

# The Singapore Youth Resiliency Survey ©

Information for Professionals  
and School Staff



# Youth Resilience Survey

## Information for Professionals and School Staff

***A survey that allows professionals like school staff members, social workers, counsellors, parents and other community agencies, to holistically understand the resiliency of youth in Singapore and thus be in a better position to engage them at an individual level or even at a macro policy level.***

Reports on “at-risk” youth behaviour in Singapore have captured the attention of not only professionals working with youth but the public as well.

Recent examples include increased levels of gambling<sup>2</sup>, under-aged sex<sup>3</sup> and adolescent suicide<sup>4</sup> reported by local media, the Singapore Police Force as well as Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports.

Such increasing reports of at-risk youth behaviour are common not only in Singapore but also in developed countries such as the United States and United Kingdom.

While it is imperative to recognise and reduce “at-risk” behaviours, the unfortunate side-effect of labelling youth “at-risk” is that we tend to blame youth for their own failure in education or development.

“Because policy tends to blame young people for their own circumstances, it can thus focus on reducing ‘push’ factors rather than offering ‘pull’ factors”

- M. Barry, *Youth Policy and Social Inclusion* (2005)

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<sup>2</sup> Straits Times report “Gambling not ‘rite of passage’” Aug 17 2009

<sup>3</sup> Singapore Police Force Annual Crime Brief 2008

<sup>4</sup> Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports (MCYS) report to United Nations Convention of Rights of the Child 2008

Earlier deficit model of adolescence recognized this period as characterized by problems to be dealt with and as such, research was focused primarily on health risk behaviours and predictors of risk behaviours.

This model resulted in subsequent prevention and intervention programs<sup>5</sup>, which were often later evaluated to have limited effectiveness.

Failing to capitalize on the strengths and resiliency of youth, youth workers and educators turned to a strengths-based approach to youth development.

One such example of this new approach to positive youth development is a renewed interest in the concept of resilience. Once regarded as a rare characteristic of a few 'superkids', emerging research has indicated that resilience can be strengthened in any child who has not suffered from the most severe of trauma.

Looking at youth development through resilience suggests that the individual is able to respond to risk factors such as drug/alcohol use, teenage pregnancy, involvement in gangs. What makes a child resilient includes not only internal individual characteristics but external protective factors as well (support provided by school, community and families).

When resilience can be viewed as something that can be strengthened through increasing protective factors in key moments in the youth's life, then strategies can be directed towards practice, attitudes and even policies.

In fostering resilience, it is important to note that:

1. The process is developmental and long term
2. The process views youth with strengths rather than deficits/risks

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<sup>5</sup> Example of such programs include the D.A.R.E program in the U.S. Studies by U.S. Surgeon General, Department of Education and several other government bodies have concluded that the program is ineffective in stopping teens from using drugs and other illegal substances

3. The process nurtures external protective factors within schools and communities as well as individual positive characteristics

### **Work done on Resiliency in Singapore**

Local resilience studies have looked specifically at areas such as the competitive education system<sup>6</sup> and family values<sup>7</sup>.

The media has also reported on surveys that looked at themes such as national pride, media usage, online activities (including gaming) and sexual behavior/attitudes amongst youth in Singapore.

This youth survey seeks to tie in resiliency in a holistic way by looking at the needs of young people. It is practical and relatively easy to administer, either by academics, professionals, or laypersons. It is simple without being simplistic.

#### **What is the Circle of Courage?**

The Circle of Courage is a model of looking at youth resilience. Larry Brendtro, Martin Brokenleg and Steve Van Brockern created this model by combining contemporary resilience theories, education and youth work as well as principles of traditional child rearing.

As portrayed artistically above, it identifies 4 universal needs: belonging, mastery, independence and generosity. When the Circle of Courage is in balance, youths are able to experience positive development and life outcomes.

Resilience within young people can be nurtured by attending to their four basic needs:

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<sup>6</sup> "Stress, Coping and Resilience in Children" in 2004. The study was in response to the **competitive nature of our education system** and **high parental expectations**. The aim was to understand the needs of children preparing for the O level examinations.

<sup>7</sup> "Exploratory Study on Youth Resilience and Family Values in Singapore" in 2003. The study looked at how **family values** and youth resilience interacted.

1. Every Child Feels the Need for **Belonging** ("I mean something to you.")
2. The Need for **Mastery** ("I am good at something.")
3. The Need for **Independence** ("I have the power to make decisions.")
4. The Need for **Generosity** ("I have purpose in my life.")

## The 4 Quadrants of the Circle of Courage

**Generosity**  
is intended to provide children with opportunities to demonstrate altruism and helping behaviors. Children learn to understand the value of giving back to the community and making a meaningful to someone else.

**Independence**  
focuses on providing children with experiences to develop autonomy and essential life skills. Children and youth learn to accept responsibility. They are empowered to understand how their choices affect their destiny.





### CIRCLE OF COURAGE



**Belonging**  
emphasizes the importance of individuals having a sense of connectedness to someone or something - families, clubs, church groups, etc. A positive sense of belonging nurtures self-esteem, self-worth, and ultimately equips children with the ability to develop healthy relationships with others.

**Mastery**  
refers to the importance of children and youth developing skills that help them produce and exercise competence, achievement, and control over self. Children gain mastery by learning new skills through daily life and enrichment activities in which their environment provides them with multiple opportunities to tap personal talents.

## INDICATORS OF ENGAGEMENT

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Insightful into the feelings of others</li> <li>• Has a sense of destiny</li> <li>• Empathetic and caring</li> <li>• Capacity to give to others</li> <li>• High levels of moral development</li> <li>• Judges right from wrong</li> <li>• Values decency, honesty, compassion and fair play</li> <li>• Responds to the needs and suffering of others</li> <li>• Is forgiving (doesn't hold grudges)</li> <li>• Demonstrates kindness</li> <li>• Feels appropriate guilt and tries to redress wrongs</li> </ul>	 <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Generosity</b></p> <p>I am considerate of others</p> <p>Concern for others</p> <p>Empathy</p>	 <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Belonging</b></p> <p>I am important to someone</p> <p>Relationships of trust</p> <p>Unconditional acceptance</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Has a network of friends</li> <li>• Participates in school life</li> <li>• Uses humour positively</li> <li>• Laughs and smiles</li> <li>• Demonstrates pride</li> <li>• Is friendly to others</li> <li>• Demonstrates warmth</li> <li>• Is cooperative and accepting</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High tolerance of distress</li> <li>• Resilient</li> <li>• Independent thinker</li> <li>• Distances self from destructive relationships</li> <li>• Personal efficacy</li> <li>• Keeps boundaries and emotional distance from troubled persons</li> <li>• Stand up to negative influence and are not easily misled</li> <li>• Takes charge of problems</li> <li>• Takes responsibility for own behaviour (doesn't blame others)</li> <li>• Demonstrates confidence</li> <li>• Is assertive (not aggressive)</li> <li>• Demonstrates leadership skills</li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>CIRCLE OF COURAGE</b></p> <p>Inner locus of control</p> <p>Responsibility</p> <p>Autonomy</p> <p>I am in charge of my life</p>  <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Independence</b></p>	<p>Skills and knowledge</p> <p>Cognitive, physical, social and spiritual learning</p> <p>I am able to solve problems</p>  <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Mastery</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is receptive to new ideas</li> <li>• Has a wide range of interests</li> <li>• Is creative</li> <li>• Has high expectations of self and others</li> <li>• Communicates effectively</li> <li>• Asks questions</li> <li>• Is persistent</li> <li>• Motivated to achieve (accomplishment rather than competitiveness)</li> <li>• Observes and imitates other's successful behaviours</li> <li>• Seeks role models</li> <li>• Tolerates frustration</li> <li>• Demonstrates organisational skills</li> </ul>

The model premises upon the more positive traits and strengths of youth, with an emphasis on the importance of youth education and development.

Adapted from the four categories (significance, competence, power and virtue) of self-esteem defined by child psychologist Stanley Coopersmith, the Circle of Courage comprises four distinct though inter-related quadrants of youth resilience: Belonging, Mastery, Independence and Generosity.

Using a Circle of Courage metaphor, many of today's youngsters have "broken circles."

- Instead of *Belonging*, fractured families, unfriendly schools, and rejecting peers can cause a sense of alienation. Children alienated from positive adults and peers are emotionally and morally adrift.
- Instead of *Mastery*, schools sometimes play a competitive zero-sum game by enthroning "winners" and discarding "losers." Children who are not bonded to school fail to develop their full potential.
- Instead of *Independence*, youth are deprived of opportunities to make responsible decisions. As African-American educator W. E. B. DuBois said, only responsibility teaches responsibility.
- Instead of *Generosity*, children are reared in a world that equates wealth with worth. Preoccupied with self, they fail to develop their natural abilities to show care and contribute to others.

Since then, the Circle of Courage has been widely applied in school settings around the world, including other contexts such as treatment facilities, family and youth development programs.

In 2001, a survey was given to Vermont students in grades 8-12 and it showed that the more students reported the feelings of belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity, the less

likely they were to participate in risk behaviors such as smoking, fighting, and drinking.

## **In context of school and other youth organisations**

**Belonging** – Children need to feel that they are loved. Therefore, access to a positive and caring environment is important. Research (Howard, Howell, and Brainard) has consistently shown a link between positive school climate and other important measurements of school success, including

- academic achievement
- high morale
- staff productivity
- effective management

**Mastery** – Strength-based approaches to learning rather than deficit models can be embraced in relation to the Circle of Courage model. Children need to experience success and develop a sense of pride in their accomplishments. If teachers use strategies that are multi-level (e.g Multiple Intelligences) to meet the needs of students, children will be able to experience success and develop pride in their accomplishments.

**Independence** – From a Circle of Courage perspective, it is imperative that students be taught decision making, problem solving, and other related social skills.

Students need to learn to self-regulate and be in control of their own behaviors. One way this can be done is through choice. Students must be given opportunities to make, and be accountable for, their own choices.

**Generosity** - “It is one of the most beautiful compensations of this life that no man can sincerely try to help another without helping himself.” – Emerson

Generosity needs to be taught, modelled and practiced. Opportunities should be provided for students to practice

generosity. One possibility is to ensure that the curriculum includes a service learning component.

## **What are the benefits of positive models of youth development such as the Circle of Courage?**

Looking at positive youth development is important in order to:

- 1) make youth engagement and leadership normative and cumulative
- 2) Develop best practices in youth engagement
- 3) Recognising that youth and his/her context matter
- 4) Build developmental assets in youth. This not only has an impact at the time of intervention but later in life as well.
- 5) Encourage effective 2 way influence between youth and society.
- 6) Enabling more inclusive environments for children and youth

Most uniquely, these beliefs can also be embraced by young persons. You do not have to fight with kids to convince them they should belong, master, be independent, and contribute to others. The desire to have these qualities is generally intrinsic.

## **Understanding the Survey**

This survey aims to measure the resiliency of youth in Singapore across income groups or educational background, using an engagement and assessment tool developed by Debbie Draper (Dept of Education and Children Services, Southern Australia)

This tool is based on “The Circle of Courage” framework and has been used in Australia, the U.S and South Africa.

## **Who is the youth survey intended for?**

Participants may include youth between the ages of 12 to 18 years who are either schooling or non-schooling.

At the moment, we will begin with youth selected from programs run by Beyond Social Services as well as those in schools, institutions or programs that are run by partner organisations.

In order to make the survey more representative of the local population of youth, we are inviting all Secondary schools, Junior Colleges and Polytechnics to take part. We will be more than grateful if your school could assist us in informally distributing this survey to one or a few classes. A more representative sample would mean that better results can be obtained and shared.

## **Administering the Survey**

Environmental or school climate surveys are often conducted to review the factors in the school or classroom that will have an influence on students' overall functioning. These surveys can be conducted at the school or classroom level and can involve students, staff, parents, community members, and school administrators.

Similarly, the Circle of Courage Youth Resilience Survey can be conducted:

### **As a Class or Group formal Survey**

A structured setting allows for the effective collation of data – many completed surveys in a relatively short time. In this case, surveys should be made anonymous to give respondents some privacy. The survey has been designed to be self-administered and minimal explanation of any terms is necessary.

Our focus group trial showed that the survey could be completed within 20 to 30 minutes in such a setting.

## **As an engagement tool to use with individual/small groups of youth**

An informal setting (such as playground or tuckshop) or session involving a small group (1-4) of youth where the counsellor, social worker or educator could administer the survey to the group and **after completion**, go through the questions and responses by engaging the youth.

Analyzing individual responses can lead to a more effective intervention or individualised plan of action.

## **What happens after conducting the survey?**

In either of the cases above, please mail back the completed forms to our address mentioned below. The data can also be collected by staff of Beyond Social Services. If you prefer to have data collated specific to your school/organisation sent back to you, please inform us. To maintain confidentiality, data from individual schools will not be released to the public or used in any further research without permission.

Survey data will be published and a copy will be sent to all schools who have worked with us in this study.

**Please contact us if you would like your students/youth to take part in the survey. Again, all specific results and scores pertaining to individuals and schools will remain private and confidential. Only aggregate data will be used in the final report.**

### **Contact Us**

Beyond Social Services  
26 Jalan Klinik, #01-42/52  
Singapore 160026  
Tel: 63752940  
Fax: 62740633

<http://www.beyond.org.sg>

Seah Pei Kwang  
Survey Co-ordinator  
spk@beyond.org.sg