

# Youth Development

*From the Trenches*

A Practitioner Examines the Research, His Experience, and  
Discovers A Powerful New Youth Development Strategy!

**Rick Miller**



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*This book is dedicated to my wife, Esther,  
who helped me when I was in college by reading and typing  
my papers before we had computers,  
and hasn't stopped since. . .*



# Contents

Preface.....	vii
Introduction.....	xi
1      Changing Conventional Wisdom .....	1
2      Remembering the Pygmalion Effect.....	7
3      Universal Truth I: Missions Versus Beliefs .....	17
4      Testing Our Beliefs by Checking Our Blood Pressure.....	23
5      Universal Truth II: The Aces.....	29
6      Stories of Aces.....	37
7      Universal Truth III: Mental Time Travel.....	45
8      The Framework: From Bureaucracy to Culture and Back Again.....	55
9      The Strategic Framework in Action .....	67
10     Are You a Treasure Hunter?.....	71
11     Top Five Practice #1 Believed and Practiced Here.....	77

12 Top Five Practice #2  
The Pledge: Power of Self-Talk .....85

13 Top Five Practice #3  
The Report Card ..... 91

14 Top Five Practice #4  
Passport to the Future.....103

15 Top Five Practice #5  
Tracking Aces..... 113

16 Where’s the Village? .....117

17 Happiest Place on Earth ..... 121

18 Culture Scan: Asking the Right Questions..... 127

19 The Anne Fox Elementary School Miracle ..... 141

20 What We Know, What We’ve Learned..... 149

21 A Thought From Professor Einstein ..... 157

References..... 165

About the Author ..... 169

## Preface

Since 1968 I have been fully committed and engaged in youth development, trying to better understand why some children do well in life and others struggle. Equal to that question was an effort to determine why some children who face many of life's greatest adversities are able to overcome great risks and experience success. Those questions guided and sustained my curiosity and enthusiasm about the development of our youth.

My first venture into the world of youth development began at age 19 as a day camp counselor for the Anaheim, California YMCA, followed by a two years as a head recreation leader with the City of Cypress, California. My first full-time employment after college was as the educational director for the Boys Club of San Gabriel Valley (now Boys & Girls Club) in El Monte, California, where I gained first-hand experience with threats such as drugs, gangs, school failure, and aimlessness—factors that greatly impact children. From El Monte, I accepted an executive director's position at a Boys Club in Buena Park, California, a challenging, low socioeconomic pocket within affluent Orange County, where many of the problems I first experienced in El Monte were also present.

In 1978, I was 30 years old, had been married for nine years to Esther, and was the proud father of Kimberly Miriam (age 8) and Aaron Joel (age 3). Encouraged by a growing interest in public policy and its effect on child and youth development, I was excited with my new job as the National Director of Government Relations for Boys & Girls Clubs of America. I wrote testimony and public policy papers,

attended high level Congressional and Cabinet meetings, and spent a year on a White House committee as a loaned executive working for President Ronald Reagan's Task Force on Private Sector Initiatives, an effort designed to maximize the power of the business and voluntary sectors to minimize government's role in our lives. I testified before Congress on such issues as juvenile justice and delinquency prevention and had the honor of spending time in the oval office with President Carter as well as President Reagan.

In 1983, I accepted the job as President and Executive Director of the Boys & Girls Clubs of Metropolitan Phoenix, Arizona. This, our family's second cross-country move in five years, gave me an opportunity to return to the trenches where the real work of child and youth development takes place.

But it was in 1993 that my life's work was to be profoundly defined. I was attending a seminar where a principal of a local high school was discussing a program that had received national attention. During his presentation he shared his programs for "at-risk" students. In an odd moment he hesitated, looked unconsciously at the ceiling, allowed his eyes to return to the audience and then shared this thought, "When you think about it, all of our students are 'at risk.'"

It was as though a lightning bolt had struck me. I don't know why I felt like that considering I already knew the expression *at risk*. I used it daily to describe many of the children that my organization serves. It was a prerequisite term that had to be used in order to have any chance of securing corporate, government, United Way, or foundation funding.

So why was I taken aback by hearing the principal use that term? What actually struck me were not the words *at risk* but the fact that he used it to define all students. My

practitioner and public policy experience suggested that some children and youth are indeed at risk, but claiming that all children are at risk troubled me.

I obsessed about that moment for a good number of weeks trying to better understand why a high school principal whose school had received national acclaim offered commentary that troubled my seasoned understanding about our youth. Was he right or wrong?

A few months later I was invited to attend an event held twice a year in our state called Arizona's Town Hall where a cross section of interested citizens gather at the Grand Canyon to wrestle with major issues. That year's theme was "Who is Responsible for Arizona's Children?" Certainly, it was a subject I felt qualified to discuss. One of the forum's keynote speakers was a celebrated juvenile court judge from outside our state. All that I remember from his speech was, "Today, all America's children are 'at risk.'" My fellow participants nodded in agreement with the judge's statement. I was stunned!

I resolved to challenge that claim and prove that although some children may be at risk, there was no way all children are at risk. Furthermore, maybe we had it all together wrong. Maybe all children are, in fact, *at hope*.

As I embarked on the defining journey of my career, I quickly learned that as a country we were fully invested in the at-risk paradigm. We had created an entire industry around a pervasive falsehood that was denigrating our most precious national resource. The "at-risk" industry would distract us for decades from focusing on children's assets. We would be consumed with their liabilities and deficits.

This was an arduous effort. Not only was I to battle the at-risk empire, I found many in education, child and youth development unwilling to rethink this issue.

As noted, the first 30 years of my professional career was as a practitioner. However, in 1984 I was invited to join the adjunct faculty at Arizona State University. Over the years since, I've applied my practical experience to teaching courses in voluntarism, nonprofit management, youth development—even a course entitled “Human Services for At-Risk Youth.” In 1998 I was appointed ASU's first Practitioner in Residence for its newly created Center for Not for Profit Management and Leadership, now called Lodestar Center for Philanthropy and Nonprofit Innovation.

Through ASU relationships I had the opportunity to work with a range of academics whose expertise, advice, and guidance I sought in order to provide the evidence required to scientifically understand what I felt was true about children and youth—that they were *at hope* rather than *at risk*.

To test our theories, my colleagues and I read a good amount from a variety of disciplines: studies from psychology, sociology, social work, education, recreation, medicine, and criminology. In 2000, after seven years of reviewing the research, we announced at a major forum sponsored by ASU our findings and conclusions. We were excited to add our work to the ever-growing body supporting understanding of success, resiliency, failure, risk, and hope and their relationships to the fields of child and youth development.

I trust that you will be inspired, empowered, and transformed by reading this book as it offers caring adults the knowledge and skill set needed to support the success of every child.

**Rick Miller**

# Introduction

## *What We Know: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*

We know much about our children today—or do we? We know their tests scores. We know how many of them drop out of school, are unemployed, in jail, commit suicide, take drugs, and become pregnant.

The following is the good, the bad and the ugly about today's children (cited from Annie E. Casey Foundation *Kids Count Data Book 2011* and State of America's Children 2011 by Children's Defense Fund). Each day in America

- 2 mothers die in childbirth,
- 5 children are killed by abuse or neglect,
- 5 children or teens commit suicide,
- 8 children or teens are killed by firearms,
- 32 children or teens die from accidents,
- 80 babies die before their first birthdays,
- 186 children are arrested for violent offenses,
- 368 children are arrested for drug offenses,
- 949 babies are born at low birth weight,
- 1,204 babies are born to teen mothers,
- 1,240 public school students are corporally punished,\*
- 2,163 babies are born without health insurance,
- 2,058 children are confirmed as abused or neglected,
- 3,312 high school students drop out of school,\*
- 2,573 babies are born into poverty,
- 4,133 children are arrested,
- 4,717 babies are born to unmarried mothers, and
- 18,493 public school students are suspended.

*(\*Based on 180 school days a year)*

The following provides additional detail about children:

- More than one in eight preschool children lives with a parent who abuses or is dependent on alcohol or other drugs.
- More than 1.7 million children have a parent in prison. About 45 percent of these children are Black.
- 1,741,379 children were arrested in 2008.
- In seven states, Black juveniles are about 10 times as likely as White juveniles to be in secure residential placement (2006).
- White, Black, and Hispanic teens are equally likely to use drugs. Black teens are almost twice as likely as White teens to be arrested for drug offenses and more than five times as likely to be incarcerated for drug offenses (2006-2008).
- Forty-six percent of Black high school students, 39% of Hispanic and 11% of White students attend the 2,000 “dropout factories” across our country, where less than 60% of the freshman class graduates in four years with a regular diploma.
- One in 18 high school students reported staying home from school because they felt unsafe at school or going to or from school.
- The United States has the highest teen birth rate among comparable countries. The U.S. teen birth rate is nearly

twice as high as that in the United Kingdom (26.7 per 1,000), which has the highest teen birth rate in Europe. The U.S. rate is more than triple the rate in Canada (14.1 per 1,000).

- The number of children living in families where no parent has full-time, year-round employment increased from 27% in 2008 to 31% in 2009. This increase represents 2.9 million more children living in families without secure parental employment.
- Nationwide, there was an increase of children in single-parent families, from 31% in 2000 to 34% in 2009. 3.1 million more children were living in single-parent families in 2009 than in 2000.

These are the hardcore conditions faced by our children. We have collected such statistics for many years. We had yet to directly ask our kids about how they feel about their lives. We need to understand the psychological effects of conditions we continue to document.

Fortunately, beginning in 2009-2010, the Gallup organization started surveying America's youth by asking them to share their daily experiences and how they envisioned their future. The following is from a representative sample of over 700,000 children who responded by midyear 2010:

- Half of American students are hopeful (53%). These students were found to possess numerous ideas and abundant energy for their future. Thirty-one percent said they were stuck, and 16% stated they were discouraged.

- Nearly two-thirds are engaged in school. This means they are highly involved with and enthusiastic about school, prepared, and eager to learn. Twenty-three percent note they are not engaged and are just going through the motions, and 14% admit undermining the teaching and learning process for themselves and others.
- Seventy percent feel great about their lives. They think about and plan for their future. Their health is good, relationships are sound, and basic needs are met. Thirty percent are struggling or suffering; these students seem to lack personal support and social resources.

After digesting these facts and figures, one would surely be exhausted, if not numb. How could we not be pessimistic about our children's future considering the great number of real or potential risks in their lives?

According to Albert Bandura and Martin Seligman, past presidents of the American Psychological Association, we have spent an enormous amount of time committed to studying failure rather than studying success. We agree: Studying only the risk factors as some social scientists do does not offer hope or success. It's time to look at the immunity rather than the disease.

Fortunately, the study of hope, success, and resiliency reveals a more promising story (as cited in WestEd, 2004):

A consistent yet amazing finding over the last two decades of resilience research is that most children and youth, even those from highly stressed families or resource-deprived communities, do somehow manage to make decent lives for themselves. In fact, for just about any population of children that research has found to be at greater risk than normal for later problems—children who experience

divorce, live with stepparents, lose a sibling, have attention deficit disorder, suffer developmental delays, become delinquent, run away, get involved in religious cults, and so on—more of these children make it than do not (Rhodes & Brown, 1991).

In most studies, the figures seem to average 70% to 75% and include children who were placed in foster care (Festinger, 1984), were members of gangs (Vigil, 1990), were born to teen mothers (Furstenberg, 1998), had substance-abusing or mentally ill families (Beardslee, 1988; Chess, 1989; Watt, 1984; Werner, 1986; Werner & Smith 2001), and grew up in poverty (Clausen, 1993; Schweinhart et al., 1993; Vaililant, 2002).

In absolute worst-case scenarios, when children experience multiple and persistent risks, still half of them overcome adversity and achieve good developmental outcomes. (Rutter, 1987, 2000)

After reviewing these data, we wanted to better understand the following questions:

- What were the 70% to 75% of kids getting to overcome their adversities that the other 25% to 30% who were exposed to the same risk factors not receiving?
- What were 50% of the children receiving as suggested in the “worst-case scenarios” that allowed them to overcome risk that the other 50% were not getting?

Ann Masten (2009), a leading expert in the field of resiliency research and a distinguished professor at the University of Minnesota, offers the following to help us understand the difference.

Study after study has revealed a frequency list of factors associated with resilience. These “usual suspects” probably look familiar. A short list of resilience factors for children and youth includes

- effective parents and caregivers;
- connections to other competent and caring adults;
- problem-solving skills;
- self-regulation skills;
- positive beliefs about the self;
- beliefs that life has meaning;
- spirituality, faith, and religious affiliations;
- socioeconomic advantages;
- pro-social, competent peers and friends;
- effective teachers and schools; and
- safe and effective communities.

This short list came from research on young people, but research on adults suggests that many of these same resilience factors continue to be important (sometimes in more mature forms), as people grow older. Close relationships, for example, are important across the lifespan, first with parents and later with friends or romantic partners. This list provides important clues to what matters for resilience, leading me to conclude that there must be fundamental protective systems for human resilience.

Some examples of basic protective systems for human resilience include

- attachment relationships,
- human intelligence and information processing (a human brain in good working order),
- motivation to adapt and opportunities for agency (mastery motivation),

- self-control and emotion regulation (self-regulation),
- religious and cultural systems that nurture human development and resilience, and
- schools and communities that nurture and support human development and resilience.

What are we to learn from this? What youth are telling us is “You can mess all you want with instruction, curriculum, policy, and program strategies, and while all that is important, it doesn’t substitute for the basics. We need adults who care about us as people and believe in us when no one else does, even when we don’t seem to care about ourselves. Make sure we are connected to family, school, and community, and help us to see that education is relevant to our lives. In return, we will be better students, achieve our potential, and feel that life is an exciting journey.”

The idea of studying what we actually need to know is not new to science. It’s just that from time to time it appears we get lost in our journey. For example, I am reminded of a young British country physician who in the late 1700s noticed that milkmaids who suffered from cowpox appeared to be resistant to smallpox. This seemingly modest observation led to the discovery of the smallpox vaccine. Less than 100 years later, the World Health Organization announced that this terrible disease, which had claimed over 300 million lives in the 20th century alone, had been eradicated. The lesson learned: *Don’t study only the disease; also study the immunity.*

In his book, *One Small Step Can Change Your Life*, Robert Maurer, associate clinical professor at the UCLA School of Medicine, also reminds us about missing simple answers because the problems seem so great. He offers this story to make his point:

Many Americans are unaware that diarrhea kills a million children around the world each year. To put this number into perspective, that's the equivalent of a jumbo jet full of children crashing every four hours. Global health-care experts and governmental organizations have attempted to reduce this occurrence through large scale, costly solutions, such as delivering improved plumbing systems to the beleaguered areas or introducing oral rehydration therapy to the medical facilities that serve these children. These efforts are laudable and useful, but they demonstrate blindness to one very small problem that leads to diarrhea: dirty hands. In the countries where fatal childhood diarrhea is most prevalent, soap is usually present in the house, but only 15 to 20% of people use it before handling food or babies. When people keep their hands clean, diarrhea cases can be reduced by more than 40%. It is easier to teach a person to prevent diarrhea by washing his or her hands than it is to install new plumbing across a continent or to supply a therapy after the disease has taken hold. (pp. 135-136)

The following chapters outline the remarkable body of work, conclusions, principles, and practices found to dramatically help all young people achieve productive and satisfying lives. Be prepared—it may be much simpler than you would expect.



## *Chapter One*

# **Challenging Conventional Wisdom**

Many people fall victim to conventional wisdom. In the child and youth development and education fields, conventional wisdom clearly holds that some children will do very well, others average, and—invariably—some will fail. Over time we have institutionalized that conventional wisdom without fully challenging it. Just look around. We have programs for young people who do extremely well, others for our average children, and many systems for youth who struggle to find a positive place in society.

Our school grading systems consist of As, Bs, Cs, Ds, and Fs, or Excellent, Satisfactory, Unsatisfactory, or Needs Improvement. These systems are in place because we expect students to earn these grades.

Youth-serving organizations continue to design and develop disciplinary protocols. History tells that children have issues requiring these programs. Society is even prepared for youth who break laws. We expect to lock some of them up.

Based on conventional wisdom, we have created a great number of programs to prevent developmentally detrimental behavior. For example, if there is a drug problem, we create a drug prevention program. If we sense a gang problem it

would be prudent to create a gang prevention service. If it is determined there is a school drop-out issue, that would, of course, require a school drop-out prevention program. The same pattern would occur if we were worried about bullying, teen pregnancy, and/or alcohol abuse. These prevention and/or intervention programs could go on endlessly. Find a problem, create a program; find another problem, add another program. Let's continue that process until we finally realize that

- children who succeed in life do so when we focus on their assets, not their liabilities;
- programs don't make a difference in children's lives, relationships do; and
- children grow up holistically and are the sum total of all their experiences, not just one institution's service or activity.

If that is the case, what's a community, school, or organization to do? It begins by challenging conventional wisdom.

Professor Albert Einstein gave us a clue to this dilemma when he said, "We cannot solve today's significant problems at the same level of thinking we were at when we created them." Einstein's assessment is clear: It's time to challenge what we think we know. Unless we do so, we will continue to see the types of statistics collected by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Children's Defense Fund, the Gallup Student Poll, and others.

Over the centuries, our greatest achievements have resulted from changing the way we think. Beyond the

obvious inventions in technology or other discoveries in medicine, society has been most transformed simply by thoughts.

Such powerful thoughts were written by a freckle-faced, six-foot-two, red haired, 33-year-old attorney who spent two and half weeks in a boarding house in Philadelphia, just thinking. He captured his ideas in this expression: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal. They are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” That idea was powerful enough to spawn a new nation (Thomas Jefferson, 1776).

One hundred ninety-two years later and only 200 miles from Philadelphia, a 34-year-old minister addressed more than 100,000 people with a commanding new idea, a new way of thinking: “. . . my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character” (Martin Luther King, 1963). These words thoughtfully and beautifully defined a civil rights struggle by simply and powerfully envisioning a new future for our country.

If we can change the course of history with great ideas, is it not time to suggest that “All children are capable of success, no exceptions?” Conventional wisdom is conventional only as long as it isn’t challenged.

Each chapter in this book examines the dynamics of risk and—most importantly—the power of hope. We explore whether risk and hope are actually manifestations of the same thing. We seek to understand whether eliminating risk offers hope to our children. We redefine words such as *success*, *future*, and *potential* because they are part of conventional wisdom. We challenge well-meaning programs along with established bureaucracies while exploring a culture.

And, if that is not enough conventional wisdom to challenge, we suggest a new discipline of study within our institutions of higher learning: *Hopeology*.

*Hopeology* sounds odd, but not so much when further examined. Over the years, various groups have determined which disciplines require greater study. Most colleges and universities offer degrees in widely ranging areas and specializations within many. Criminology, for instance, might include the dynamics of crime, its history, root causes, prevention, intervention, and punishment theories and practices. Advanced studies may examine why some countries consider some behaviors criminal and others don't, or why some behavior is criminal only past a certain age threshold.

We are not suggesting that crime is not an important area of study. However, I would suggest that if crime is so important to study, why not also study hope? Isn't it hope that gives reason to life—to try, to achieve, to not give up, to be happy, healthy, and courageous? Doesn't hope deserve its own discipline? Could such an idea challenge conventional wisdom?

What is hope? We all have some understanding of what it feels like to have high hopes, a little, or none. Even apart from a faith-based definition of hope, hope relates to goals and energy, dreaming and realizing one's dreams. Where does that come from? Is there a hope gene? Could hope be taught like reading, math, tying one's shoes, or driving a car? Can one learn or receive hope only from a hopeful person such as parents? Might a hope vaccine provide immunity from the ravages of hopelessness, pessimism, and failure?

These questions and hundreds more need study, testing, and answers. Our goal is clear: Understanding why some children do well and others struggle cannot come from conventional means.

In this quest to challenge conventional wisdom, we also challenge the conventional methods we use to support youth. Instead of delivering a series of well-meaning programs or services to youth, we instead offer our findings within a *strategic cultural framework*.

A what? Yes, a strategic cultural framework!