

Are the Kids OK?

Young people need champions. This couldn't be truer in today's society. I've often struggled with what to call myself when it comes to my work, but the title I have landed on that feels the most aligned would be *youth advocate*. All of my work revolves around advocating for kids. Either I'm advocating for them *to* them or I am advocating *about* them to the adults in their lives. They are our hope. They are our future. We must invest in them. We must listen to them. We must work with them. And it is 100% an all-hands-on-deck moment in our existence.

When I was first asked to write this book, I was encouraged to write a guide for teachers. At first I thought it was a great idea because of how important student-teacher relationships are, but there was something telling me that I should make this book for a larger group of people. First of all, I feel like there are enough people out there telling teachers what they should and shouldn't be doing. I knew that I wanted it to be more than a teacher's guide because the conversation needed to include more than just teachers. Something was stirring inside of me as I watched the people around me struggle and suffer with what life was throwing at them. I became even more worried when I started thinking about how these times were affecting our young people and how little space society provides them with an opportunity to talk about their feelings and experiences. When 2025 hit, something sparked inside of me and I had a whole new fire lit around why this work needs to be shared with all of society, not just educators. I was seeing that adults were behaving in harmful ways toward one another and toward themselves. I saw cruelty, fear, and anger becoming a social norm. I also heard and saw people punching down on the youth for how they acted, when oftentimes they were failing to recognize that kids were taking their cues from us. I started thinking about how we can help society move forward and the answer kept being this: we have to change how we treat young people.

We need more people to step up for kids. We need champions, servants, leaders, advocates, mentors, and supporters. Those roles can fit almost any type of adult-child relationship, and so I decided to write about how we, as adults, can support kids better. Whether it's our students, our children, our club members, our campers, our nieces and nephews, or anyone else, all of these young people deserve to have people in their corner who are actually invested in their success and well-being.

Whenever I share my background with people, they are often surprised to hear that I didn't have a traditional teaching background. Ninety percent of my expertise, experience, and training has come from my work in the positive youth development space. Education is important, we know this; but I often find it frustrating that youth development programs and methodology are often left out of general education. Some of the most beautiful, meaningful, and powerful work I have done with young people has been in these spaces.

Even though I have experience in the classroom and have been working with kids for almost 15 years, I don't think that makes me an expert on what other people should be doing in their classrooms. But on a larger scale, I know that deep down we need to be encouraging more people to be safe and trusted adults so that young people can have the support they deserve. I decided I wanted to write this book for anyone who wants to support the young people in their lives. This includes teachers, parents, guardians, aunts and uncles, coaches, mentors, youth development specialists, and anyone else who has the opportunity to be there for a young person as they discover who they are. Now more than ever, we need people in our society to hold themselves responsible for the success and well-being of kids and teenagers. When we invest in our young people, we invest in our future. My greatest hope for you reading this is that you will take away mindsets, practices, and strategies to be someone that young people can learn from, grow with, and be supported by. This book is for anyone who wants to make a difference and wants to be a trusted adult for the kids in their lives.

A couple of years ago I was asked to be a keynote speaker for a small teaching conference. I was so honored to be speaking with teachers about my work because I truly believed it was the missing piece in helping kids grow to their full potential. I did a presentation on learner identity, which is how kids view themselves in relation to their learning. The speech went pretty well in the beginning; we played a fun game. I told my story

as usual, but I was most excited about introducing them to the work. As I spoke about self-compassion as a learning tool, I saw multiple teachers having aha moments. But suddenly a 20-plus-year teacher raised his hand with a look of frustration on his face. He asked me, “Who cares how kids feel? They need to do the work.” There was some murmuring in the crowd, but I also saw several other teachers nodding in agreement with the man. I had to hold back everything inside of me that wanted to yell “*Quit teaching!*” and chose to instead help that teacher understand how feelings deeply affect our ability to show up in learning spaces. I wasn’t sure how the teacher received that information until afterward when he came up and spoke with me. He told me that he didn’t feel like it was a teacher’s job to be a therapist for a student, but after hearing more about how feelings influence how we show up from a “learner’s perspective,” he felt that he had taken away some new knowledge that could help his students when they were struggling.

How we feel about ourselves determines how we see ourselves. How we see ourselves affects how we show up in the world. This is especially true when it comes to learning. I have worked with several students on this issue directly. Their image of being a “bad learner” or “too lazy” directly affected their effort with their classwork. If someone believes that they are a bad student, what is the point of trying at all? One student came to me for help with organizing priorities in their life. When they shared with me what subjects they needed help with, they left out two. I assumed it was because they felt confident in those subjects but once we talked some more, I realized that they had completely written off any possibility of them getting better in those subjects because they believed that they were bad in those subjects and couldn’t get better. What I recognized was that they had an internal narrative about themselves as learners that was preventing effort and engagement. By helping them recognize the stories they told themselves *about* themselves, I was able to help them start building a deeper understanding of why they do what they do. My work with students has revolved mainly around this concept. I aim to help young people build self-expertise so that they can grow in harmony with themselves, instead of enduring a combative inner relationship.

But my bigger mission in life is to be a trusted adult to the kids I serve. The role of a trusted adult in a young person’s development is crucial to their growth and well-being. Trusted adults exist in many forms—parents and guardians, teachers and counselors, youth development specialists, coaches, youth pastors—and trusted adults can

help increase positive life outcomes for kids, provide extra support, and offer guidance when they need it. According to the National Alliance of Mental Illness, the positive outcomes that trusted adults can help encourage in young people include the following characteristics:

- Less risk-taking behavior
- Higher self-esteem
- Higher levels of motivation
- Increased engagement in education
- Positive employment occupations later in life
- Improved mental and physical health

To put it simply, trusted adults can help kids feel better and do better.

I think a lot about the phrase “it takes a village” and where it comes from. At the core of it, that statement expresses the need for extra support in the raising of young people in our society. The phrase itself comes from an African proverb that first originated in the Nigerian Igbo community. What I really appreciate about this approach is that it emphasizes the responsibility that community has in the upbringing of kids. However, over the last few decades we have seen more isolation from one another even though we have more ways of connecting than ever before. Society deems the responsibility for young people to be solely on parents and teachers. Of course the main responsibility for raising kids lands on the parents, but youth development shows that at a certain age, young people need a bigger tribe. It is developmentally appropriate for preteens and teens to pull away from their parents, and many look for other people who can serve as mentors and guides in their lives. This often leads kids to connecting with teachers with whom they feel safe. But the job of a teacher is to teach curriculum to students, not raise them. I recognize and appreciate this because overburdening teachers is never a good move. However, some of the biggest successes in our society attribute their progress to teachers who played a significant role in their lives. It’s rare that they say that it was the curriculum that changed their lives. Instead it usually focuses on how the

teachers made them feel about themselves and their futures. They refer to the growth they had as people, which was co-facilitated with the teacher who had an impact on them. What those teachers did was above and beyond teaching educational skills. They played the role of a trusted adult.

This is what we want this book to be for you. It's designed as a guide to help you become a practice partner in helping young people better understand themselves and the world around them in new ways. You will learn skills and practices that will guide you as you become a person they can turn to and who will hold space for them in a nonjudgmental and caring way. This is not to say that how you currently interact with the young people in your life isn't enough, but rather, we are here to offer new ways of showing up for kids. We are sharing strategies, guidelines, and skills based on research and our experience to help you become that extra support so many young people need.

But first: a little history of how we got here and how our story began.

How the Work Found Us

Donovan's Story

Growing up I believed deeply in the big lie. If you get good grades, have friends, and participate in extracurricular activities then you will be "good." This is a message that we hammer into kids daily. It comes from our families, our teachers, our friends, media, and even society. When adults are trying to connect with kids, one of the first and most common questions we ask them is "How is school going?" We claim to care deeply about students doing well in school, but we often don't pay attention to what's happening internally for them and how it is affecting their well-being. Some of the most stressed out people I have met are kids who are trying to live up to the big lie.

Being good was something that was super important to me and so I held on deeply to that belief that I can't be or feel bad. However, I had a lot of things happen to me that caused a lot of internal pain. My struggles as a young person went unnoticed and eventually became my suffering. Because I felt that I was doing the right things I tended not to ask for help and tried to hide my pain from the people around me. Deep down I wanted to be supported and needed guidance but I tricked myself into invalidating my struggles.

In elementary school I loved learning. I really enjoyed the process of learning new things and felt pride in myself as a student. I was obsessed with books. I couldn't get enough of them. I had good relationships with my teachers and was able to make friends. I didn't think much of myself outside of that but when I got to middle school, things changed drastically for me. The main change came from how I viewed myself. I always pin it down to one memory. When I was in fourth grade they started assessing me for the talented and gifted program. I remember being so excited that I was going to be in advanced classes, learning all sorts of new things. However, when I got the results from my assessment, they commented that I showed a lot of promise but was bad at testing. The next year they brought me in again but this time I remember feeling anxiety about it. I took that belief that I was bad at testing and internalized it as I wasn't good enough. I scored lower than I did the year before and got very similar feedback. My mother eventually told them that we were no longer interested in the program after I shared with her that I felt I was dumb for not meeting their standards.

This followed me into middle school and contributed to my performance anxiety that I still struggle with today. When report cards came out it was always the same story. All As and one B. The B was in math, of course. Even though a B isn't a bad grade, I got hyper-fixated on that. The As didn't mean anything to me but that B was there to remind me that I wasn't good enough. I started to care less about school and started using my failures as a tool of violence against myself. Middle school is where I started to really dislike myself. I felt awful about myself, and since school wasn't providing me a place to feel good about myself, I instead sought out other ways to feel that I was good. That's how I ended up becoming a social butterfly. When I figured out that I could make people laugh and that would make them want to be my friend, I leaned heavily into making that a part of my identity. My grades remained the same, but I lost that love of learning I had when I was younger. I started caring way more about what other people thought about me and completely disconnected myself from my inner voice. Instead I began developing an incredibly toxic voice in my head that was hyper-critical and judgmental and granted me absolutely no peace for most of my young adult life.

For years I waged war on myself, mentally and emotionally. No matter how many people loved me or how good my grades were, deep down I hated who I was. The voice got so bad that by the time I got to college it became a threat to my sense of self. My substance abuse spiraled out of control and my mental health plummeted. However,

I was still very good at hiding how I really felt behind the guise of doing what was expected of me. By my sophomore year, I had decided the only way to end this war on myself was by ending myself. I created a plan to take my life and over the next few months, I slowly pulled away from my life. A week before the day I had planned to take my life, all of that changed when I was called and told that a friend of mine had died by suicide the night before. It was the biggest wake-up call of my life. After immediately getting the help I needed, I worked on my relationship with myself. I had to undo years of self-abuse to build up a new foundation of inner care.

At the same time, I was working with kids in several youth development programs. I kept observing them and thinking about how I could help them avoid some of the things I struggled with. Specifically, what skills would help them be kind and caring to themselves so that they wouldn't have to spend so much time undoing what they had done to themselves growing up. That is where this book comes from, and more importantly, how I found my personal calling. I am committed to being a known public figure that supports young people through teaching them skills to take care of themselves mentally and emotionally as they are growing. However, I also know the importance of adults, and that has led me to developing spaces and strategies for adults to learn how to champion for the young people in their spaces.

Margot's Story

I was born in Germany, the daughter of an American soldier and a German mother. Because my dad was on active duty and my mother worked, at six months old I went to live with my grandparents until I came to America when I was four. I spoke *no* English, didn't know my mother that well, and couldn't remember my father when we arrived in Seattle. Once we settled in, they enrolled me in a preschool and, on the first day, in my mother's words, I "carried on like a fool." I was terrified and traumatized. So, they decided to wait a little longer and they enrolled me in public school. Kindergarten was relatively uneventful, but first grade changed my life. Better yet, a teacher changed my life. Ms. Ingram (I still remember her name! I don't even remember the name of the school!!) was a tall, thin, and stately Black woman. She taught me how to write and all the other first grade things, but her impact on me had less to do with

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learning content (although it enhanced that learning significantly) than it did with being an adult who cared about me and was someone I could trust.

Ms. Ingram wasn't just my teacher, she was the first caring adult in my traumatized little life besides my dad and my German grandmother. She found a safety pin for me when the elastic on my undies gave out (I was mortified!) and then discretely pinned me up. She comforted me when a jealous classmate destroyed my beautiful coloring work and then firmly required him to apologize to me. She chose to work with me on learning to speak English because she cared about me and there were no English for Speakers of Other Languages programs in schools back then. She was always patient, never raised her voice, firm but fair, and encouraged me consistently. My final and favorite story about Ms. Ingram was when my military father received orders to go to Germany. I informed Ms. Ingram that I was leaving and that I wouldn't be back. I was sad about leaving, but packed my things and my pride-and-joy art project, a papier mâché polar bear, and went home. Unfortunately for all of us, my father's orders were canceled. So, I picked up my polar bear the next day and returned to school to the obvious delight of Ms. Ingram who, within my earshot, bragged about me and my polar bear to another teacher and then expressed delight that we were back! I felt so loved and proud. I happily returned to my desk and finished the school year with a teacher I adored.

By the time I reached sixth grade, my English was on par and reading was my passion. My sixth-grade teacher was the always-dapper Mr. Ames. I was new to the school and pleased to have a male teacher. Mr. Ames quickly understood that I loved to read. We were using a system with small booklets that, once successfully read and tested, assessed the grade/reading level of each student. I flew through those little books and finished the whole kit and kaboodle before the year was half over. Most of it was too easy for me, so once I was done, he allowed me to skip the reading circles and read independently. That was heaven for me! I loved to read so much that when we were given names to buy Christmas gifts for a classmate, I bought my gift recipient a book. I looked and searched and picked and discarded book after book until I found one I thought she would love. When I presented it to her, she looked at me and her nose scrunched up in disdain. She dismissed my gift

with a snide “a book? Thanks a lot.” She made quite a show of saying it loud enough for everyone to hear. I was devastated and broke down in tears. Mr. Ames took me to the side, comforted me, told me a book was a wonderful gift and then went to speak to the girl. I don’t know what he said, but she came up to me, abashed and apologetic, and at least pretended to be happy about her gift. Once again, Mr. Ames came to my rescue. He let me know it was a great thing to love books—no matter what anybody said.

Years later, I was in the 10th grade and passed James Sales Elementary daily as I walked to my high school. One morning, a car drove by and then stopped. I was a bit nervous about approaching it, but as I got closer the window opened and I could see the driver was Mr. Ames. He knew exactly who I was; and we were both surprised and delighted to see one another. We had a great conversation, and he wished me well in high school. Although I never saw him again after that, I will never forget him.

Besides the aforementioned academic comments, what these exceptional teachers taught me about caring, about expectations, about fairness, about safety, about trust and acceptance were lessons I never forgot. I learned teaching is much more than just giving students content to learn; it’s about showing up as a trusted adult in their lives. These teachers and my experiences as their student shaped my life in ways I couldn’t have dreamed of back then. I graduated from college, joined the military, and then spent over 20 years as a teacher, lead teacher, district supervisor, and instructional coach in four school districts in two states and every time I stepped into a classroom, I carried Ms. Ingram and Mr. Ames with me. These teachers recognized and honored the humanity of that lonely little German girl and all the other students they taught. It wasn’t just about passing tests or doing homework; they taught us what it means to be a caring human and that there are people in this world we could trust.

Throughout the 20-plus years I’ve been an educator, it was the humanity of the young people I taught, observed, or wrote curriculum for that always stood front and center. When asked to co-write this book with my son Donovan, I was thrilled to add my little bits of knowledge and experience to this meaningful and much-needed book.

Our greatest hope for you reading this is that you will take away mindsets, practices, and strategies to be someone that young people can learn from, grow with, and be supported by. This book is for anyone who wants to make a difference and be a trusted adult for the kids in their lives.

The Why

I am a big believer in understanding the why behind doing the work. You probably already know that young people are struggling a lot in our country. But before we jump into the work, it's important that we lay out some data to show you what has been going on. These statistics may be hard to read but awareness is the first step in creating change.

As educators and youth advocates, we feel it is important to share some statistics to help our readers better understand the why of this book. In both of our experiences, we have seen very clear signs of distress and disconnection in the students we encountered. More importantly, perhaps, was the clear and obvious need for more connection with caring adults. As we began the research for this book, it was clear to us that our children need help—sometimes more help than just teachers and (sometimes parents) could provide.

In the research paper “Where Need Meets Opportunity: Youth Development Programs for Early Teens,” author Jane Quinn wrote as early as 1999 that “opinion polls reveal that the public is concerned about the nation’s young people and supports programs that help schools and families provide the guidance that young adolescents need.” Current statistics only solidify that belief. The Annie E. Casey Foundation funds a nationwide network of state-level grantees to track the well-being of children in the United States. In their (2014b) report “What’s Going On in There?” the statistics are telling:

- “Every year, an estimated 195,000 young people are admitted to detention facilities nationwide, and approximately 15,600 are held in detention on any given night.”

- “In 2023, about one in three youth who were confined were locked up based on a violent crime index offense (i.e., homicide, aggravated assault, robbery, or sexual assault).”

Detention and incarceration aren’t the only serious issues facing our young people: According to The Annie E. Casey Foundation (2014b), “since 1999, more than 230,000 young people have left the foster care system in America, typically at age 18, without having a stable family. Far too many of these young people face troubling challenges upon aging out of foster care, including homelessness, lower graduation rates from high school and college, and difficulty securing stable employment.”

Margot’s Story

One of my most memorable teacher experiences involved a student who, although usually very vocal, was largely a good student. One day, I noticed a bit of tension between this young girl and other students in the class. I stepped in as things continued to escalate, and she got louder and began threatening various classmates. I had her step out into the hallway and, after giving the class a stern warning and an assignment to keep them occupied, I waited for her to settle down a bit.

I was angry but puzzled by her behavior, so I calmly told her that I was surprised and disappointed by what she was doing. I let that sink in and then asked her, “This isn’t like you. Do you want to tell me what’s going on?” She looked at me with tears in her eyes and, after some time, told me that she had been kicked out of her foster home and didn’t know where she was going to live or how she was going to make it. At that point, her classroom behavior became irrelevant, and my number one priority was to get my class covered and get that child the help she needed. Which was what I did. We went to the guidance counselor and social worker, and they took care of everything. She was able to finish her senior year, graduated, and gifted me with numerous graduation pictures and a heartfelt thank-you note.

The lesson? First, I had no idea that children who aged out of foster care were basically put out without resources to help them. Second, it brought home to

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me once again that we don't always know what our children's lives are like outside the classroom—the situation, the parent situation, the home environment, and so on. Young people can't learn when their world is falling apart, and it's our job as adults to be there for them. Whether we're teachers or coaches or family members or friends—it truly does take a village.

Not every child lives with a typical nuclear family as evidenced by The Annie E. Casey Foundation's (2014a) statistics on kinship fostering: "Kinship care is when relatives or close friends step up to raise children when their parents can't care for them for the time being. More than 7.5 million children live with a relative who is the head of their household (frequently a female grandparent [63%] and another nearly 2.5 million children are in kinship care without a parent present in the U.S. If you were raised by a grandparent, an aunt, or a close friend; you were raised under kinship care."

Clearly, poverty, homelessness, or alternate care placements create myriad serious problems, but children from more stable or affluent home situations are not immune to problems either. In their report "Privileged but Pressured? A Study of Affluent Youth," authors Suniya Luthar and Bronwyn E. Becker (2008) of the Society for Research in Child Development, delved into factors contributing to "adjustment problems among relatively affluent" children. These issues were identified in studies as early as the 1990s. "Problems spanning multiple domains of adjustment were detected in a recent comparative study involving over 250 suburban tenth graders, and their economically disadvantaged inner-city counterparts. Suburban youth were found to report significantly higher levels of anxiety symptoms and cigarette, alcohol, marijuana, and hard drug use."

More recent statistics are revealing. In the fact sheet "The Connection Between Teen Drug Use and Mental Health Challenges" published by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (n.d.), the facts are clear: "The number of teens reporting poor mental health has increased over the past decade. . . . The same study found that among high school students in the last 30 days 29% reported experiencing poor mental health, 22% drank alcohol, 17% used marijuana, and 4% misused prescription opioids."

The connection, based on the facts collected by the CDC and others, clearly shows the connection between substance abuse and mental health challenges. “Mental health conditions and substance use disorder (SUD) are often co-occurring. This means that if a teen has a SUD, they are more likely to have a mental health condition.” The fact sheet lists some of the mental health conditions that can affect the lives of young people and, over time, can cause SUD: “Mental health conditions such as anxiety, involve serious changes in thinking, mood, behavior, or any combination of the three that cause distress and problems. These conditions can affect teens’ decision-making and how they relate to others. The reverse is also true: teens with a mental health condition are more likely to use substances” (CDC n.d.).

Clearly, these statistics point to rising and concerning behavioral and mental health issues in our youth. According to the most recent National Survey of Children’s Health conducted by the Data Resource Center for Child & Adolescent Health (2022–2023), approximately one-quarter of 6- to 11-year old children and over 30% of children 12- to 17-year-old students surveyed reported mental, emotional, developmental, or behavioral problems and/or qualified on CSHCN Screener EBD criteria, including approximately 15% of 3- to 5-year-olds!

A study published in the *Journal of American Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* states, “Lifetime and 12-month prevalence of Major Depressive Disorder were 11% and 7.5%, respectively. The prevalence of Major Depressive Disorders (MDD) increased significantly across adolescence, with markedly greater increases among females than among males. Most cases were associated with psychiatric comorbidity and severe role impairment, and a substantial minority reported suicidality” (Avenevoli et al. 2015). Other mental health issues include anxiety, attention deficit disorder, and other behavior disorders including oppositional defiant disorder and pathological demand avoidance are also on the rise. All told, according to the CDC, “Nearly 1 in 5 children ages 3 to 17 (21%) had ever been diagnosed with a mental, emotional, or behavioral health condition” (Leeb et al. 2024).

Some progress in addressing these serious challenges is slowly being made. Recently, Illinois Governor J. B. Pritzker signed into law a requirement for schools to plan universal mental health screenings for elementary, middle, and high school students, the first of its kind in the United States. Although this is a great first step, it is the *only* state in the nation to do something about this alarming issue. The mental health

of our young people affects their lives and the lives of the people surrounding them, and, unfortunately, sometimes help comes too late. Case in point: gun violence.

Perhaps the most alarming statistic is the increasing gun violence perpetrated on school children or themselves by young people. The numbers are horrific. A report by Everytown for Gun Safety (2019) states, “Firearms are the leading cause of death for American children and teens. Approximately three million children witness gun violence each year.” According to their research, children with guns in their homes are more likely to hurt themselves or others and gun violence in schools has continued to increase. “From 2013 through 2022, Everytown identified 720 incidents of gunfire on the grounds of a preschool or K–12 school, including incidents of gun homicides and assaults, gun suicides and attempts, unintentional shootings, and mass shootings.” The research shows that guns used by shooters under 18 usually come from their home. According to Everytown for Gun Safety (2023), “Roughly three-quarters of school shooters under the age of 18 got the gun from their home or the home of a close relative.” In 2024, there were at least 229 incidents on school grounds. By October 2025, there had been at least 118 incidents of gunfire on school grounds that year.

What’s staggering about these statistics is that school shooters nearly always exhibit advance warning signs. “In all incidents of targeted school violence—100% [!]
—there were warning signs that caused others to be concerned.” Why didn’t anyone do something to help these children and prevent further tragedies? Schools have employed school resource officers, security guards, and some are advocating arming teachers, but are these measures effective? According to the National Threat Assessment Center (2019),

When it comes to school shootings, there are nearly always advance indications. These warning signs, if appropriately identified, can offer an opportunity for intervention. The Secret Service study of incidents from 2008 to 2017 found that 100 percent of the perpetrators showed concerning behaviors and that 77 percent of the time at least one person, most often a peer, knew about their plan.

And Everytown for Gun Safety (2023) reported,

School-based interventions that play a vital role in keeping schools safe include: Fostering a safe and trusting school climate for all students; implementing crisis intervention programs to help schools identify and deescalate dangerous situations, ensuring sufficient mental health counselors to create a safe school climate; informing parents about safe gun storage; and implementing school security enhancements.

What are the possible or underlying causes of mental distress and the ensuing aftermath of these conditions in our children? In a (2025) *New York Times* article, “America’s Children Are Unwell. Are Schools Part of the Problem?”, Jia Lynn Yang examined growing evidence that school itself is essential to understanding why so many children seem to be struggling. “It can be a cause of stress that exacerbates anxiety or depression.” I personally experienced the change in education over the 20-plus years I served as an educator. The emphasis shifted from “teaching the whole child” to “teaching to the test.” Political initiatives created to track and improve student progress themselves became sources of stress as teachers faced backlash if student scores did not meet standards set by the state or the Department of Education. According to Yang (2025), “The rules put in place by both political parties were well-meaning, but in trying to make children more successful, they also circumscribed more tightly who could be served by school at all.”

Margot’s Story

I experienced this firsthand when I was tasked to monitor a third-grade class taking their first-ever state exam. These students had been prepping daily for weeks or months preparing for this important examination and the tension was palpable. As we handed out the tests, we noticed a student missing and scrambled to find her. She was found hiding in the bathroom; trembling, with tears running down her face. When asked why she was crying and hiding, she sobbed that she was “scared of failing the test.” To be honest, I’ve never been a fan of these high-stakes tests, but to see this child buckling under the pressure made me both sad and angry. I remember thinking, *What are we doing to our children? WHAT ARE WE DOING TO OUR CHILDREN?*

Whether the pressure comes from society, teachers, parents, or the children themselves, the results can be devastating. According to Luthar and Becker (2008), “In examining the role of achievement pressures in the present study, the construct of achievement pressures was operationalized in terms of two dimensions, the first of which encompassed parental emphasis on achievement. . . . The second dimension used to operationalize achievement was children’s own maladaptive perfectionistic strivings.” Today, I would venture to suggest that there exists a third dimension: school and high-stakes testing.

Quinn (1999) shares that “we interviewed several ‘key informants’ (members of the community likely to have a good understanding of processes in the community) about potential causes of students’ distress. Respondents included school administrators, clinical service providers in the community, PTA representatives, and several parents and children. Insights gained from these various sources consistently pointed to two major factors as possible causes of distress. . . . The first of these potential causes of distress was excessive achievement pressures.” These pressures can, as stated previously, result from the adults in children’s lives or from their own feelings of self-worth. Sadly, it can also be a combination of both.

What can we do to mitigate or help other suffering children mitigate these challenges, pressures, and/or mental health issues? Clearly, more needs to be done and we cannot solely rely on schools or the government to address these issues. So, with all the challenges our children *at all socioeconomic levels* face in this country, how can you and I make a difference in the lives of children? That’s why we wrote this book—to reach out to coaches, youth advocates, friends, family, teachers, employers, caregivers, and any trusted adult who can affect the lives of our children.

According to The Annie E. Casey Foundation (2014b), “Experience matters—experience matters more than we ever thought during adolescence, especially experiences within relationships. The more and varied relationships a young person can maintain within families, peers, school, work, or in their community, the better positioned they will be to achieve a healthy and balanced adulthood. Experiences during adolescence can largely determine the rest of that person’s life trajectory.”

The research shows that providing positive adult and community support is essential and makes a difference. According to Tough (2012), “When the adolescent brain is

exposed to developmentally healthy experiences, it can actually ‘rewire’ itself. This can help any young person, regardless of prior trauma, get on a better path to a brighter future.”

What’s Next?

Chapter 2 will go into detail about how the curriculum was designed. For a long time, I didn’t know how to explain how important this work was. People knew that I was positive and kids felt good being in my class, but they didn’t understand that almost everything in my spaces and curriculum is intentional and comes from research and data. Before we share the work with you, we want you to understand where this work comes from and why it is so important.

