

Thriving

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Driving Mom McMillan

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Every child needs at least one adult who is irrationally crazy about him or her.
~Urie Bronfenbrenner

She was well past retirement age when she took a job as a house mother in a residential school for troubled boys. Mom McMillan, as she was called, had spent her first career in urban missionary work serving children and families. Now she faced a new challenge with a group of teens placed in care by the juvenile courts. Her success depended on being able to build bonds of trust with these wayward boys. How could she connect with adult-wary kids over fifty years younger than herself? She also was feeling the effects of her advanced age and had difficulty getting around the large campus. Turning these problems into opportunities, she engaged the young people in searching for a solution.

“Boys, I am having trouble walking all the way to the administration building for meetings, but I don’t want to have to leave. So, I think I need to buy a car in order to get around the campus. But, I don’t know anything about cars, so can you boys put your heads together and suggest what kind of car I should get?”

The boys huddled, speaking in hushed tones, and, in a few moments, came back with their proposal. “There are lots of different kinds of cars, but we think what you need is something easy to get in and out of—a Thunderbird would be best!”

On her next day off, Mom McMillan had another houseparent couple bring her to a large auto dealership. They returned to campus with a second-hand silver Thunderbird, much to the admiration

of the boys in her cottage. And, since her vision was not the best, she enlisted the oldest youth, seventeen-year-old Kim, to be her driver, with others added to her pool of willing chauffeurs as they got their driving licenses. Mom McMillan was able to continue to serve the boys who meant so much to her, and they were able to build a close bond with a caring adult. But what did Mom McMillan understand about the needs of these youngsters in her charge?

What All Humans Need

In 1943, Abraham Maslow developed a hierarchy of human needs which continues to be one of the most cited contributions in psychology.¹ Each of these needs is mapped in the human social brain.

The earliest youth work pioneer to put these principles into practice was Johann Pestalozzi who worked with street children after the Napoleonic wars.² He described love as the essence of education

(in developmental terms, Attachment) and created schools based on learning by doing (Achievement). He abandoned punitive discipline to teach freedom and responsibility (Autonomy). Finally, he engaged students in caring for and helping others (Altruism).

William Jackson conducted a comprehensive review of major models of childhood socialization and positive youth development.³ While researchers used different terms, most were synonyms of four universal biosocial needs. Table 1 below briefly highlights four examples.

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Table 1: Four Universal Biosocial Needs

	ATTACHMENT	ACHIEVEMENT	AUTONOMY	ALTRUISM
Self Esteem Coopersmith, 1967	Significance	Competence	Power	Virtue
Cultural Values Brokenleg, 1990	Belonging	Mastery	Independence	Generosity
Leadership & Service CF Learning, 2008	Belonging	Achievement	Power	Purpose
Character Strengths Peterson & Park, 2009	Focus on Others	Mind	Focus on Self	Heart

Stanley Coopersmith conducted classic studies on self-esteem in children.⁴ He found that our sense of worth is measured against four standards: *Significance*, being loved and feeling you matter to someone; *Competence*, being skilled in areas important to the person; *Power*, feeling you have control over yourself and can shape your destiny; and *Virtue*, feeling you are a person who is of value to others.

Martin Brokenleg and colleagues developed the Circle of Courage model based on traditional Native American and First Nations child rearing principles.⁵ Early anthropologists observed that Native children were highly respectful and responsible although adults never used harsh punishment. These young people were reciprocating the respect they received from caregivers who were highly responsive to their needs.

The late Chris Peterson was a leader in the positive psychology movement which shifted the focus from deficits to strengths.⁷ He and colleagues did extensive studies with youth to formulate a list of 24 character strengths which foster positive development.⁸ Factor-analysis identified the four dimensions listed in the table on the previous page.

CF Learning, the research and training institute of Cal Farley's Boys Ranch, developed the Model of Leadership and Service to focus on meeting needs of adult caregivers and leaders as well as young people.⁶ In addition to the four biosocial needs, this model drew on trauma research and neuroscience to identify two additional needs, safety and adventure.

As portrayed in Figure 1, the Model of Leadership and Service uses simple, nontechnical terms to describe key developmental needs:

Safety. Ensure physical, emotional, and cultural safety by replacing threat with trust.

Belonging. Connect with others and create positive family and peer group climates.

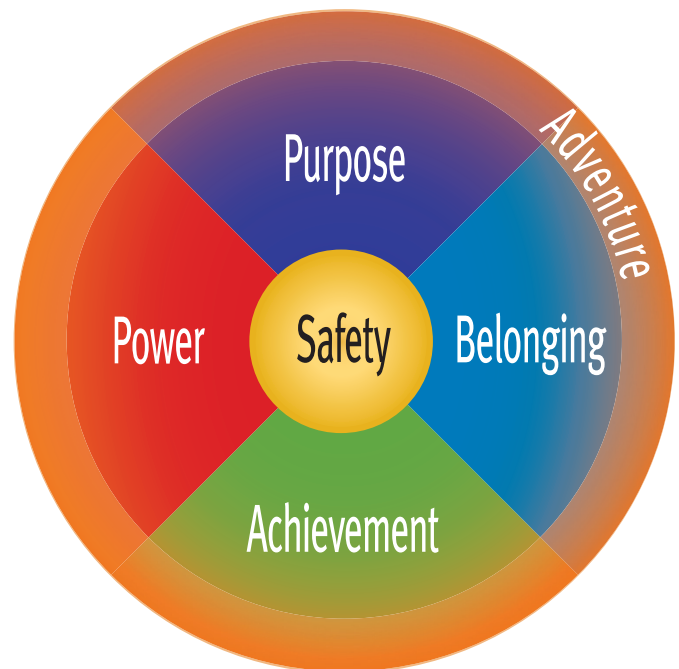
Achievement. Build intrinsic motivation to engage learners and nurture intelligence.

Power. Develop self-regulation, self-efficacy, and opportunities for positive leadership.

Purpose. Strengthen empathy and find meaning through service to others.

Adventure. Provide challenges and healthy risks that spark the spirit of joy.

Figure1
The Model of Leadership and Service



The Model of Leadership and Service might be called The Resilience Compass since it points to pathways that foster growth and development, even in the face of adversity. While the potential for positive change is vibrant in children and youth, *turning points* across the lifespan open new opportunities. Both positive and negative life events can build resilience, enabling a person to develop new views about self and the meaning of life. Reflection, religion, or therapy can help turn trauma and adversity into turning points—one of the most common responses is “I learned what was important in life.”⁹

The story of Mom McMillan highlights each of the key developmental needs. She put her trust in the judgment of the boys, and they learned to trust her. The generational gulf was bridged as these young people accepted her as a surrogate grandmother. Once given responsibility as drivers, they experienced achievement and power. Finally, this elderly woman and these young people found purpose in life through mutual caring and sharing the spirit of adventure.

Adapted from a forthcoming book, *The Drive to Thrive*, to be published by CF Learning.

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(Endnotes)

- 1 Maslow, 1943.
- 2 Silber, 1960.
- 3 Jackson, 2014.
- 4 Coopersmith, 1967.
- 5 Brokenleg, 1990.
- 6 CF Learning, 2008.
- 7 Peterson & Seligman, 2004.
- 8 Peterson & Park, 2009.
- 9 Wethington, 2003, p. 48.