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Abbreviations

ACEs: Adverse Childhood Experiences; PPC: Positive Peer Culture; LSI: Life Space Interview; RAP: Response Ability Pathways

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Review Article

Trauma-Wise Youth: Responding to the Need Beneath the Pain

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Abstract

While there are many “trauma-informed” training programs for professionals, youth are the leading players on the trauma stage. In contemporary cultures of coercion, youth battle adults and become bullies or victims of peers. But Indigenous cultures of respect view children as contributors to the community, not problems to be controlled. This article describes how “trauma-wise youth” can respond to the needs of their peers in pain. Strategies drawn from the circle of courage resilience model and positive peer culture are used to engage youth in helping roles. These developmental relationships heal trauma and build resilience.

Children in Pain

- i. Get out of my face. I don't want to talk to you. Go away. Leave me alone!
- ii. I went to see this psychologist in town. The man was very strange. He'd try to pressure me into telling him what was on my mind.
- iii. I was just some waif and they were going to change me, just mold me into this other person. But I was already my own person.
- iv. I needed someone who'll be there, who will be a friend, who I can talk to.

These youth are describing their experiences of trauma and abuse and their struggle to find someone to trust who can help them heal. Their voices are from the book *Pain-Lots of Pain* published by the Canadian Youth in Care Network [1]. Youth alienated from adults are often more receptive to support from other young people. This article describes how they can be enlisted in helping their troubled and traumatized peers. The current concern about childhood trauma has roots in the mid-twentieth century. In 1951, Fritz Redl and David Wineman published *children who hate* which is considered the gold standard for qualitative research on healing childhood trauma [2,3]. Every nuance of the behavior of aggressive boys at Pioneer House in Detroit was documented in detail. In the author's words: All children experience traumatic events but can cope if their needs are met. Seldom do we see children who have been so grossly and continuously exposed to traumatization on so many different levels as the “children who hate” [2]. These youngsters displayed a breakdown of emotional and behavior controls. Connecting with caring adults and peers enabled them to develop controls from within, the title of a companion volume [4]. Healing requires helpers who respond to needs instead of reacting to problems. James Anglin [1] intensively studied staff and young people in ten Canadian residential group care settings [5]. He discovered that 100 per cent of the youth reported pain in their lives. Their overt problem behavior disguised deep-seated emotional distress from trauma and loss. These youth were displaying pain-based behavior driven by emotions such as fear, anxiety, anger, and shame. The word pain is more than a metaphor since physical and social pain use the same deep brain circuits to signal that the organism is in danger [6].

The way others respond to pain-based behavior can provide support and heal trauma. Unfortunately, typical reactions exacerbate conflict and pain. Anglin [5] found that staff members seldom responded with sensitivity to the inner world of the child. Instead, they reacted with controlling demands like “Get a grip on yourself” or warnings of possible consequences. Ironically, the typical consequence to pain-based behavior is punishment which comes from the Latin word *pœna* meaning pain. Anglin [5] concluded that the key challenge in dealing with kids in pain is to avoid inflicting secondary pain through punitive or coercive reactions [5]. This same concern was expressed by trauma researcher Bessel van der Kolk: “Faced with a range of challenging behaviors, caregivers have a tendency to deal with their frustration by retaliating in ways that uncannily repeat the children’s early trauma [7].”

Trauma Informed and Trauma Wise

Renewed attention to childhood trauma has sparked calls for staff in schools, treatment programs, and juvenile justice to be trauma informed. But despite an abundance of trauma training, the key issue is whether this makes a real difference in the lives of children [8]. In an article titled “The Trouble with Trauma,” Australian psychologist and trauma researcher Howard Bath observes that trauma-informed treatment has been oversold as the answer to most problems of children and youth. “It seems in some quarters that the trauma perspective may be on the way to high-jacking the very meaning of the word ‘therapeutic’ [9].” While trauma theory is crucial in understanding adversity and resilience, the present article makes a distinction between being trauma informed and trauma wise: To be trauma informed requires information. There certainly is a flood of technical information about trauma from diverse perspectives. A few examples: being trauma informed might entail knowledge about trauma as a mental disorder, the neuroscience of trauma, and the epigenetics of intergenerational trauma. There are mountains of specialized information about trauma, but as Harvard professor E. O. Wilson warns, we are drowning in data but starving for wisdom [10]. The challenge is to translate this complex information into principles for practice [11]. To be trauma wise requires wisdom. Beyond technical information, wisdom is the ability to use practical knowledge to make good decisions. Trauma is not new to humans who have long been able to surmount hardship, survive, and thrive. Wisdom to deal with trauma is embedded in cultural values and human DNA [12]. For millennia, Indigenous peoples have created communities that insured safety, met growth needs of children, and supported one another in times of trial. Such wisdom is shared by all members of the community, elders and young alike. Trauma treatment models are readily available for clinicians who work in the office-based therapy hour. But as Howard Bath and John Seita [3] have shown, it is essential to mobilize all participants in the “the other 23 hours [13].”

This theme is elaborated in The Child Trauma Handbook—parents, counselors, teachers, coaches, direct-care workers, case managers, and others who have relationships with the young person can support healing and growth [14]. Missing from the trauma handbook's list of helpers are youth, which is puzzling since they spend the greatest amount of time with one another—for better or worse. In fact, the U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration puts Peer Support on its short list of trauma-informed practices [15]. Unfortunately, youth are often the perpetrators of trauma through peer mistreatment, so it is not surprising they are seldom seen as resources for healing trauma. We develop trauma-wise youth not by formal instruction in trauma science, but by unleashing the natural inborn capacity of humans to help one another in times of need.

Young people either produce or prevent trauma in their relationships with others. The next section, Cultures of Coercion, begins with the bad news: peer mistreatment plagues all Western nations [16]. This problem is framed in deficit-based labels of bullies and victims which target individuals instead of cultures. A meta-analysis by Juvonen and Graham indicates that most attempts to address “the power of bullies and the plight of victims” are ineffective [17]. Interventions fail because they do not change the culture of the school or instill in young people values of respect. The second section, Cultures of Respect, highlights the role of youth as responsible caregivers to their peers. Indigenous societies prevented adult or peer abuse because children were reared by the entire village, and youth were given responsible roles in caring for one another. Tapping this traditional wisdom, we will show how trauma-wise youth can help promote health and well-being by responding to the needs of peers in conflict and pain.

Cultures of Coercion

Youth alienated from adults populate our communities, schools, treatment programs, and juvenile justice settings. Too often they form negative subcultures that foment antisocial values, peer abuse, and conflict with authority. Adults typically react by piling on more pain and punishment. Or, as Robert Foltz documents, they indiscriminately use medications to mask the symptoms of trauma and chemically control problem behavior [18,19]. Decades ago, Howard Polsky described a culture of coercion in his classic book, *Cottage Six* [20]. Polsky [20] lived for eight months as a “participant observer” with a group of aggressive teens in a New York residential treatment center. Once youth became accustomed to his presence, he gained window into a world otherwise hidden from adult surveillance. This was a reputable program, but it harbored a hostile underground hierarchy akin to lord of the flies. Negative leaders and their enforcers wielded power over submissive group members with scapegoats at the bottom of the pecking order. Adults were generally oblivious to this destructive climate which sabotaged educational and therapeutic goals. Polsky [20] described a culture of violence and intimidation where aggressive leaders victimized vulnerable peers. While adults believed they were running a progressive program, beneath the surface was a totalitarian peer subculture. When a new student entered the group, established members would “rank” the novice by attributing real or imagined faults. In a culture of pseudo-masculine toughness, those seen as weak became targets of abuse. For example, the group harassed a timid boy, Chuck, by claiming he was having sex with a dog. Unable to defend himself from these spectacular accusations, he became the butt of continual hateful humor.

These were not isolated incidents since scapegoating was the warp and woof of the social structure. Most staff either were ignorant of peer abuse or chose to ignore it. Some even joined the bullying process, giving bullies free rein to harass low status members. In this pervasive culture of intimidation, staff also became intimidators, flaunting their own toughness with intimidating language and demeanor. A generation before Polsky, Kurt Lewin and colleagues had shown that authoritarian adult leaders produce climates of bullying and peer abuse among youth, while democratic leaders create climates of respect and cooperation [20,21]. Buttressed by such research, Polsky [20] challenged schools and treatment programs to move from authoritarian to democratic approaches. In this new paradigm, youth would contribute to creating relationships of human dignity. Scientific knowledge is slow to impact policy and practice. Six decades after Polsky [20], coercion is still in style. Canadian resilience researcher Kiaras Gharabaghi contends that behavior control is the dominant mindset as adults wield punishments and rewards to compel compliance [22]. In this split-screen view, adults try to impose obedience while youth struggle for autonomy. This fuels negative peer and staff cultures that retraumatize youth. This coercive culture of pain is seen in a recent study of an urban alternative school and treatment program for adolescent girls who had experienced abuse and trauma [23]. Participants in this qualitative research were adolescent females placed in residential care by the child protection or juvenile justice system. In focus groups, four major themes emerged: relationships with peers, relationships with staff, the learning environment, and sensitivity to being touched. Students were asked to describe events that affected their mood. As seen from the excerpts below, the responses were sharply negative [23].

Peer relationships

Interactions were hostile with fighting the most common problem. Anticipating both verbal and physical altercations had a toxic effect on emotional well-being.

- a) Other peers try to mess with you.
- b) People calling you names and saying shit that they don't have business saying.
- c) If somebody gets too close to me, I feel like I should defend myself.

Staff relationships

The girls perceived most teachers and staff members as petty and unpleasant. They were upset by actions and comments which conveyed a lack of respect.

- a) Some of the staff will make comments like, “At least I get to go home at the end of the day.”
- b) The staff don't even talk to us really; they blow us off.
- c) I needed help for my reading . . . When I asked the staff, they're like “No, I don't like you.”

The learning environment

The classroom was riddled with fights and constant disciplinary encounters. The girls expressed fears of not being able to be successful and better their lives.

- a) I feel like being at this school, it's like this is a joke.
- b) I feel like everything here is just dumbed down.
- c) I wanna learn and I wanna go to college.

Don't touch me

Hypersensitivity to being touched was probably due to their traumatic history. They wanted others to approach and interact with them in a less triggering way.

- a) Like, don't touch me, I'll break your wrist. I don't like being touched.
- b) Supervisors can trigger some of the kids. If they say “don't touch me” then don't touch them.
- c) They've been touched in a wrong way when they were young and that's why they don't like being touched now.

The girls attended a charter school which developed an alternative to traditional discipline by sending them—or allowing them to escape—to the “Monarch Room” where trauma-trained paraprofessionals help them deescalate, refocus, and return to class. The average time for this intervention was ten minutes. The girls report their mood improves when they have a place to calm down and where adults listen to them. Ironically, this brief respite from the tempest cannot compete with constant retraumatizing in this hostile climate. While peer mistreatment is a leading source of abuse and trauma in modern society, many publications about childhood trauma overlook its toxic effects. For example, the highly publicized Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) focuses on family-based trauma [24]. But Bessel van der Kolk's definition for developmental trauma disorder includes “educational neglect and child maltreatment [25].” Schools are also hot spots for epidemics of peer abuse—and these can quickly spread to the internet through cyberbullying [26]. Irwin Hyman developed the Student Alienation and Trauma Scale which identifies “my worst school experience” as reported by young people [27]. These troubling incidents perpetrated both by peers and staff created symptoms akin to PTSD. Australian researcher Marilyn Campbell used this scale with 95 participants in a graduate education course [28]. Overall, 69 per cent reported only fellow students were involved in their worst experience, 21 per cent involved only teachers, and 10 percent involved both peers and teachers. Of the ten most frequently occurring bad experiences, most involved social rather than physical abuse. Even in cases of physical attack, the most troubling memories had less to do with bodily pain than the social pain of being teased, ridiculed, or humiliated. Researchers found that schools were markedly different in the prevalence of adverse experiences [27].

Negative school climates

Negative school climates had high rates of verbal assaults. Scapegoating, name-calling, and put downs by peers and staff were rampant and tolerated as if such behavior

was to be expected.

Positive school climates had very low levels or absence of sarcasm, ridicule, put-downs, and other verbal assaults from students and school staff. Relationships were respectful and supportive.

Urie Bronfenbrenner described the alienation of modern youth in the four worlds of childhood of family, school, peer group, and community [29]. The loss of parents and adults in the lives of children is filled by an age-segregated peer group which cannot meet their needs. Devoid of guidance, youth grow up without a sense of purpose or responsibility. Bronfenbrenner called for a curriculum of caring where young people would become active participants contributing to the community [30]. This is reclaiming the cultural wisdom of Indigenous peoples.

Cultures of Respect

The negative youth subculture is a recent social invention since, throughout human history, youth spent little time with same-age peers. Instead, youth participated in community activities that involved elders or cross-age peer groups [31]. Indigenous cultures engaged children and youth in nurturing and protecting one another. As Lakota psychologist Martin Brokenleg observes, "I was always taught that when I was the oldest in a group of children, it was my responsibility to protect and take care of those younger than me." Canadian Anthropologist Inge Bolin authored growing up in a culture of respect which describes child-rearing in the remote Andes of Peru [32]. From earliest years, children were raised with "rituals of respect" and bullying of peers was virtually nonexistent. They were taught universal cultural values that matched the Native American Circle of Courage [33]:

Belonging

Children learn that loneliness is the saddest human experience. They are responsible for ensuring that no one is left out and all feel that they belong.

Mastery

Children are motivated to achieve but never flaunt their knowledge. They learn from adult models and mature peers, and share what they know with others.

Independence

Young people have responsible roles in working for survival of the community. They are encouraged to speak for themselves and make good decisions.

Generosity

Young people care for smaller children and contribute to the community. Respect is modelled by elders and children seek to help others in any way they can.

In psychological terms these are brain-based needs for attachment, achievement, autonomy, and altruism. When these needs are met, children thrive; when frustrated the result is a host of emotional and behavioral problems [12].

Universal Biosocial Needs

In 1938, Harvard psychologist Henry Murray defined a need as a brain-based drive that organizes thinking, emotions, and behavior to reach a goal [34]. Decades later, Urie Bronfenbrenner observed that these basic needs are met in developmental relationship [35]. These are listed here with corresponding biosocial needs in brackets:

- i. A close emotional bond [Attachment]
- ii. Increasingly complex tasks [Achievement]
- iii. Shifting the power to the learner [Autonomy]
- iv. A relationship of reciprocity [Altruism]

Researchers Junlei Li and Megan Julian provide empirical evidence that these developmental relationships are the active ingredient in all successful work with children and youth at risk [36]. Unless caregivers meet developmental needs, other interventions have weak effects. In 1943, Abraham Maslow proposed a hierarchy of human needs that is still the most widely cited model of motivation [37]. At the base of the pyramid are physiological and safety needs. Above these are higher biosocial needs for belonging,

esteem, and self-actualization. Maslow's focus on the self was widely criticized as an artefact of self-centered western individualism. Early in his career he had studied the Blackfoot First Nations people in Canada and marveled at their generosity and emotional health. In the last year of his life, he corrected his oversight by placing self-transcendence-commitment beyond self-at the highest level of his hierarchy [38]. A powerful principle articulated by Abraham Maslow is that most problem behavior results from unmet needs, and effective treatment must focus on these [39]. Maslow further observed that since needs are biologically based, these would be tied to universal values. This is shown in (Table 1) below, which notes the consilience of biosocial needs, Maslow's hierarchy of needs, and the Circle of Courage values embodied in Indigenous wisdom [12].

Table 1: Universal developmental needs.

Biosocial Needs	Maslow's Hierarchy	Circle of Courage
Attachment	Belongingness	Belonging
Achievement	Esteem	Mastery
Autonomy	Self-Actualization	Independence
Altruism	Self-Transcendence	Generosity

The Indigenous Circle of Courage values have served for tens of thousands of years as the archetype for environments in which all can thrive. Resilience researcher Emmy Werner describes Belonging, Mastery, Independence, and Generosity as foundations of resilience and recovery [40]. These become the basis for trauma-wise strategies which enlist adults and youth in creating cultures of respect.

Responsible Roles for Youth

Cultures of coercion dominated Europe from the invasion of Bronze Age warriors about 4000 years BCE [41]. But with the advent of democracy, educational reformers began to experiment in giving youth responsible roles as young citizens in their schools and communities [42]. The foremost pioneer in transforming education was Johann Pestalozzi who worked with Swiss street kids at the dawn of the 19th century [43]. Translating his ideas into biosocial needs, he declared that love was the essence of education (Attachment) and taught students skills for practical problem solving (Achievement). Rejecting punitive discipline, he instilled responsibility (Autonomy) and helped these cast-off kids find purpose in life by caring for others (Altruism). In that same era in Switzerland, Johann Wehrli also worked with street children. He created a system of self-rule where older peers were expected to be positive role models who would be deeply invested in the guidance and education of less mature peers [42]. In mid-19th century Germany, Johann Hinrich Wichern directed the Rauhe Haus where boys and girls up to age 14 elected their leaders called Friedenskinder (peace children) who were responsible for helping peers maintain positive relationships in the group. The motivation to help others is designed in the human brain [44]. Scottish psychiatrist Ian Suttie observed that children are born with a generous disposition and need opportunities to care for others [45]. A child who senses his or her gifts are being rejected feels bad and unlovable. The remarkable generosity of children was documented by Anna Freud who worked with a group of youngsters rescued from a Nazi concentration camp. Devoid of caregiving by adults, the children were totally committed to one another, showing great kindness and self-sacrifice [46]. This is a remarkable example of how crisis triggers helping behavior. While these early pioneers build democracy by nurturing cooperative relationships, other reformers had a political lens and sought to cede power to youth. In 1895, William George established a Junior Republic in Freeville, New York, with youth from street gangs. These "citizens" established their own laws and economic system. In 1913, Homer Lane founded Little Commonwealth in England, based on a system of youth self-governance, albeit with peers administering punishments.

Student-governed schools for orphans and delinquents proliferated in the early 20th century under names like Republics, Common wealths, Villages, Boys or Girls Towns, and even Pedocracie (1). Many reformers believed adults should not discipline children so they created a simulation of formal government ruled by the young. But instead of authentic democracy, anarchy or peer abuse of power prevailed [42]. David Wills of England called for replacing formal self-governance with natural relationships of shared responsibility [47]. Research by Diana Baumrind supports this view: authoritarian adults are too punitive and permissive adults are too indulgent, but authoritative adults exert influence while respecting the voice of youth [48]. The missing experts on creating respectful school cultures are students according to research by Stanley Davis and Charisse Nixon. They conducted The Youth Voice Project with 13,000 students in 31 schools who shared their personal experience with bullying and peer mistreatment [49]. These young people expressed little confidence in programs or interventions purporting to make schools safe. In fact, many popular methods such as conflict resolution often made things worse.

Instead, youth reported that the most helpful response came from other students. They gave examples of supportive peers who:

- Helped me instead of ignoring me.
- Listened to what I had to say.
- Said keep my head up.
- Were always at my side to make sure I was OK.

Peers proved to be sophisticated helpers to their traumatized peers, and their ready presence made this support more reliable than depending on adults in authority. For example, a peer would encourage a friend who felt like an outcast by reframing: the bully is the one with problems, who is acting immature. They shared advice, ignore what others say and be proud to be yourself. Peers provide long-term connections so even if mistreatment continued, this was not traumatizing. When a friend puts an arm around you and says You don't deserve to be treated that way, the sense of self-worth is restored.

Positive Peer Culture

A well-researched system for engaging trauma-wise youth in helping one another is Positive Peer Culture [42, 50, 51]. At a recent professional conference in Germany, we met such a group of youth who were alive with purpose and hope. These teens led a workshop session where they described the core values that guided their relationships with peers and adults:

- We treat each other with respect!
- We look out for one another!
- We help others if they have problems!
- We reject all physical or psychological violence!

Their values clearly challenge the self-centered mindset of contemporary culture. These young people were boldly espousing democratic principles for treating all persons with dignity. Most of the youth were immigrants to Germany. Their own personal experience with violence had shown that abuse of power can only be countered by values of respect. Translating their words: Violence in any form includes humiliation and depreciation of the other person. When we engage in violence, we want to make the other "small" and ourselves superior. That stands in bold contrast to showing respect to one another [52]. How did these teens create their culture of respect? They are part of a Positive Peer Culture (PPC) program operating in a unit of a youth prison near Adelsheim in southern Germany. Accompanying them to their conference presentation was a veteran prison guard. He recounted that many correctional staff used to call in sick because of the stress of this job. "But now we enjoy coming to work!" he exclaimed. Although confined in prison, these youth formed bonds of respect with peers and adults in authority. Recounting their transformation of values, one youth observed, "We used to have fights every day, but now we never fight because we have learned to treat one another as human beings." This mutual respect is particularly noteworthy since those incarcerated had diverse ethnic backgrounds. When the PPC groups mix with residents of other prison units in work details, it is apparent how different the tone is among other inmates who feel they must put on a front of toughness. Even if ridiculed as being "soft," these PPC youth are secure in their core values: "We treat each other with respect."

We had first visited Adelsheim two years earlier as PPC Germany launched this peer-helping program in a secure unit of a sprawling youth prison. We explained to two dozen teens that they would be asked to help one another. The goal was to encourage each young person to develop strengths in the four areas of the Circle of Courage:

- i. **Belonging:** Building positive relationships with peers and staff
- ii. **Mastery:** Thinking clearly, solving problems, and achieving
- iii. **Independence:** Growing in personal power and responsibility
- iv. **Generosity:** Developing empathy and concern for others

The youth quickly embraced these four growth goals. It is little surprise that young people seek to belong, for such is the lure of gangs. Further, they want to succeed, even though they may struggle in school. And the drive for independence is a centerpiece of adolescence. But generosity-getting teens hooked on helping-has been overlooked by major theories of learning that presume humans are self-centered [53].

Trauma-Wise Helping Strategies

In their work with aggressive youth, Redl and Wineman found that office-based therapy was generally ineffective [4,54]. Instead, real-world problems are best resolved when they occur in the natural living environment with those most directly involved. Redl jokingly called this "therapy on the hoof." Thus, the Life Space Interview (LSI) was created to use problems as learning opportunities. These practical problem-solving conversations are the foundation for relationship-based work with youth at risk [55,56]. An evidence-based refinement of that life space model is RAP as described in the book Response Ability Pathways [57,58]. RAP is not a complicated intervention but the natural way humans help one another solve here-and-now problems with these strategies: Connecting for Support, Clarifying Challenges, and Restoring Harmony. These can be used separately or in a three-stage problem-solving sequence as described below.

Connecting for support

The helper maintains a calm, concerned manner, even if the person being helped is upset. The brain's vagal system signals whether the helper is friend or foe by scanning facial expression, tone of voice, and eye contact [59]. The helper shows interest and empathy through verbal and nonverbal bids to connect. A person who refuses to connect does not feel safe. Trauma-wise helpers continue showing care and concern, even towards those who are hard to like or resist help. If acts of kindness are reciprocated, this unleashes positive emotions [60]. Connecting occurs in brief encounters and small acts of kindness, precursors to developing stable relationships. Building connections strengthens Belonging and Generosity, keys to resilience [61].

Clarifying challenges

All problem solving starts with felt difficulty, said John Dewey [62]. In fact, when we have unsolved problems, we are motivated to keep trying to reach a solution (2). The human brain is designed to solve problems by analyzing the sequence of an event. Thus, the most effective way to solve problems is to explore the timeline of a challenging event. RAP uses this natural process as shown by the acronym CLEAR as seen in (Figure 1):

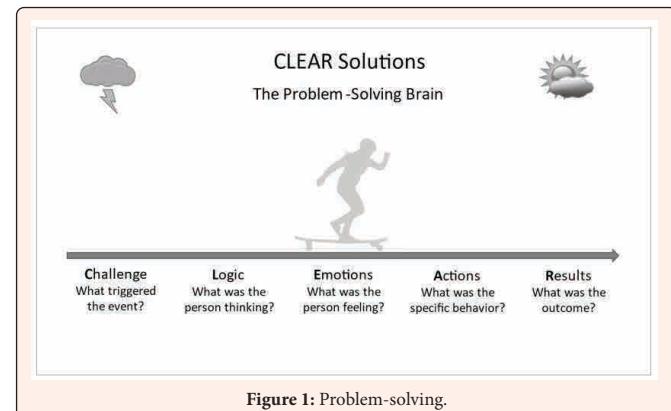


Figure 1: Problem-solving.

The helper does not mechanically follow this sequence, but these key questions give insight on how one's behavior affects self and others. Clarifying a problem is the first step to taking responsibility. The ability to resolve challenging problems strengthens the sense of mastery and promotes responsible independence. Responsibility also requires coping skills to manage inner emotions and external challenges [63]. Many who have experienced trauma lack self-regulation, so the trauma-wise helper lays the foundation for self-control through a process called co-regulation [13]. The contrast between coercion and co-regulation is shown (Table 2):

Table 2: From coercion to co-regulation.

Coercion	Co-Regulation
Controlling the person	Calmng the person
Harsh, Aggressive tone	Soothing, concerned tone
Retaliating to hostility	Defusing hostility
Imposing a solution	Collaborating on a solution
Reacting to behavior	Responding to needs

Restoring harmony

While Connecting and Clarifying can be free-standing strategies, the full RAP process uses these as the basis for planning restorative outcomes. The Minnesota Study of Risk and Adaptation followed a large cohort of children from birth to adulthood and found that emotional and behavioral problems result from too much stress and too little support. This informs the restorative goals of trauma-wise helpers: reduce stress and increase support [64]. Simply, one develops specific plans to provide external supports and to build inner strengths to cope with challenges. The Search Institute has codified these dual goals in lists of 40 Developmental Assets, half focused on external supports like family bonds and half building inner strengths like achievement motivation [65].

The central theme of being trauma-wise is simple: respond to needs instead of reacting to problems. The Circle of Courage provides the cultural foundation for Positive Peer Culture and a roadmap for peer helpers. These principles are formally taught first to adults who in turn model these to youth in the natural living environment. A growing body of research documents the evidence base of these strategies [66-68]. Youth in formal group sessions become experts at giving and receiving help-skills rare among today's youth. Harry Vorrath who inspired the Positive Peer Culture model would applaud peer helpers as "our young staff." Young people apply these skills with peers, family, and community. Both students and staff learn to see problems as signs that basic needs are unmet. Those who are disconnected need to belong, those frustrated by failure need mastery, those who are powerless or rebellious need to develop responsible independence, and those without purpose need to develop a spirit of generosity.

Voices of Youth

For a final perspective, here are the voices of youth who explain their role in peer helping (3). They all were students at risk who participated in Positive Peer Culture Programs.

Calm in crisis

If you can help people before they get mad, they are more apt to listen. When upset, other things go through their head and they act disrespectfully. Basically, you set the pace and calm them down. I feel good when I help others, so they won't be in the same position I was in.

Self-Awareness

My group told me, "Look, Josh, you need to check the way you come off to people cause you are rude sometimes and maybe the tone of your voice or the way you carry yourself is kind of arrogant." They didn't sugarcoat anything, just told me flat out "you need to change." That brought me to my senses.

Future perspective

You may not see the effects of helping until down the road, maybe that person will do something with their life. As long as you put in your effort, you can say, "I tried to help that person. Now it is up to them to go that extra step."

Natural helping interactions

When I was having problems, a group member would come and talk with me naturally, not in program language like a psychologist. He made me feel comfortable to open up. I started helping others like that and it made me feel better about myself.

Skills for living

There are a lot of challenges if people are disrespectful. But we are going to face these things in the world. If you can overcome them here, it is a lot easier to overcome them in the community.

Helping as prevention

Rather than seeing somebody making mistakes, you prevent it from happening. You know the triggers, the warning signs, what causes them to act the way they act. That's where you should step in and help-showing care and concern while they're going through their problem.

Don't give up you might think that people don't want your help or don't need you, like

they are just cruel or coldhearted. It's just that they are trying to hide their feelings. You don't want to give up on people no matter who they are.

Peer respect

A lot of people weren't taught respect. They are in a new place and don't know what to do. They think they need to try to get relationships by giving in to peer pressure. In my group, we try not to have peer pressure. Respect is where everybody's mind is at.

Helping others

The one thing I really enjoy about being in a peer group is that I can take what I have learned and help other people to apply it to their lives, sort of like everybody helps each other out.

Problem solving

PPC helps develop our problem-solving skills so when those situations come up again, we will be able to deal with them and make ourselves more successful instead of giving up.

The Power of Peers

I think youth can help other youth more effectively than older people can. They relate more to people their age and are more ready to believe them.

Developing empathy

If you can put up with and learn to help or show empathy toward the lowest member in your group, the worst to get along with, you can show empathy to anybody.

Conclusion

Trauma-wise knowledge comes not from formal instruction but rather through what Inge Bolin calls rituals of respect [69]. John Dewey observed that scientific knowledge was less potent in shaping our beliefs and behavior than common knowledge [70]. In his book Democracy and Education, Dewey called this practical wisdom "habitudes" which are formed in the constant give and take of relationships with others [71]. Humans evolved over millennia in egalitarian indigenous cultures that nurtured and revered the young [72]. However, modern society is mismatched with how homo sapiens are biologically designed to live; the result is a breakdown in health, emotional well-being, and social stability [73]. In contrast, Indigenous peoples created cultures of respect that meet the needs of all members of the community. This traditional wisdom is validated by modern research and provides the alternative to cultures of coercion. Trauma-wise principles are essentially standards of good care which all young people deserve and are not reserved just for those who have experienced trauma [8,74]. Discovering the need beneath the problem is the antidote to pain-based behavior.

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Footnotes

1. The term pedocracy was coined by Polish educator Janus Korczak who operated a self-governing orphanage school for Jewish street kids. He died with his students in the gas chambers of Treblinka. Brendtro & Hinders, 1990.
2. This is called the Zeigarnik effect.
3. Youth interviewed by Randy Copas and colleagues from Starr Commonwealth, Albion, Michigan.