studies on the benefits of mindfulness practice, including with young people. As stated on the page that has links to numerous published studies:

Research in mindfulness has identified a wide range of benefits in different areas of psychological health, such as helping to decrease anxiety, depression, rumination, and emotional reactivity. Research has also shown mindfulness helps to increase well-being, positive affect, and concentration.

Practicing mindfulness can also be helpful to foster physical health by improving immune system function, quality of sleep, as well as decreasing blood pressure. Structural and functional brain changes have also been documented in areas associated with attention, emotional regulation, empathy, and bodily awareness.

²⁷ <https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/topic/gratitude/definition>.

²⁸ Smith, J.A., Newman, K.M., Marsh, J. & Keltner, D (editors) (2020) *The Gratitude Project: How the Science of Thankfulness Can Rewire Our Brains for Resilience, Optimism, and the Greater Good*. New Harbinger Publications: New Harbinger Publications.

²⁹ <http://www.umassmed.edu/cfm/>.

In addition to health, research has been made on the benefits of mindfulness in business and educational settings. In companies, results showed improved communication and work performance. In educational settings, mindfulness practices improved social-emotional skills, executive functions, and decreased test stress in students, as well as reduced stress and burnout in teachers.³⁰

Research has documented effectiveness of mindfulness training and practice in addressing stress-related concerns of children and adolescents, with documented positive results in their physical health, psychological well-being, social skills including emotional regulation, and academic performance.³¹

Insight on Mindfulness to Impart to Students

The following language can be used to discuss the importance of mindfulness.

The practice of mindfulness helps people achieve calmness and focus—to self-regulate. Being mindful is the basic human ability to be fully present, aware of where we are and what we’re doing, and not overly reactive or overwhelmed by what’s going on around us.

You can achieve greater mindfulness by routinely engaging in the practice of meditation. The following are the simple steps to meditate:

- **Be in a Safe Place.** Sit or lie in a safe place.
- **Ground Yourself.** If you are sitting, make sure your feet are on the floor. Whether sitting or lying, feel your energy go deep into the earth—grounding you there.
- **Reduce Input from Anything Outside of You.** Close your eyes or gaze downward. This will help you focus on you—and not what is going on around you.
- **Breathe.** Pay attention to your breathing. Take a slow breath in. Hold your breath for a short time. Release your breath out slowly. Keep repeating this.
- **Be There.** If your attention begins to wander, which it often will, gently return your thoughts to a focus on your breathing.

That’s it. Consider how long this activity might take—not long at all. In fact, you can achieve a mindfulness state in a very short period of time—less than a minute.

The more you intentionally practice being mindful, the more effectively you will prepare your brain so that it does not trigger when someone is hurtful or a challenging situation emerges. Practicing mindfulness helps to build neural pathways so that you can remain calm even when challenging things happen.

You will also find that if you routinely practice meditation, you will increase your success in your learning. When you achieve mindfulness, this shifts your focus to your Prefrontal Cortex which is the thinking part of your brain. This allows you to think more clearly and concentrate.

Now, let’s try something even more fun. When you feel calm while practicing mindfulness and your attention starts to wander, there is something else you can do. This is a guided mindfulness practice that uses the Positively Powerful Thinking Questions.

- **Positive Connections.** Take a breath and as you breath out think, “Who did I have a positive connection with?” Now, in the next several breaths think about several recent positive connections you had. Smile as you remember how happy you felt.
- **Kindness.** Take a breath and as you breath out think, “Who was I kind to?” Now, in the next several breaths think about several recent times you were kind to someone. Remember the smile on their face and how this made you feel.

³⁰ <https://www.uclahealth.org/marc/research>

³¹ Zenner, C., Herrnleben-Kurz, S., and Walach, H. (2014). Mindfulness-based interventions in youth organizations – A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 5, 603. See also research noted at: <http://www.mindful.org/the-mindful-society/mindfulness-in-education-research-highlights>.

- **Strengths.** Take a breath and as you breath out think, “What did I do today that used one of my strengths?” Or “What did I do today that I am proud of?” Now, in the next several breaths think about what you did that used a strength or did something that you are proud of. Smile as you remember how proud you are.
- **Thankfulness.** Take a breath and as you breath out think, “What happened today that made me feel really happy?” Now, in the next several breaths think about what happened that made you happy. Take the time to really feel happy and to bring that feeling of happiness into your whole body.

There are some other ways that you can achieve mindfulness. This includes:

- Take a walk in nature and pay attention to the beauty around you.
- Listen to some calm music or watch a calm video.
- Play with a fidget toy.
- Read a book that makes you feel really happy.

Positively Powerful Strategies

- **Practice Mindfulness Every Day.** Take just a bit of time to practice mindfulness every day. You could do this both in the morning and at night before you go to sleep. Try to extend the time you can stay mindful.
- **Use the Positively Powerful Thinking Questions When You Meditate.** This will both help to build the neural pathways for you to be calmer and increase your happiness.
- **Engage in Movement Mindfulness.** You may take a yoga or a tai chi class, which is considered “movement mindfulness.” There are also yoga and tai chi videos online.
- **Try Other Ways to Become Mindful.** This includes walking in nature, listening to music, watching a video, playing with a fidget tool, or reading a book.
- **Use a Transitions Strategy.** Every time you enter a classroom and take your seat, spend the next minute in a brief meditation to become mindful. Lower your eyes. Breathe slowly in and then release. Just a minute. Do this for a while and you will see that you are much better able to focus in class.

Self-Regulation Insight

Concerns of students who are not able to self-regulate and become disruptive are frequent in schools, especially as students have come back to the school environment after the pandemic.³²

Schools across the country say they’re seeing an uptick in disruptive behaviors. Some are obvious and visible, like students trashing bathrooms, fighting over social media posts, or running out of classrooms. Others are quieter calls for help, like students putting their head down and refusing to talk.

“This is a prolonged adjustment period,” said Dr. Tali Ravin, the associate director of the Center for Childhood Resilience at Lurie Children’s Hospital in Chicago. As children return to school, “There’s much more interaction, there’s much less downtime to recharge, there’s much less flexibility.”

The behavior issues are a reflection of the stress the pandemic placed on children, experts say, upending their education, schedules, and social lives. For students dealing with grief, mental health issues, or the layered effects of poverty and racism, big transitions can be even more challenging.

Anxiety and chronic stress also trigger a child’s “survival brain,” as Ravin put it. While some students retreat, others feel like they’re on high alert — turning a nudge in the hallway into cause for an outburst, for example. “You can get these really big reactions over really small things,” she said.

³² Belsha, K. (Sept 27, 2021) Stress and short tempers: Schools struggle with behavior as students return. Chalkbeat. <https://www.chalkbeat.org/2021/9/27/22691601/student-behavior-stress-trauma-return>.

Coupled with staff exhaustion, the behavior challenges are making school environments more tense than educators and students had anticipated — and underscoring how much support students need right now.

In 2004, Colvin enunciated a framework called the *Stages of Behavior Escalation*.³³ This thinking and approach is connected with PBIS, thus is an approach that is grounded in behaviorism. This guidance has been presented to support the presentation of a framework that is informed by an understanding of trauma and a desire for student empowerment. Insight into trauma and the impact on dysregulated behavior has significantly increased since the time of the creation of this guidance. More insight into the process by which students become dysregulated is included in Chapter 5. According to Colvin, there are seven stages of behavioral escalation.

- *Phase 1: Calm. Supervise, reduce distractions, and provide quiet space. Establish and teach CLEAR expectations and acknowledge and praise compliance. Establish routines to decrease downtime and disruptions. Plan ahead for starter activities, transitions, and entry and exit routines.*
- *Phase 2: Triggers. Identify the situation where the behavior is likely to occur. Use pre-correction to teach appropriate response. Rehearse the expectations, prompt or remind students as needed, provide specific praise and reinforcement. Work with all staff and faculty to teach and reinforce social skills. School and non-school triggers. Group social skills, anger management, community services.*
- *Phase 3: Agitation. Show empathy: recognize the student's problem and communicate concern. Redirect and help the student become engaged in activity, lesson or task (passive or movement). Provide choices. Provide space in a quiet area or allow students to disengage briefly or put their heads down. Use proximity or brief interactions; show acceptance.*
- *Phase 4: Acceleration. Pause and Assess- "Is this an emergency situation?" Avoid escalating the student's behavior. Pausing rather than responding immediately shows students that while they may be out of control, staff are calm and controlled. Use a calm but serious tone. If the situation escalates, withdraw and follow school procedures for emergency situations.*
- *Phase 5: Peak. Focus on student and staff safety. Notify necessary staff of situations and provide directions for response. If needed, evacuate others. Contact appropriate assistance. If an Emergency Safety Intervention was used—Notify parents, document, debrief and learn from it.*
- *Phase 6: De-escalation. Monitor for health and safety. Once escalation is over, allow student space to calm down, under supervision. Avoid blaming—provide opportunity for non-judgmental discussion. Provide independent work that is fairly easy to complete to help regain focus. Debrief and document the incident to provide data for ongoing planning for safety.*
- *Phase 7: Recovery. Help student return to normal activities and engage in learning. Continue with planned consequence and do not discuss or negotiate. Acknowledge cooperative and appropriate behavior. Encourage and support student in changing problem behavior. Help student return to normal activities and engage in learning.*

This insight must be updated to allow for a better understanding of what is happening within the brains of students when they are becoming dysregulated. Most importantly, the response approach must incorporate Social Emotional Growth Mindset strategies to empower students to be able to independently self-regulate.

When a student triggers and starts to become dysregulated, their Anterior Cingulate Cortex and Prefrontal Cortex is in the process of, or has become, disconnected. They are functioning in “fight, flight, or flee” mode. When students are in this state, the message their brain is telling them is, “You are not safe.” When they reach this state, their ability to regulate their emotions and problem solve has been undermined. This interferes with their ability to process what a staff member is trying to tell them. There is one thing—and only one thing—that can help them at this point. That is to regain the feeling of being safe.

The other understanding that needs to be incorporated is an understanding of Social Emotional Growth Mindset. Students must be assured that they can change how they react when something has triggered them. The goal is to “flatten the curve”—to go from trigger, to slight escalation, back to calm—without ever climbing up to the peak. Students absolutely require the assurance that they can do this. The key to to assist students to gain more effective self-regulation is to help them to understand triggers them. Then, when something they know is likely to trigger them starts to happen, they can take steps to avoid going from a trigger to an outburst—to flatten the curve.

³³ Colvin, G. (2004). *Managing the cycle of acting-out behavior in the classroom*. Eugene, OR: Behavior Associates; Document noted from: <https://k12engagement.unl.edu/AppropriateResponsestoEscalation.pdf> Colvin, G. & Scott, T.M. (2004) *Managing the Cycle of Acting-Out Behavior In the Classroom*. Corwin. <https://us.corwin.com/en-us/nam/managing-the-cycle-of-acting-out-behavior-in-the-classroom/book243522>.

- **Phase 1. Calm.** All of the outlined tasks are necessary. Some additions are helpful. Implement a mindfulness program with mindfulness practice and mindful breaks after every transition. This can help students build the neural pathways that will better allow them to self-regulate. Teach all students how their brain functions, so that they understand how they or other classmates might become dysregulated. Also discuss with them the actions they can take if they start to feel triggered. For students known to have challenges in self-regulation, when they are calm is the time to engage in participatory problem solving to identify several self-regulation strategies they can use. These should be for any location in the school where they may be. If they can walk away from the situation to get to a place where they can better self-regulate, this is best. They may choose to walk to a calm place in the classroom or they may need permission to leave wherever they are in the school and go to a calming room. Some manner of “code” to communicate to the teacher or an aide that they feel they are about to trigger will be helpful. For younger students, a laminated card of “My Calming Strategies” could be placed on their desk.
- **Phase 2. Triggers.** Notice how in this Colvin framework, insight into trauma was not integrated. Most of this research was not readily available. A key word to notice is the term “expectations.” What this communicates is that the student is choosing to behave in a manner that is out of accord with “expectations” and that providing praise or reinforcement will help to control their choices. When a student is triggering, that student is in the process of flipping their lid. Something has happened that has caused them to not feel safe. They are losing the connection with their Prefrontal Cortex, which is reducing their ability to problem solve. They are not intentionally choosing to be noncompliant with “expectations.” Note also that in some situations, the staff member may not yet be aware that the student has triggered.
- **Phases 3 and 4. Agitation and Acceleration.** It is unclear why these are two stages in the Colvin format. Every teacher has likely experienced a student who has gone to a hidden or not noticed trigger to a dysregulated peak in less than a minute. Many of these suggestions are helpful to assist a student become regulated. However, the most important issue of which to be cognizant is that the primary need of the student at this time is to feel safe. Students have not yet lost full capacity to problem solve. This is the stage that needs to be prepared for in advance, when the student is calm. Prepare for this stage helping the student identify strategies that are helpful for them to regain calm—to flatten the curve. Staff should use Reflective Listening at this stage. “It appears that you are becoming upset because _____. You have strategies you can use to regain calm. How can I help?” Note that this approach is student empowering, not focused on compliance with staff expectations.
- **Phase 5. Peak.** Obviously, this is the stage to avoid. If a student has become totally dysregulated, both their safety as well as that of the other students and staff are of concern. At this point, the student’s Anterior Cingulate Cortex and Prefrontal Cortex are primarily off-line. All staff must be trained in effective de-escalation strategies. The key to effective deescalation is to recognize that what the student requires most of all is to regain the feeling that they are safe. Any reaction to them that continues their feelings of not being safe will not be effective in deescalation. The strategies that absolutely must be avoided can be remembered by this term: TACOS: Threats. Arguments. Commands or criticism. Orders. Shaming. An Emergency Safe Intervention may be necessary.
- **Phase 6. De-escalation.** This is also a stage to support student empowerment. Ask the student what they think they need to do to recover from the situation. After they have gotten themselves out of the immediate situation, they may also need to engage in some physical activity. When they trigger and start to get agitated, their Amygdala caused their body to release stress hormones of cortisol and adrenalin. It is important to get these hormones out of their system. Vigorous physical activity is the way to do this.
- **Phase 7 Recovery.** The biggest question of the Colvin guidance is the reasoning behind imposing a consequence. This suggests that the student intentionally chose to become dysregulated. Dysregulation is reactive behavior. Not proactive misbehavior. If while dysregulated a student has harmed another, the student should engage in an Accountability Process, such as is described in Chapter 11. It should be considered necessary for this student to develop a plan for how they will remedy the harm to anyone they harmed while they were dysregulated. However, a disciplinary consequence for a student’s reaction to a situation that triggered and caused them to become dysregulated should not be considered appropriate.

Insight on Self-Regulation to Impart to Students

The following language can be used to discuss the importance of remaining calm.

If you are faced with a challenging situation, it is exceptionally important that you are able to self-regulate to remain calm. Failure to effectively self-regulate could lead you to engage in an outburst that could cause harm to you or others. When you frequently practice mindfulness this will help to create the neural pathways in your brain that will allow you to self-regulate more effectively. This is why daily mindfulness practice is so important.

If you have experienced bad things happening to you or ongoing distress, your brain is more likely to be hyper vigilant. You are concerned about and focusing on everything that is happening. You are more likely to have greater difficulties keeping yourself calm. Because of this, you are more likely to become disruptive something else happens that makes you upset.

When you know that this is the case, you have the ability to take the power into your own hands to better respond if this might occur. Because you know that there is a higher risk you will trigger and get upset, this knowledge gives you the power to change what could happen.

Alternatively, if you do not normally trigger but you know someone who does, you can use this insight to be on alert to the signs of emerging concern and reach out to help them.

There are several stages in going from calm to really upset and back to calm:

- **Calm.** You feel calm and relaxed.
- **Trigger.** Something happens that triggers you. You start to feel upset.
- **Agitation.** You become increasingly upset. You start having challenges in thinking clearly.
- **Outburst.** You become out of control and are disruptive.
- **De-escalation.** You now feel confused and embarrassed, but you are getting calm again.
- **Recovery.** The time it takes for you become calm.

The key to effective self-regulation is to have a good idea of what triggers you, so that when something like this starts to happen you know what might happen next. You can then take steps to avoid going from a trigger through agitation to an outburst. When you have triggered, this is the time to take a specific steps to stay calm.

Knowing when you might trigger is really helpful. At a time when you are calm, you can think things through to figure out what you can do to stop the trigger and get back to calm. It is important that you know that you absolutely have the ability to develop new strategies to keep yourself calm.

Take the time to think about what situations most often cause you to trigger. Then, think about your personal strengths. How can you use your top strengths to remain calm if or when something triggers you? Envision this kind of a situation occurring and practice using your strengths in such situations.

If you have a history of triggering and then becoming disruptive, talk with your teacher, a counselor, or a principal at your school to obtain special permission to leave any situation when you have triggered and start to feel agitated. There may be a calming corner in your room. They may agree to allow you to another place in the school to self-regulate. This might be the counselor's office or perhaps the school library. You should have some kind of a permanent pass, so that no other staff person stops you from going to a place to self-regulate.

The mindfulness meditation approach set forth above is a good approach for your initial response if something has triggered you. Make sure to ground yourself and hold yourself tall, but lower your eyes so you are not looking around. Slowly and intentionally breathe in, hold your breath briefly, and then-breathe out. If your brain tries to shift your attention to the perceived threat, continue focus on your breathing.

After you have gotten yourself out of the immediate situation, you may also need to engage in some physical activity. When you trigger and start to get agitated, your Amygdala caused your body to release cortisol and adrenalin. It is important to get this out of your system. Vigorous physical activity is the way to do this.

- **Think Things Through.** If you have challenges with triggering, make a positive connection with a trusted adult to think things through to identify the common situations that you are more likely to trigger. Then, for each of these

common situations, think things through to identify at least three things you can do if this common situation occurs.

- **Obtain Special Permission.** If you have a history of triggering, talk with your teacher, a counselor, or a principal at your school to obtain special permission to leave any situation when you have triggered and start to feel agitated.
- **Write in Your Journal.** Whenever you trigger, be sure to write about this in your Journal. Write out what happened and how you handled the situation. Did you become agitated and engage in an outburst or were you able to self-regulate? Note specifically what happened before you triggered so that you can be alert to when this might happen again. Do a self-evaluation of your effectiveness. It is perfectly okay if things did not work out right. You are rewiring your brain and learning this new self-regulation process. Decide whether there are strategies you might want to change in the future. It is most important not to focus on what you did that went wrong—but what you learned that can help you in the future. If you were able to self-regulate, congratulate yourself! Well done!
- **Connect with a Trusted Adult.** After you have gone through the journaling process, take the time to connect with a trusted adult. Share your thoughts and talk things through to get feedback on your thinking and plans for the future.

Mindfulness and Self-Regulation Activities in School

There are many sites that provide excellent guidance on establishing mindfulness practices in schools. These include: Mindfulness in Schools Project.³⁴ Mindful.³⁵ Mindful Schools.³⁶

One very simple practice is to simply have students practice mindfulness for a minute upon coming into class after a transition. A minute of silence for self-calming. Then, at any time the students appear to be getting rambunctious, return to just a minute of silence until they have calmed.

A short guided meditation using the Positively Powerful Thinking Questions was set forth above. This guided meditation may be easier for students than the “clear your mind” kind of meditation practice. An alternative way to do this guided meditation could be asked is in a morning announcement for the entire school. Members of the Student Leadership Team could lead the guided meditation.

It is helpful for staff to have a trauma informed understanding of what is happening when a student becomes dysregulated. Siegel's approach to describing the process of becoming dysregulated is called “flipping your lid” is exceptionally helpful to use with students.³⁷

Teachers can teach students about this by having them use their hand as a model of the brain to describe what happens when they trigger. The inner or downstairs brain is represented by their palm. The thumb represents the limbic system and can simulate its approximate position when they rest their thumb across their palm. This includes both the Hippocampus and the Amygdala. Curling their fingers over the top creates the Anterior Cingulate Cortex and the Prefrontal Cortex, the upstairs brain, in its proper place. If they become dysregulated, their fingers flip up—they have “flipped their lid”—and can no longer regulate their emotions or problem solve.

All school staff and students should be trained to understand the process by which anyone might become dysregulated. The key point that must be made is that the time that a student triggers is when they need to take action to self-regulate. This may be just at the start of when they are becoming agitated. The Prefrontal Cortex has not become entirely disconnected at this time, allowing for the opportunity to “flatten the curve.”

All staff must be trained in effective de-escalation strategies. The key to effective deescalation is to recognize that what the student requires most of all is to regain the feeling that they are safe. Any reaction to them that continues their feelings of not being safe will not be effective in deescalation. The strategies that must be avoided can be remembered by this term: TACOS: Threats. Arguments. Commands or criticism. Orders. Shaming.

³⁴ <https://mindfulnessinschools.org>

³⁵ <https://www.mindful.org/mindfulness-in-education/>

³⁶ <https://www.mindfulschools.org>

³⁷ Siegel, D.J. & Bryson, T.P. (2012) *The Whole-Brain Child 12 Revolutionary Strategies to Nurture Your Child's Developing Mind, Survive Everyday Parenting Struggles, and Help Your Family Thrive*. Random House Publishing Group.

Every student will have different ways that are best for them to self-regulate. Implement a Social Emotional Growth Mindset approach. When a student is calm, have them think things through to determine what tends to trigger them and the best ways are for them to self-regulate when they have triggered. This is a participatory problem solving activity which can be done as a class or individually. Ask all students to respond with their best strategies and write this list on the board. Then, have all students select from this list their best self-regulation strategies. These should be written down. Be sure to include “get a snack” on this list. A drop in blood pressure often causes dysregulation. A term for this is “hangry.”

Especially for students who are known to become dysregulated more easily, perhaps even laminate the list of self-regulation strategies they have chosen and have it on their desk. Also, develop a school-wide or class code for when a student feels they have triggered and need to take the time to calm. “I need to calm” may be sufficient. Or a teacher may note that a student looks anxious and ask, “Do you need to use a calming strategy?”

Positively Powerful CI-CO

In the morning, if there is time, it would be helpful to have a brief mindfulness activity with the student. Using the Positively Powerful Thinking Questions every day can accomplish this. Remind them of the transitions strategy that every time they enter a new situation they will take several deep breaths and remind themselves to calm. At the end of the day ask if they practiced this transitions mindfulness technique. Remind them also to practice meditation for a time at home.

The approach discussed above to positively address self-regulation, that includes identifying what situations tend to trigger them and their strategies to respond should be discussed with the student in the context of a longer Positively Powerful CI-CO discussion. Then, on a daily basis at the end of the day, discuss whether anything triggered the student and how they responded.

If they triggered and were not able to flatten the curve, engage in participatory problem solving to gain a better understanding of what happened to trigger the student and discuss how the strategy they tried to implement did not appear to work effectively. Approach this discussion with a Social Emotional Growth Mindset approach. “You learned what did not work. You can change your brain so that you do not become dysregulated. We just need to think things through to figure out something better you can do.”

It will be especially important to positively acknowledge student’s success in self-regulation. If escalation is a specific concern for any students, providing written positive acknowledgement to a parent or caregiver when the student successfully self-regulated would also likely be helpful. Self-regulating when you have triggered is really something to celebrate.

Keep My Personal Power

I hold myself tall and proud. I will not allow what happens to me control how I think about myself or respond.

To effectively address the concerns of hurtful behavior directed at, and sometimes by, students, it is necessary to increase students’ level of personal power. This can be addressed both by a focus on how they are holding themselves physically and what they think when something challenging does happen to them.

Personal Power Insight

As was discussed in Chapter 1, students who have been treated badly in a serious or persistent manner have experienced trauma. Increasing their resilience and empowerment is necessary to address the harms caused by the adversities they have experienced. This will also support them in making behavior changes that reflect greater personal power, which should help to decrease the inclinations of those looking for disempowered targets to be hurtful to them.

The Keeping Their Personal Power strategies will also improve the ability of Targeted Students to respond more effectively when they are treated badly. Rather than trigger and have an outburst, which only encourages the Hurtful Students and Supporters, they will have a greater ability to remain calm, nonchalant, and simply walk away. Without the visible rewards of the results of their hurtful behavior, Hurtful Students will hopefully decrease their hurtful acts.

Hurtful behavior can essentially be considered a “power game,” where a student is seeking to gain “power points.” Students who seek greater personal power and dominance are seeking additional “power points” from their admirers. They are hurtful to students who have lower social power—have fewer “power points.” When Targeted Students overreact to being treated badly, this proves to the Hurtful Student that they have been successful in taking the target’s “power points.”

When Targeted Students gain sufficient personal power, they will have a greater potential of reacting in a way that will not result in a loss of their “power points” when they are treated badly. Over time, with the other strategies that are advised, the Hurtful Student will hopefully come to realize that being hurtful is not working effectively to enable them to gain the “power points” they so desire.

Increased personal power of students can also increase the perspectives of Witnesses that they have sufficient personal power and self-efficacy to effectively step in to help. This is discussed more in Chapter 8. When witnesses, either individually or when working as a team with other students, have equivalent or greater “power points” as the Hurtful Student and Supporters, these Witnesses can gain additional “power points” by stepping in to help.

There are two strategies students can use that can help them to better keep their personal power, especially in situations where someone is trying to take their power from them: Hold Myself Tall and Control My Thinking.

Powerful Presence Insight

(The original text for this section was “stand tall.” It was pointed out to me that this may cause offense by those who are wheelchair bound. I have consulted with a number of representatives from this community and none had concerns with the use of the term “stand tall.” However, I decided to make a shift in language.)

Research conducted by Cuddy, a professor at Harvard School of Business, has demonstrated that adopting a pose that indicates power—a “power pose”—can result in increased feelings of confidence.³⁸ An excellent TedTalk by Cuddy on Power Posing provides greater insight into this, as does her book, *Presence*.

Cuddy did an experiment where she had one group of college students in the business school stand using a power position for a period of time. Another group of students maintained a powerless position. These students were then interviewed as though they were applying for a job. Their interviews were video-taped.

People who knew nothing about what the students did before their interview judged the performance of the students on videos. These judges strongly favored the students who had stood in a powerful position before the job interviews.

What this study demonstrated is that holding a “power pose” before a challenging interpersonal relationship task allowed students to increase their effective performance. This showed that it is possible to “fake it” by assuming a power pose, which will then help a person “make it” by feeling more confident.

Insight on Powerful Presence to Impart to Students

The following language can be used to discuss the importance of holding oneself tall.

In both humans and other primates, standing tall with a very open posture indicates high power, whereas hunching over with your arms crossed over your chest reflects lower power. Many times, young people who are bullied maintain physical posture that demonstrate that they feel that they lack personal power.

Research conducted by a professor at Harvard School of Business, demonstrated that if you hold a pose that indicates that you feel you have personal power—a “power pose”—this can increase your feelings of self-confidence. You can watch an excellent TedTalk by Dr. Cuddy on Power Posing.

Dr. Cuddy did an experiment where she had one group of college students in the business school stand tall using a power position for a short period of time. Another group of students held themselves in a powerless position. These students were then interviewed as though they were applying for a job. Their interviews were video-taped.

³⁸ Cuddy, A. (2012) Your Body Language May Shape Who You Are. TedTalk. https://www.ted.com/talks/amy_cuddy_your_body_language_may_shape_who_you_are?language=en; Cuddy, A. (2016) Presence: Bringing Your Boldest Self to Your Biggest Challenges. Little, Brown & Company.

People who knew nothing about what the students did before their interview judged the performance of the students on videos. These judges strongly favored the students who had stood in a powerful position before the job interview.

What this study demonstrated is that holding a “power pose” before a challenging interpersonal relationship task allowed students to increase their effective performance. This showed that it is possible to “fake it” by assuming a power pose, which will then help a person “make it” by feeling more confident.

You can do this also. When you hold yourself tall and in a position of power you will then start to feel more powerful.

Positively Powerful Strategies

- **Try This Experiment.** Hold yourself in a position that indicates you have no power—shoulders hunched, arms crossed, head down. How does this make you feel? Now stand up tall or hold yourself tall. Shoulders back. Head held high. Arms out to you side or over your head in a celebration post, like you just won a race. How does this make you feel?
- **Practice Power Posing.** Every morning, stand or hold yourself for a few minutes in a position of personal physical power. Perhaps you can do this while looking at yourself in your mirror. Say an affirmation to yourself as you are holding yourself tall.
- **Use These Transitions Strategies.** Remind yourself to hold yourself tall whenever you come into school or go from one class to another. Also, whenever you in an area where you previously have experienced any challenges, remind yourself to hold yourself tall through this area.
- **If Something Bad Happens.** If something bad has happened, like a student says something hurtful, your first response should be to take a deep breath to remain calm and at the same time to shift your body posture to hold yourself tall.

Control My Thinking

Students will never be able to control when or if someone might treat them badly. They will never be able to control whether or if other bad things might happen to them. But they do have the ability to control their thinking about how they feel about themselves and how they respond in these challenging situations. This is how they can keep their personal power.

This is an old theory. The underlying principles of the ancient Stoic philosophers, as set forth by Epictetus, who in the first century C.E. said: “Men are disturbed not by things, but by the views which they take of them.”³⁹

The key underlying premise of Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy (REBT), created by Ellis, is that harmful consequences are not just caused by the bad adversities that happen to us, but also by our beliefs about those adversities.⁴⁰ While we can't control what might happen, we can control our beliefs. Ellis developed the A-B-C-model:

- A is the adversity or bad event.
- C is the consequence of how we feel or respond.

But A is not solely responsible for C.

- B is our belief—what we think or believe about A, not merely that A happened.

Thus, $A + B = C$. While it is not possible to change A, it is possible to be in control of B, and thus have greater control over the resulting C.

³⁹ A Greek philosopher. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/epictetus/>.

⁴⁰ Ellis, A. (1994) Reason and Emotion in Psychotherapy: Comprehensive Method of Treating Human Disturbances : Revised and Updated. New York, NY: Citadel Press; Ellis, Albert (2003). Early theories and practices of rational emotive behavior theory and how they have been augmented and revised during the last three decades. Journal of Rational-Emotive & Cognitive-Behavior Therapy, 21(3/4).

Insight on Control Their Thinking to Impart to Students

The following language can be used to discuss the importance of controlling their thinking.

You will never be able to control when or if someone might treat you badly. You will never be able to control whether or if other bad things might happen to you. You do have the ability to control your thinking about how you feel about yourself and how you respond in these challenging situations.

The key understanding of the importance of controlling your thinking is to realize that harmful consequences are not just caused by the bad things that happen to us—but also by our beliefs about those bad things. While you can't control what might happen, you can control your beliefs and your thinking. This controls the outcome and how you feel.

This is an old theory. The underlying principles of this theory comes from the ancient Stoic philosophers, as set forth by Epictetus. In the first century C.E. he stated: “Men are disturbed not by things, but by the views which they take of them.”

Think in terms of A-B-C-model:

- A is the adversity or bad event.
- C is the consequence of how you feel or respond.

But A is not solely responsible for C.

- B is your belief—what you think or believe about A, not merely that A happened.

Thus, $A + B = C$. While it is not possible to change A, it is possible to be in control of B, and thus have greater control over the C.

Translation: We don't always have control over what happens to us. But we do have the ability to control what we think of ourselves and how we respond

Positively Powerful Strategies

- **Control Your Thinking.** If you are ever in a situation where someone has been hurtful or find yourself thinking about a past situation that occurred, think to yourself, “I will not give that person the power to control what I think about myself or how I respond.”
- **Write in Your Journal.** If you experienced a situation where someone was hurtful or something else bad happened, write about this. Write out what happened and how you handled the situation. Do a self-evaluation of your effectiveness in controlling your thinking. Decide whether there are things you might want to change in the future. It is most important not blame yourself. Rather focus on what you have learned.
- **If Something Bad Happens.** Stand or hold yourself tall are you breathe slowly and deeply to remain calm. Then, think to yourself, “I can't control what happens. I can control how I feel about myself and respond.”

Personal Power Activities in School

An excellent TedTalk by Cuddy on power posing provides greater insight into standing or holding oneself tall. This TedTalk is quite appropriate for secondary students to watch and discuss.⁴¹

For elementary students, talking about standing or holding themselves tall can be supported by watching the highly popular “Let It Go” music video from the movie *Frozen*.⁴² Have them note how powerless Elsa appears in the first of the video. Then, note when she holds herself tall and proud. Have them practice “feeling small” and “holding themselves tall and proud. Students love this video—likely because they yearn to be able to demonstrate their level of personal power.

⁴¹ https://www.ted.com/talks/amy_cuddy_your_body_language_shapes_who_you_are?language=en# and https://www.ted.com/talks/amy_cuddy_your_body_language_shapes_who_you_are?language=en#.

⁴² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L0MK7qz13bU>.

The message that while it is not possible to control what happens, but it is possible to control how you respond and feel about yourself will need to be transmitted more informally in every situation where a student is feeling distressed about something that happened to them.

Positively Powerful CI-CO

In the morning as they are about to leave your meeting, have them practice “feeling small” and then “holding themselves tall.” Remind them of the transitions strategy of remembering every time they are getting ready to move to a different place in the school they should remind themselves to hold themselves tall. Also, always remind them every day, both in the morning and before they leave, to keep their personal power—never give any other person the power to control what they think about themselves and respond.

Think Things Through

In any challenging situation, I will think things through to decide what is best to do.

When students gain effective problem solving skills they are more resilient in figuring out how to respond if they are faced with any kind of a challenge. When they think things through, this is the opposite of acting without thinking.

Problem Solving Insight

Some students who are most often bullied lack critically important relationship skills. When students gain greater interpersonal relationship problem solving skills—that is learn how to think of their own solutions to problems, consequences to their actions, and how they and others feel about things—they are less likely to engage in risk behavior and are more resilient in figuring out how to respond if someone is hurtful to them.

Shure has done significant work focused on supporting young people in effective problem solving.⁴³ Four key interpersonal cognitive problem solving skills are:

- Means-ends thinking to reach a stated interpersonal goal by planning a step-by-step, sequenced means to reach that goal.
- Alternative solution thinking to identify alternative solutions to a stated problem.
- Consequential thinking to consider what might happen in certain situations.
- Weighing pros and cons to decide whether to carry out an interpersonal act.

As was discussed in Chapter 4, an excellent intervention approach for students who have engaged in misbehavior is called Collaborative Problem Solving, also called Collaborative and Proactive Solutions.⁴⁴ This process engages school staff in problem solving with students. Parents and caregivers can also use this approach.

Knowing how to effectively solve problems provides the foundation for success in school, higher education, family life, and in their employment. It is also important to know how to think things through as part of a team. When they develop their skills in goal setting and action planning and use these skills consistently, this can support their positive future.

Think Things Through

The following language can be used to discuss how to engage in effective problem solving.

When you gain effective problem solving skills you can become more resilient in figuring out how to respond if you are facing any kind of a challenge. Thinking Things Through is the opposite of acting without thinking.

⁴³ Dr. Shure's books include: Shure, M. B. (1992). I Can Problem Solve (ICPS): An Interpersonal Cognitive Problem Solving program [preyouth organization], Champaign, IL: Research Press. Shure, M. B. (1992). I Can Problem Solve (ICPS): An Interpersonal Cognitive Problem Solving program [kindergarten/primary grades], Champaign, IL: Research Press. Shure, M. B. (1992). I Can Problem Solve (ICPS): An Interpersonal Cognitive Problem Solving program [intermediate elementary grades], Champaign, IL: Research Press. Shure, M. B. (1996). Raising A Thinking Child Workbook. New York, Holt (Republished, Champaign, IL: Research Press, 2000).

⁴⁴ <https://thinkkids.org>; <https://livesinthebalance.org>.

Knowing how to effectively solve problems provides the foundation for success in school, higher education, family life, and in your employment. It is also important to know how to think things through as part of a team.

These are the steps that are necessary to engage in effective problem solving:

- **What is the Situation?** Step back from the situation and think about what has happened to make sure you have a clear understanding.
- **What Do I Want to Accomplish?** Determine what you would like to achieve or what outcome you desire.
- **What Strategies Could I Use?** Identify several different strategies or actions you could take to resolve the problem or respond.
- **Is Each in Accord With my Values and Does Each Build and Use My Strengths?** Evaluate these strategies based on your own personal values and whether each strategy or action Uses Your Strengths.
- **For Each, What Might Happen?** Think about and try to predict or envision what might happen if you followed each of those strategies or actions.
- **What is My Best Choice?** After thinking through what might happen as a consequence of each strategy you thought of, then weight the pros and cons to decide which strategy or action would be the best to take.
- **How Should I Proceed?** Determine what steps to take to accomplish this strategy or action.
- **Did This Work?** Evaluate your effectiveness. Realize that the first thing you try might not work. The fact that the first thing you tried did not work is totally okay. You learned what would not work.
- **What Else Could or Should I Do?** Repeat this process if the first strategy or action did not achieve your desired goal or if you learned something that leads you to decide that some other action is necessary.

Positively Powerful Strategies

- **If Something Bad Happens.** Think to yourself, “I got this. I can think things through to decide what is best to do.”
- **Working With a Team.** Use the think things through steps when working with a team on a project.
- **Engage in Goal Setting and Action Plans.** You may want to set goals for a day, for a week, or for a month or for even longer.
- **Write in Your Journal.** At the end of the day, in your Journal, think about what happened during the day and whether you faced a situation where you needed to engage in effective problem solving. Write about what happened and how you used the think things through strategy. How did this work?

Problem Solving Activities in School

Effective problem solving should be integrated into all aspects of instructional activities, especially in history and cultural affairs as well as science. Problem solving is the basis for all scientific exploration. “What problem were these people trying to solve? What had happened? What was their goal? What strategy did they use? Did this work? Remember, the first thing people try to do to solve a problem often does not work? What else did they try?”

Problem solving should especially be incorporated into Community Circles whenever there is a discussion of a concern or relationships issue. “What has happened? What do we think should be the goal? What strategies could be used? Let’s think about the Character Strengths. Can we think of some strategies that use some of these strengths? Are all of these strategies in accord with our school’s values? What do you think might happen if this approach was tried? What about this other approach? Based on this analysis, what do you think would be the best strategy to try first? How will be determine if this was effective? What should we do if it is not effective? We have to remember that many times the first thing we try might not work and that is okay.”

Positively Powerful CI-CO

In the morning, ask if there are any challenges or problems that the student anticipates having to deal with during the day. Then think things through to develop a strategy they can implement. At the end of the day, ask what challenges arose and how they thought things through to figure out what to do.