

Reframing Success

Helping Children & Teens Grow from the Inside Out

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Defining Success

From the time we are born, each of us walks a different path to success.

Most often, our attitudes about achievement and success quietly emerge from our personal life stories —positive or negative —of being parented, educated, and mentored by the generation who came before us.

Societal notions of success creep, often unquestioned, into our psyche. They are notions mostly associated with the quantity, not the quality, of our lives. How much have we achieved? Do we make enough money? Do we know the *right* people?

Have you ever whispered the *real* meaning of success to yourself? If you expressed those feelings aloud, would you stand out? Would you be different? Most of us don't want to be different, so we take the road most traveled.

Personally, I'm tired of the road that measures success by numbers. And I believe it's a road that's hurting our children.





Before I earned a Ph.D. in Human Development, I had a long career in corporate America, making my way up the traditional ladder of success in the field of Organization Development.


In a Fortune 500 company, I led strategic planning sessions, coached leaders, conducted management workshops, and facilitated conversations that helped executives collaborate toward achieving goals.

But what I most noticed during those years were the young employees, those new to the work environment. Despite good grades and college diplomas, most entered the workplace poorly equipped to communicate, solve problems, and overcome challenges. Many had not learned to work in teams, give and receive constructive feedback, or critically think about both sides of issues. This is an observation I still hear from today's managers.

I began to wonder about the roots of success. Not just what success looked like in organizations, but about individual success and the inner qualities that helped us thrive in life. Who plants the seeds of purpose, compassion, honesty, and integrity? Who nurtures internal strengths like initiative and creativity? Who raises children to care about their communities and the world around them?

The answer? All of us.





PARENTS, SCHOOLS, AND COMMUNITIES
play interconnected roles in how children
thrive in school, careers, and society.



Like the patterns of nature, we are all **connected**. It is not one person, teacher, or experience that fosters success. It is the collection of relationships, experiences, and opportunities that weave together each of our stories – that determine the people we become and how well we contribute to our families, jobs and communities.

More than ever before, we live in an interconnected society – a society that requires young people to be creative, innovative, and well-prepared to solve complex problems. Students still need strong foundations in reading, writing, math, science, and other core academics. Few people argue that progress in these areas should not be measured in some manner.

But what I and many of my colleagues argue is that today's definition of success is far too narrow. Measuring achievement through high-stakes academic testing limits success. It disregards the whole child and the many proven attributes that lead to a life of well-being.

Notions of success and achievement follow children a lifetime, helping define their identities. Imagine if young people measured success from their experiences beyond grades, test scores, and awards. Imagine if they felt good about who they were on the inside?

What are some characteristics, according to research, that facilitate school, job, and life success? They include the following:





CURIOSITY

Photo by Ryan Hagerty



CREATIVITY

POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS



Photo by Elizabeth Jackson



APPRECIATION OF NATURE AND BEAUTY

Photo by LaVonda Walton



BELIEF IN YOURSELF

Photo by Paolo Neo

Measuring K-12 Success

Research shows that internal strengths are far more important to a life of success and well-being than whether a child earns an “A” on an Algebra exam or achieves a high SAT score.

Yet most tests are designed to measure a student’s ability to produce correctly memorized answers. They are not designed to measure a child’s most valued attributes and characteristics, including

- Effort
- Critical thinking
- Collaboration
- Respect
- Caring
- Honesty
- Open Mindedness
- Initiative
- Imagination
- And much more!





For today's learners, correct answers are not enough.

By the time children reach late adolescence, they have the capacity to see interrelationships, explore the boundaries between fields of study, and think in new ways.

Combined with internal strengths that are fostered throughout childhood, young people can fuel tomorrow's innovative technologies and create positive change in their communities and around the globe.

Despite a strong body of research on the value of measuring success from the inside out, why do we continue to rely on standardized, quantitative tests? The simple answer is that these tests are easy to administer and provide a huge profit to companies that design and score them. Lobbyists pressure legislators to increase high stakes testing for younger and younger children each year.

To be honest, I'm not a proponent of eliminating standardized testing altogether. I believe it has a place in our educational system, primarily for measuring curriculum effectiveness. Period.

My objection to standardized testing is the insidious way it instills notions of achievement and success in our children.





In addition to an unhealthy focus on grades and test scores, adults send clear messages through the expectations we convey. What are some things we do?

- Envision a child in college (maybe Harvard) on the first day of kindergarten.
- Encourage kids to choose one extra-curricular activity by late elementary school (preferably a competitive sport) that will fuel their self-esteem.
- Insist they practice that sport or activity at least 20 hours per week, much more if they want to get a college scholarship.
- Get them to volunteer at least 250 hours during high school, making their college resume stand out from the crowd.
- Remind them often to get good grades. On second thought, get A's. (They'll have a much better chance of getting into Stanford.)
- When they stumble or fail, treat it as someone else's fault.
- Worried about their SAT or ACT score? Hire a tutor to raise their scores.
- Is your teen feeling stressed? Unfocused? Get a life coach or counselor.
- Help student apply to most prestigious colleges, those that are most highly-ranked by U.S. News and World Report – a system that is not evidence-based.
- Imagine child at prestigious college, graduating magna cum laude, getting a high paying job, and paying off student loans. Ah...they are finally happy and launched to a life of success!



Photo by Kat Spence

What's wrong with this picture?



First, the scenario on the previous page is seldom achievable unless you are a child of privilege. And if you are, research shows that these adult expectations are affecting kid's mental health at alarming rates.


But the stresses are even greater for low-income children whose families struggle to meet basic needs. They often live in situations that do not provide the same kind of support and learning opportunities. Kids have fewer mentors and role models. And they have fewer safety nets when they fail.

The American dream costs big money. It also demands big involvement on the part of parents. Not that parents shouldn't be involved. Of course they should. In fact, parents should be engaged in all aspects of their children's development.

But to climb today's ladder of K-12 success and onto a prestigious college, many parents feel pressure to become over-engaged. They end up doing homework for children, solving their problems, and shielding them from the most important learning in life – how to overcome challenges and rebound from failure.

Privileged or not, the BIGGEST problem with the picture we paint for children is quite simple.



The background of the slide features a close-up, slightly blurred image of several Euro banknotes in various denominations (50, 10, 5, 2) and a portion of a calculator. A small, shiny, metallic object, possibly a paperclip or a small figurine, is resting on one of the banknotes. The text is overlaid on a semi-transparent green rectangular box.

We are educating our
children to achieve
EXTERNAL wealth rather
than **INTERNAL** wealth

Quality vs. Quantity: What is Internal Wealth?

What if we measured success by internal rather than external wealth? What would that look and feel like?

Actually, we live in a society that contradicts itself over and over again on this topic. We place our deepest value on internal wealth but we act in ways that reinforce the opposite to our children.

Ironically, some of the most authentic conversations about wealth occurs at funeral and memorial services. Whether we remember a child whose life was cut short or someone whose life was long and successful, families and friends always speak with honest, raw emotion about what they valued.

What do we most remember and cherish?

I've been to my fair share of memorials in the past few decades, including one for my own husband when my daughter was three years old. Each time I relearned the meaning of internal wealth.



What did I learn?

It doesn't matter if people have prestigious educational initials next to their names or if they lived in an expensive house. What matters most is how they loved and were loved. It's that simple.

We mostly remember people for their generosity, kindness, compassion, sense of humor, friendliness, and integrity.

We remember them for their ability to overcome life's obstacles with quiet determination, courage, and perseverance.

We remember the contributions they made to their families, workplaces, and communities – how they listened, helped solve problems, and expressed their feelings and emotions.

It is these and many other internal qualities that help us connect with others, to live lives of happiness and well-being. They enable us to love and be loved.

I don't know about you, but these are qualities I strive to develop in myself. And it's the kind of wealth I want for my children and grandchildren.



Child Development Myths

As I've worked with parents and teachers over many years, I've discovered a few myths about how children and teenagers develop into responsible and caring adults.

- Parents tend to believe it is the result of a good education.
- Teachers tend to believe it is the result of good parenting.

Who's right? Neither. And both.

We actually know a great deal about positive youth development – how children and adolescents grow to become caring family members, innovative and responsible workers, engaged citizens, and ethical leaders.

When children receive age-appropriate support from parents, teachers, adult mentors, and role models AND they are given opportunities for learning, they are more likely to thrive in life – regardless of their circumstances.





As parents and teachers, we place a great deal of emphasis on how well our children learn reading, writing, math, and science, as well as how they develop skills in extra-curricular activities. And we should.

But shouldn't we place equal emphasis on developing the foundations of how young people grow to take action in the world -- to love, work, and play in ways that bring them happiness and well-being?

Just because children do well in school or sports doesn't mean they will thrive in life. Of course, having supportive parents helps, but doesn't ensure success either. Why not? Because healthy development isn't that simple.

It is the inner work of childhood and adolescence that shapes a young person's future. Scholars have studied this process since Erik Erikson's ground-breaking work in the 1950's. While many researchers, including today's neuroscientists, continue to refine our understanding of healthy development, there are good resources to help parents, teachers, and other adults refocus attention on how we define success and help kids develop the internal strengths that shape the adults they will become.

I call these strengths the *Roots of Action*.



How Children Become Successful

Children and teens learn to propel life forward in meaningful directions when they develop an interconnected system of internal strengths – much like the roots of a strong tree. These qualities emerge as the result of adult support and relevant life experiences during childhood and adolescence.

Imagine these roots as sources of guidance as kids journey through life – much like an internal compass. Everyone's compass is different because each of us is different. It helps us navigate the good times and bad as well as make meaning of our experiences and relationships.

Our internal compass is the pilot of our life ship. It helps us take charge, take action, and stay on course.

The *Roots of Action* website is designed to engage families, teachers, and community leaders in discussion about these internal strengths and how they are nurtured in young people.

There are many ways to talk about these abilities. Since they help provide a road-map through life, I like to think of them in the form of a compass. This internal compass give kids clear advantages in school, career, and life. The next page shows the whole compass, with eight abilities that every child needs to succeed.



Ability to recognize, feel, and respond to the needs and suffering of others.

Ability to generate and communicate original ideas and to appreciate the nature of beauty.

Ability to seek and acquire new knowledge, skills, and ways of understanding the world.

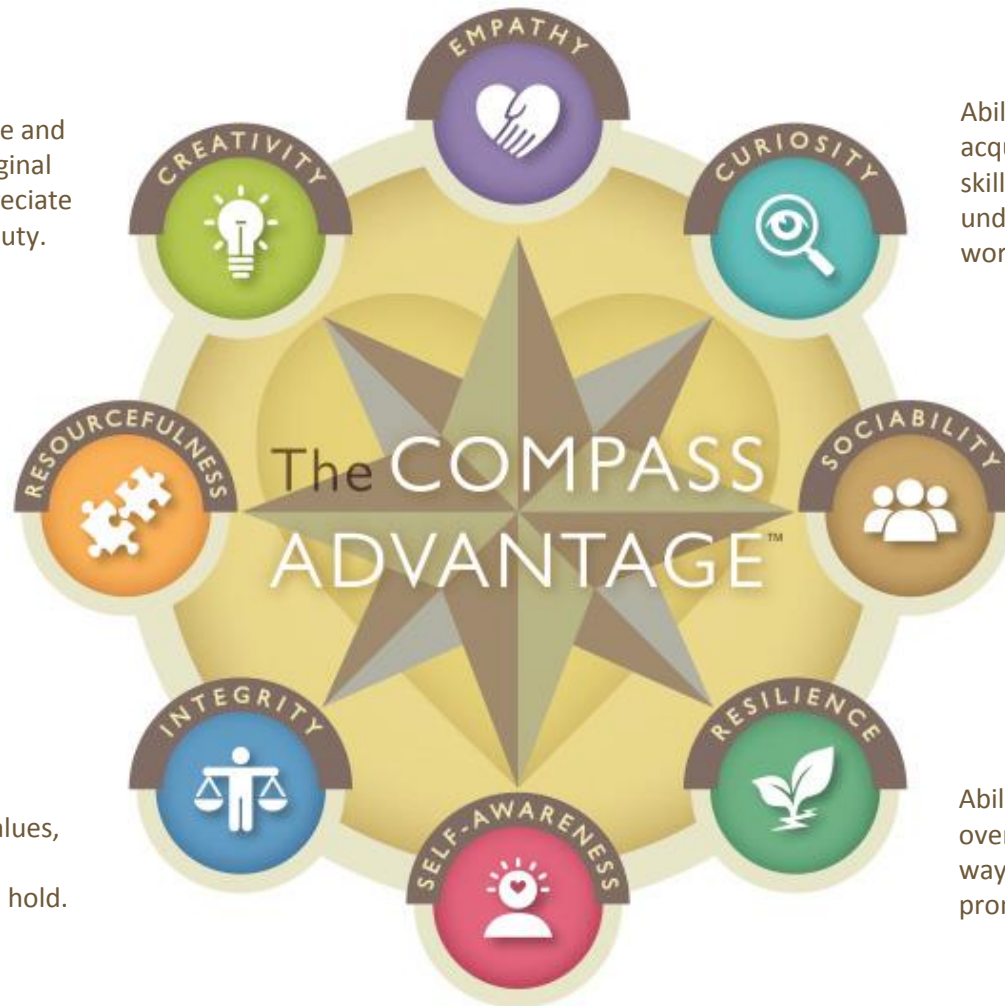
Ability to find and use available resources to achieve goals, problem-solve, and shape our future.

Ability to understand & express feelings and behaviors that facilitate positive relationships.

Ability to act in ways consistent with the values, beliefs, and moral principles we claim to hold.

Ability to meet and overcome challenges in ways that maintain or promote well-being.

Ability to examine and understand who we are relative to the world around us.



Eight Pathways to Every Child's Success

When children develop an internal compass from which to draw strengths, they learn to navigate life without the help of parents and teachers.

They plot their own paths and create their unique maps toward the future.

While the eight compass points represent distinct skills and abilities, ALL strengths are connected at the heart of who we are and how we relate to the world around us.



Curiosity is the ability to seek and acquire new knowledge, skills, and ways of understanding the world. It is at the heart of what motivates kids to learn and what keeps them learning throughout their lives. Curiosity facilitates engagement, critical thinking, and reasoning.

How do children become lifelong learners? Browse and discuss the articles and latest research on [curiosity](#).





Sociability is the joyful, cooperative ability to engage with others. It is derived from a collection of social-emotional skills that help children understand and express feelings and behaviors in ways that facilitate positive relationships, including active listening and communication skills. Also included is the ability to self-regulate, to have impulse control when we are under stress. Children learn to avoid aggression, bullying, and other anti-social behaviors when they learn to read their bodies, separate impulse from action, and respond to social cues.

These skills mature throughout our lives, but the roots of how we develop good relationships are seeded in childhood. Browse the articles on [sociability](#).



Resilience is the ability to meet and overcome challenges in ways that maintain or promote well-being. Resilience is developed when children believe in themselves and their abilities, when they persevere in the face of failure, and when they take initiative to make things better for themselves and others.

At the Roots of Action website, you can browse and discuss articles related to [resilience](#).





Self-awareness is the ability to examine and understand who we are relative to the world around us. Children learn to become self-aware by practicing self-reflection and by making sense of feedback. By adolescence, self-reflection helps teens discover their core values and life purpose – an essential part of forming an identity that will shape their adult lives.

How children grow to become aware of themselves and what they value is a complex process. I hope you'll browse and discuss the articles on [self awareness](#).



Integrity is the ability to act in ways consistent with the values, beliefs, and moral principles we claim to hold. Its about doing the right thing, even when no one is watching – about courage, honesty, and respect in one's daily interactions.

We shape a child's integrity by treating them with respect, dignity, and listening to their feelings and concerns without judgment. Browse and discuss the articles and research on [integrity](#) at the Roots of Action website.





Resourcefulness is the ability to find and use available resources to achieve goals, problem-solve, and shape the future. Young people can have an abundance of skills but if they don't have the ability to think strategically, they are unlikely to plot their future courses. These skills include the abilities to plan, problem-solve, and make decisions.

Resourcefulness is developed from solving real-world problems. Browse and discuss the latest articles and research on how young people develop **resourcefulness**.



Creativity is the ability to generate and communicate original ideas and to appreciate the nature of beauty. It involves our capacity to imagine and create innovative ways of contributing to the world. Creativity also involves the aesthetic connection we feel to the gifts around us – to art, music, and nature.

Standardized testing and highly structured environments squelch creativity. Browse and discuss the articles on **creativity** and how we nurture this important strength in children and teens.





Empathy is the ability to recognize, feel, and respond to the needs and suffering of others. It facilitates the expression of caring, compassion, kindness, and even civic engagement. It is situated at “true north” on the compass to symbolize the outward impact of educating young citizens committed to a just and sustainable world for everyone.

Research suggests that our ability to care is the result of both nature and nurture. While it’s true that some people are born more caring than others, it is also true that we can nurture this ability in children from a young age. How does this happen? Browse and discuss the articles about [empathy](#).

* * *

The abilities in *The Compass Advantage*™ are developed in many ways, including through storytelling, role models, and childhood heroes. Parents, families, teachers, and community leaders share in the development of these strengths, but we often forget to teach and reinforce them every day, in ways that matter.

It’s easy to think that children and teens develop these abilities by osmosis, by studying hard, doing well in school, making friends, and following the traditional road to “success.” But research shows that children grow to be their best selves when they have the abilities to understand who they are and how they want to live their lives. If we can nurture these abilities, then we’ve been successful adult guides.



A Strong INTERNAL COMPASS Makes Young People the Navigators of their Own Lives



And Helps Them Thrive...

As Caring Family Members



As Productive & Innovative Workers



A photograph showing a woman with reddish-brown hair and sunglasses on her head, leaning over a dark wooden table. She is looking at a young boy who is focused on cutting a piece of white paper. On the table, there are several pieces of colored paper (yellow, pink, green) and a small brown string. In the background, a girl with dark hair is looking through a window frame. The text "As Engaged Citizens" is overlaid in the center in a pink font.

As Engaged Citizens

As Ethical Leaders



Storytelling for Success

Each one of the young people on the previous pages has a story.

We adults have stories too.


How we share our stories influences our future and the future of the planet. Stories connect us to each other. They connect us to generations that follow.

Children learn about the world through stories and experiences. It is where they learn about relationships, culture, values, morality, justice, spirituality, and nature. When we think about how to reframe success in ways that invite children to become their best selves, we must consider the stories we tell.

We must also *listen* to the stories young people tell us.

Many adults look first to what is wrong with kids today. They focus on disabilities, addictions, and disorders of all kinds. Their stories convey disappointment as they struggle to find ways to *fix* young people.





While weaknesses are part of being human, children need not be defined by them. In fact, our struggles are embedded with successes.

Is it time to change how we tell our stories?

Research Weighs In


Researchers in the fields of psychology, sociology, and anthropology have been studying people's stories for decades. They listen to hundreds of stories, and then look for themes.

What have researchers learned?

Social scientists who have studied how adults influence the next generation in positive ways found intriguing themes in their stories. Their stories shared:

- How they learned through overcoming obstacles.
- How they became aware of themselves through suffering.
- How adversity paved a path to a better life.
- How success was embedded in the journey, not in the outcome.





In many ways, these adults mirrored the themes in Joseph Campbell's *Hero's Journey*.

In mythological stories, heroes are called upon to face difficult challenges. Their adventures are filled with obstacles to overcome. They feel distraught. Fearful. Emotionally paralyzed.

What happens next? Heroes always encounter helpers during the journey. These helpers show up as wise people, role models, and mentors that support the hero.

Helpers ease the hero's suffering, walking alongside as they dig deeply for internal answers. They encourage the hero to struggle, to learn from failure and temptation.

Myth stories always end with transformation and deep learning for the hero – the kind of learning that is carried forward to life's next adventure.

Research shows that parents, grandparents, teachers, and other mentors help kids become their own heroes when they walk alongside them as helpers. When they share stories of their own lives that focus on internal struggle, they help children understand the importance of the journey within.





My own research delves into stories that young people tell us! You can read more about them in the [research section](#) of my professional website.

Rather than studying the deficits in kids, I study what makes youth successful and how adults contribute to their growth and development.

Not surprisingly, my research showed that children and teens who became highly engaged in societal causes had parents, teachers, and/or mentors who:

- Helped them overcome challenges through guidance and support.
- Encouraged them to find meaning from adversity.
- Told their own stories that shared difficult journeys and what they learned.

I can't begin to tell you how these young people changed my own perceptions of success. Their stories convinced me how important the childhood and teen years are to developing life-long internal strengths. And most importantly, they showed me how adults scaffold that development in key ways.

Whether young people grew up with few or many material resources, their stories of success had common themes.



Success and Struggle are Interwoven

Over 100 years ago, the great African American educator, Booker T. Washington made a statement that is validated by today's research in human development. He said, "I have learned that success is to be measured not so much by the position that one has reached in life as by the obstacles overcome while trying to succeed."

If success and struggle are as interwoven as humans truly believe, then why do we negatively label kids who struggle? The truth is that all kids struggle! That is what makes them succeed!

If we place children in categories based on their weaknesses, they will learn to be weak. But if we stand alongside and support them as they learn how to struggle, we give them a gift that lasts a lifetime.

Read some of the quotes from the teens I interviewed as they described the adults who brought out the best in them, from the inside out.





Melinda: “Getting support from somebody who isn’t your parents is very touching. She had no obligation to listen to me, and yet she still did. It gives you strength in a way that your parents really can’t give you.”

Ryan: “He encouraged me to keep writing, to channel my emotions into some form of media, rather than keeping them bottled inside of me and being upset about things.”

Byron: “He was always there to help when I needed him. It wasn’t him telling me what I should do...he was just there to keep me going which I thought was very important because I knew that I could pull stuff together. It’s just nice having someone there all the time to let you know.”

Victor: “He helped me see the success of an event isn’t just measured by one thing. After everything started going not quite the way I had planned, he was able to step in and let me know that it was alright.”

Ashley: “These two teachers were right alongside me. I could go to them and talk about anything, any difficulties. I talked to them about everything. It was like my possibilities were endless for whatever I wanted to do in the world.”

Danielle: “My father wouldn’t try to tell me what to do. He would instead just be thoughtful and quiet and then he would remind me who I was. He showed that he had faith in me and he knew that I would make a good choice.”



What's Your Story?

We all have stories of struggle that are embedded with deep learning and success.

Think about your own childhood and adolescence. This is the time you developed your internal compass – the strengths and abilities that would guide you into adulthood.

Who influenced you? Who were your role models? Who helped you believe in yourself? What lessons did you learn from those who hindered your development?

How can you tell your story to your children, students, and those you mentor? How can you connect with them in ways that reframe success?



Take Action on Behalf of Youth

The concepts in this short eBook provides the foundation of what we write about at *Roots of Action*. I hope you'll join us there for virtual coffee and conversation.

I'm a big believer in Margaret Mead's message, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."

Let's not wait for Superman, Congress, or anyone else. Each of us has a child to mentor, a story to tell, and a role to play in making a difference for future generations!

Today, we compete with corporate and societal models of success that place external wealth over the kind of wealth that helps us truly thrive as humans and global citizens.

Please ask yourself, "How can I help reframe success for one child or teenager?"

Start with small actions. Think how our collective actions can change the world.



Pass It On!

Please talk about the topic of success at your school, in parenting groups, in social media, and especially with children!

If you've enjoyed this book and want to pass it on, it's free to share. Please learn about the [Creative Commons license and attribution requirements](#) if you plan to publically redistribute the book in any form.

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Your comments and stories speak volumes about the topic of success. Please share your thoughts and ideas in an [online discussion](#).

Marilyn Price-Mitchell, PhD

Founder, *Roots of Action*

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