



NEW DIRECTIONS FOR YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

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Doing the Right Thing Ethical Development Across Diverse Environments

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editor*

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What strategies can help transform the attitudes and behaviors of youth who have low self-esteem, few resources, and little interest in learning?

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Giving youth the social and emotional skills to succeed

Ginny Deerin

DEREK JOHNSON (not his real name) arrived at the WINGS for Kids after-school program as a third grader who disrupted class, neglected homework, and defied his teachers. He clowned, cursed, tripped other students, and flagrantly disobeyed the rules. Once he climbed onto the roof at school and threw rocks from above. Fist-fights were routine. And his aggression was not confined to classmates. One day he took a swing at a WINGS leader, knocking her against a row of lockers and breaking the watch she was wearing. "He was a little thug," says Tamara Field, the counselor whom Derek shoved in a rage.

Yet this troubled eight-year-old boy was able to shed his self-destructive behavior and remake himself into a responsible young man with a promising future. His schoolwork advanced so much that by sixth grade, he was singled out as the most improved student in the class. He got help for reading difficulties that had gone undetected at school or at home. He began to manage his anger, value his strengths and recognize his weaknesses, experience empathy, and communicate constructively with friends and family. He

learned how to cope with the difficulties that so many disadvantaged youth must face.

By acquiring these social and emotional skills in small lessons woven throughout his afterschool activities, Derek improved his academic performance and his ability to distinguish right from wrong. His story demonstrates the power of social and emotional learning to shape the ethical as well as the personal and academic lives of children.

Missing a piece of their education

WINGS provides a framework of strategies, practices, and materials for social and emotional learning (SEL) to take place within afterschool programs. Founded in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1996 as a nonprofit organization and developed in partnerships that field-tested and strengthened these educational interventions in summer camps and elementary schools serving predominantly poor, African American youth as well as an after-school program for adolescents housed in an abandoned firehouse, WINGS grew out of my personal conviction that children were missing an important piece in their education.

I had experienced considerable success as a marketing and fundraising executive, helping businesses flourish and politicians get elected to statewide office. Yet I found myself struggling in middle age with personal challenges that tested my emotional resources. My six-year-old daughter's father—my ex-husband—was dying of cancer. I struggled to help her cope. In a search for assistance, I spent time with psychologists, read all the research I could find, studied, and began acquiring new skills. Out of my own struggle grew my resolve to help children develop the capabilities to navigate life's social and emotional difficulties.

In these days of tremendous political pressure for results measured by standardized tests, time constraints can make SEL a dif-

icult undertaking for many classroom teachers. It seemed to me that after-school programs would be effective learning environments for supplying the missing piece in children's education.

Developing SEL in small lessons

The WINGS elementary school program begins when the school day ends. Ours is not a drop-in program; the students attend fifteen hours each week—three hours a day. We serve 120 children who attend Memminger Elementary School in the heart of Charleston's historic district. These students averaged 42.5 percent below basic in English language arts and 36.1 percent below basic in math, with 96 percent qualifying for free or reduced lunch in 2004. The time is divided: five hours devoted to homework and academics, five hours of choice time, three hours of playground and free time, one hour of community service, and one hour of what we call WildWINGS—a special activity at week's end. Students make new choices every nine weeks, selecting activities that include dance, computer, reading and writing clubs, art, African drumming, etiquette, chess, gardening, board games, basketball, and rap club.

All of these activities are infused with intentional and carefully conceived social and emotional lessons. For example, the planning of a nine-week dance program maps out for each lesson specific SEL objectives to be taught along with movement skills. The staff focuses on teaching young people how to give positive feedback to other dancers as they try new steps or strengthening the listening skills of the dancers so that choreography instructions are heard and respected. It is through these small lessons taught during the course of ordinary activity that children acquire and practice their new skills with the support of staff members who receive constant training and reinforcement in their own social and emotional skills.

Through trial and error, the program staff of WINGS have developed five learning modules for successful SEL strategies, practices, and materials:

- Community Unity helps build a caring community through specific social and emotional skills.
- Staff Shapers enhance the teaching and SEL-specific skills of WINGS program leaders.
- SELementary shows how to teach SEL basics in engaging ways.
- Bring It In provides activities and tools to integrate SEL into an after-school program every day.
- You Rule gives staff techniques and tools to help manage behavior.

This is an approach that can add value to existing after-school activities and programs. For example, a typical youth leader teaches children how to hit a baseball, while a youth leader uses WINGS to also teach how to handle their feelings if they swing and miss the ball. A typical tutor drills students in preparation for a math test; with WINGS methods, that tutor would also help them deal with pretest jitters.

Looking at one boy's struggle

The information and comments at the beginning of this chapter and those that follow about Derek, his family, and how WINGS helped him were gathered in interviews conducted by a writer who was brought in by one of our funders.¹ The writer had the permission of Derek and his mother to tell their story. (All names have been changed for this chapter.) While we work closely with parents and often hear details of their circumstances, we typically do not collect personal information about WINGS children in such detail.

Derek's mother, Alice, was only a freshman in high school when he was born. Herself the child of a teenage mother, Alice struggled to stay in school, care for her baby, and work at McDonald's to help pay the bills. When her second boy was born in her senior year, she reluctantly dropped out.

"I loved learning. It was so hard to leave," she says. Her anger, like her burdens, grew. While Alice worked long hours managing a sandwich shop at the hospital, Derek sometimes had to feed and

dress himself and his younger brother and travel across town by bus to reach school. He was close to his father, who was trying, with limited success, to leave behind a past that included jail time for drug possession. When the boy was seven, Derek's father vanished after a beating that police believe was administered as punishment for an old drug dispute. His body has never been found. There were numerous moves because rent money was hard to come by, and the death of a beloved grandmother contributed to the family's instability.

Derek's difficulties in school began to grow. "He fought all the time. He had aggressiveness," his mother says. "It seemed like no one could say anything to him. He was using profane language. He was late to school all the time."

Full of rage, Derek lashed out with his fists. "I used to get in fights if kids would run down my family. They would make fun of how you read or do your work," he recalls.

Derek got off to a bad start when he arrived at WINGS at the age of eight. Sent to a chair to cool off on the first day after a dispute, he stood drop-kicking it against the wall for fun instead of sitting in it. More than once he had to be physically restrained to keep from hurting someone. For a time, he was ejected from the WINGS program for refusing to abide by the rules that keep children safe.

The WINGS leaders never gave up on Derek, and they made it clear to him what he had to do to return. He was belligerent in response. But they noticed that the cocky boy so disdainful of their authority was often turning up on the periphery of WINGS activities. He would stand at a distance, watching wistfully while students played games on the playground. And after several months, he earned his way back into the program with a commitment to change.

Controlling anger on the basketball court

Learning to manage his emotions made a huge difference in Derek's behavior. An avid ball player, we found that many of his best learnings occurred on the basketball court. He benefited especially from one of the most effective practices we teach our staff: the art of dialoguing to express empathy without passing judgment.

An example is when Derek exploded in a rage in the middle of a game over what he considered an unfair call. He yelled disrespectfully at the coach. A WINGS leader intervened and asked Derek to go for a walk to talk privately. Here is how their conversation went:

LEADER: Hey, Derek, what's up with this behavior?

DEREK: Nothing.

LEADER: Hmm. (Long, reflective pause.)

DEREK: That call was stupid. The coach is stupid. That call was wrong!

LEADER: So you thought he made a bad call.

DEREK: Yeah, he doesn't know what he's doing. He sucks. He can't play basketball. I don't know why WINGS has him do basketball. He sucks.

LEADER: You don't think he's the guy to be in charge of basketball.

DEREK: Yeah, he sucks.

LEADER: So you really don't think he's doing a good job.

DEREK: No.

LEADER: Is there more you want to say about this?

DEREK: Nah. He just sucks.

LEADER: Well, Derek, I'll bet you are feeling pretty angry. Have I got that right?

DEREK: Yeah.

Derek feels that he is heard and understood, which diffuses his anger. Just because the WINGS leader listened carefully to Derek does not mean he endorses his disrespectful behavior. In this case, since it was near the end of the day, he told Derek that the next day they would get together to do some problem solving to discuss other actions he could have taken in the same situation to express his anger in a more constructive way.

There were many more opportunities during basketball games to build Derek's confidence and his emotional capabilities. As he took small steps toward breaking his negative habits, WINGS leaders frequently made note of the times he refrained from outbursts or conflicts and praised his growing self-control.

Building confidence and self-esteem

Derek always loved Fridays because it was time for WildWINGS, something new and different each week centered on a theme and loaded with SEL. One week it was "You Bug Me!—activities that included games, discussion, and role playing.

The learning objectives are to teach awareness of the relationship between thoughts, feelings, and actions and how that dynamic assists in managing impulses; demonstrate alternative emotional responses; predict consequences and choose their best solutions; and practice expressing feelings and ideas assertively without aggression. We want children to internalize these lessons: "I can work out my problems with people." "When someone is bugging me, I can be patient." "I won't get upset over little things." We let them act out all kinds of hypothetical situations by taking turns drawing what we call "bugger situations" from a container. What if they are in class and the "bugger" taunts, "Your mama is stupid." What is the best response?

WINGS leaders point out some do's and don'ts, with help from the participants. Don't push or hit out of anger when someone insults your mother. Asked for some other ways to handle the "bugger," one child offers this response: "Look, if you've got a problem with my mama, that's your problem and not mine. I think my mama is real smart. If you don't—tell her yourself!"

At the same time that young people like Derek are receiving very specific instructions in how to manage anger in real-life situations, they are constantly receiving positive feedback for achievements and improvements. WINGS staff dole out raffle tickets when they catch children making progress as they develop these skills, and at week's end the winner whose ticket is chosen wins the video version of *A Bug's Life* or some other prize that is a fun reminder of their progress.

One staff activity focuses on giving and receiving compliments, emphasizing that it is extremely effective to express admiration for traits, characteristics, and actions of WINGS students and their leaders.

Derek's growing capabilities to be attuned to his own needs enabled him to admit what none of his teachers or family members had detected: that he was struggling with reading deficiencies. That allowed him to get remedial help. As his reading gradually

improved, he began to overcome the sense of inadequacy that prompted the constant fights and the need to swagger.

“He’s like a totally different kid,” says Tamara Field, the WINGS leader whom Derek once intimidated. Now she beams with pride over his accomplishments: “He realizes everybody has strengths and weaknesses. He’s got a lot to work on, but he’s not trying to impress anybody anymore. He’s not afraid he will look dumb when he asks questions. He helps the other kids. He helps me. Now he sees what strength really is.”

“I was so proud of him that he could change his attitude. It was amazing!” says another WINGS leader, Fred Jones. “He was definitely headed for big trouble. The temptations of the street were everywhere around him, and many of his family members went the wrong way. But he’s grown into a bright young man who’s got such a mature spirit.”

The other students consider Derek a leader who is both cool and kind. He works hard on his homework, peacefully resolves his disputes on the basketball court, and treats adults with respect. A freshman now attending a magnet high school, his eyes shine with excitement when he talks of attending college and maybe pursuing a career building houses or caring for animals someday.

Helping youth feel safe, valued, confident

At WINGS we see over and over that many behavioral problems presented by children like Derek stem from a lack of success in the classroom that causes them to question their self worth.

Early evaluations of this approach by University of South Carolina researchers over the past seven years have shown statistically significant outcomes, with high satisfaction levels among participants that result in after-school attendance rates above 95 percent, improved report card grades, increased parental involvement, and a highly motivated staff with a low turnover rate that has prompted other youth programs like Boys and Girls Clubs to seek our training assistance.²

Research now under way by the Health, Emotion, and Behavior Laboratory at Yale University will analyze the data gathered at WINGS since its inception. Because WINGS strategies, practices, and materials can be easily replicated at relatively low cost, these educational interventions could potentially add value to a wide variety of afterschool programs. In the 2005–2006 school year, we will refine these methodologies and test their accessibility through the integration of WINGS practices in five new developmental partnerships with existing after-school programs—two programs in Washington, D.C., and two additional programs in Charleston—all of them serving mostly low-income students—as well as a fifth school in Charleston serving middle—to upper-income students.

It is unrealistic to expect these youth to become responsible citizens who make ethical choices if they have not learned to manage their emotions and cultivate self-awareness. With an appreciation of their personal strengths that comes from social and emotional learning, they can develop the motivation to succeed in school and have positive social engagement with their peers and their communities.

In order to lead joyful, responsible, fulfilling lives, all children deserve a strong social and emotional education. But for students like Derek who arrive at overburdened inner-city schools with multiple disadvantages and scant resources, the development of these capabilities is not just important. It is crucial.

Notes

1. Schwed, P. (2002). *Connecting strengths, creating change*. 2002 WINGS Annual Report. Arthur M. Blank Family Foundation, Atlanta, GA.

2. Linney, J., & Spelman, E. (2001–2004). *Wings for kids program evaluation*. Unpublished manuscript, University of South Carolina.

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