First Steps to Mighty Hearts

The Origins of Courage

Charles A. Smith

Since September 11, 2001, tremors of fear have rippled across the world. The attack on and collapse of the World Trade Center shook the foundation of our humanity. Now, the horrible images of war remind us nearly every day of the risks we face in a dangerous world. We are not the same, and neither are our children. As early childhood educators, we face new challenges in our work because of the specter of fear that lingers at the borders of all our lives.

Young children are acutely attuned to the feelings of their beloved adults—family members and caregivers alike—and they resonate to the emotions that surround them. During the past few years, children have seen images of terror in faces on the television and in the community, and they have felt their parents' and teachers' anxiety. They acted out their fears in play. Images of fire, destruction, and death spilled across the pages of their art (Gross & Clemens 2002). Children clung more tightly to their parents—and vice versa—when they arrived at school and center.

Our typical response during frightening times is to *protect and reassure* our children. We reduce the amount of television they watch. We are careful about what we say in front of them. When we notice their fear, we reassure them that loving adults will shelter them from danger. We give them physical comfort and invite them to talk about their feelings. And we provide experiences that help them release tension (NAEYC 2001).

Children need to grow up in the secure shelter of loving adults. Childhood should be characterized by joy and enthusiasm, not fear and a retreat to shadows. Persistent fear continuously bathes children's brains with an alarming hormone cocktail at a critical period in their lives. We want children to be fear free, to feel joy in reaching out to life.

Protection and reassurance are essential but insufficient. An exclusive focus on protection and reassurance can undermine the growth of personal power and make children more vulnerable to fear. Our loving embrace should prepare children for the time when the doors of shelter will open to the dangers outside.

On that tragic September morning, incredible valor and devotion rose above panic and indifference. We honor the risks and sacrifices of the magnificent heroes in New York, in Washington, and in the skies over Pennsylvania by ensuring that our children learn the very best the human heart can offer.

Courage and the ability to respond heroically do not suddenly appear in youth or adults. These qualities are built in small step-by-step increments, beginning with the baby who defies gravity to sit up and the preschooler who dares to climb a playground slide for the first time.

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The origins of courage

> **Our loving embrace should prepare children for the time when the doors of shelter will open to the dangers outside.**

Courage is persevering despite fear. It is gumption, grit, and the capacity to get up after a setback, with one's heart on fire. The word comes from the French *curage* for "putting one's heart into action." Courage is an essential virtue, a source of strength that contributes to all significant human endeavors. Every great accomplishment requires courage. At one of my storytelling concerts, an eight-year-old told me that courage simply is "making the decision to do what you know is right."

A day comes in every person's life when there is a choice between acting out of fear and doing the right thing. The power that originated in that person's first six years will make the difference. Courage finds its roots in two fundamental skills learned during early childhood: persevering despite adversity and remaining mindful despite fear.

Persevering despite adversity

The word *power* originates in the Latin word for "to be able." Power is vitality, the ability to motivate oneself, the capacity to act purposefully with the hope of triumph—in other words, a life force. Every accomplishment requires willpower to move forward. The same wind that whispers danger beckons young children to rise up and stand against adversity. For example, despite frustrating failure, a baby tries repeatedly to move the mobile over her crib. A toddler falls down but gets up on unsteady legs again. A three-year-old gazes up at the dizzying height of a playground jungle gym and begins climbing.

Children do not depend entirely on adult support to manage fear. They can draw on their own resources to respond to adversity. In examining the artwork of young children following the World Trade Center disaster, Gross and Clemens (2002) were touched by how one child dealt with her grief, worry, and fear: "When Emma spoke so directly to her desire to know about the towers and the fighting, I experienced her not as a helpless little child but a powerful human being" (p. 49).

As early childhood educators we see many opportunities to strengthen children's sense of power and their will to persevere. We encourage children to try despite difficulty, whether they are stacking blocks, building a tunnel in the sand, or rejoining an outdoor game after a fall. For example, three-year-old Terry became angry when his cardboard tower collapsed, and he started kicking the boxes. His teacher noticed his frustration and gently put her arm around him. "Terry, c'mon," she said. "Try again. You can do it. I'm here to help if you need it."

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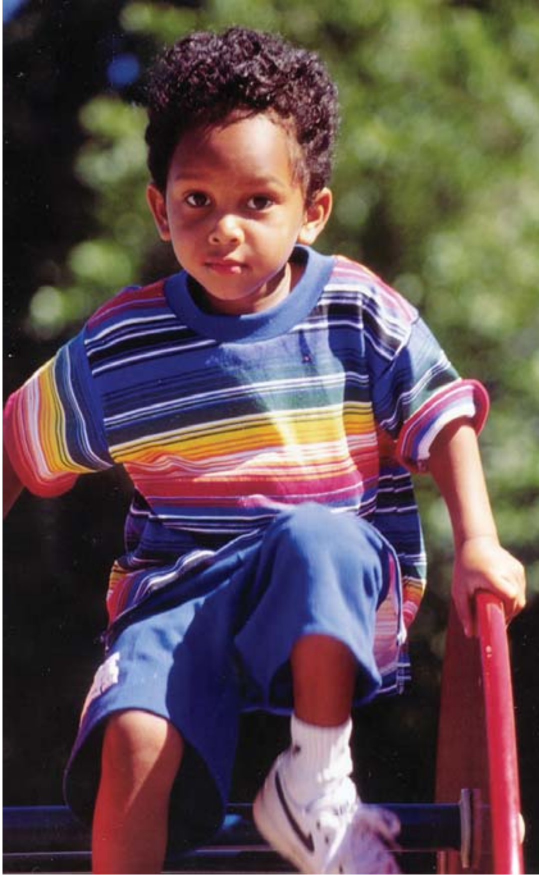
We also can provide opportunities for children to exercise power on their own. Some group activities challenge children to overcome obstacles (Smith 1993). In the activity Tug of Peace, for example, children have to work together to move something too heavy to move alone. In Over the River, two children have to cross a narrow bridge from one island to another, with one child's left ankle tied to the other's right.

Most great stories involve elements of power (Smith 1989). In the Classic Golden Book *The Little Engine That Could*, a small train engine succeeds where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others fail. He overcomes the adversity with great determination: "I think I can; I think I can; I THINK I CAN." The size of his heart matters more than physical strength.

In *Where the Wild Things Are*, Max stands up to bullying of the Wild Things and gives children hope that they can stand up to their own fears. When they "roared their terrible roars and gnashed their terrible teeth and rolled their terrible eyes and showed their terrible claws," Max refuses to be intimidated. Instead, he demands, "BE STILL!" Then he tames the Wild Things by "staring into their yellow eyes without blinking once and they were frightened and called him the most wild thing of all."

In *Brave Irene*, a young girl fights a furious snowstorm to deliver a wedding dress. After losing the gown in a gust of wind and then falling exhausted into a snow bank, Irene is ready to give up. But then a voice from within gives her the energy to continue the struggle:

> Why not freeze to death, she thought, and let all these troubles end. Why not? She was already buried. *And never see her mother's face again?* Her good mother who smelled like fresh-baked bread? In an explosion of fury, she flung her body about to free herself.

Despite the storm, Irene delivers the dress in time for the wedding.

Such stories are powerful narratives that encourage children to keep trying. By fostering persistence and perseverance, we can let children leave our care to begin formal schooling instilled with a deep belief in their value and the ability to persist in the face of difficulty. Both attributes are necessary to take risks and succeed (DeBecker 1997).

Remaining mindful despite fear

Fear is a developmentally appropriate emotion necessary for survival. Recognition of danger and the experience of fear can keep children safe.

Loud noises or loss of support frighten infants, but we see the first appearance of vigilance and caution at about nine months, when babies show fear of a visual cliff (Walk & Gibson 1961). When five-month-olds are coaxed to cross a glass tabletop with another solid surface showing through from below, they will crawl across the "deep end," with its illusion of a drop-off, to reach their mothers. By nine months, though, a baby will show a pronounced fear reaction and refuse to cross the table, despite enticement from their mothers. Some begin to cry. At about the same age, children also begin to show fear of strangers. Before their first birthday, children learn to show caution in response to what looks dangerous.

This wariness and self-protection are critical skills. Children need to listen to and learn from their fear. The problem with fear, though, is that its arousal can trigger mind-numbing panic. The natural push of fear to flight makes self-control challenging. Courage, like all growth, requires taking risks. When children leave their parents to participate at an early childhood center, relate to an unfamiliar pet, or play with a new and unpredictable classmate, they show evidence of responding affirmatively to fear.

Remaining mindful despite fear means acting with grace under pressure. For example, a child controls her anxiety to cautiously reach out and touch a friend's pet lizard. A three-year-old wakes up to noises in the middle of the night, calms himself down, and goes back to sleep. Instead of just crying, a

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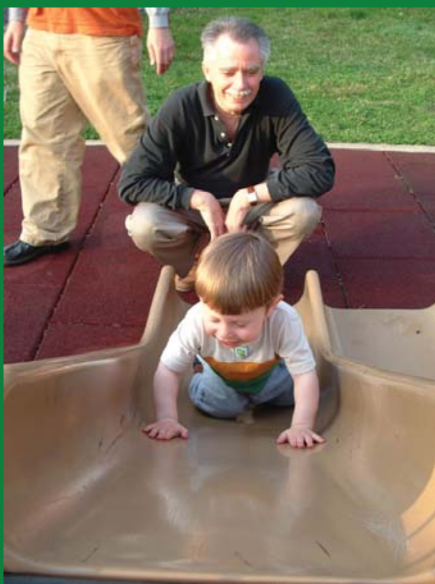
preschooler stops a classmate from smashing the clay figure she created. These children have learned to link the thinking part of their brains (the cortex) with the emotional arousal in the center of their brains (the limbic system).

We want our children to be afraid but to remain thoughtful about their fear. They depend on us to help them evaluate uncertainty. We don't want children to panic or to act foolishly. This process of providing support to promote growth is called "scaffolding." We help children move from one level to another by establishing a framework that makes growth possible. When we comfort a frightened child, neural pathways for managing fear are strengthened in the child's brain. The repeated experience of comfort, in moving from alarm to calm, enables children to eventually manage fear on their own.

Early childhood educators can provide group and story activities that allow children to practice managing fear. In a Staying Safe activity, for example, a teacher uses pictures to discuss concepts of *safe, dangerous,* and *careful,* and in Ship in the Night, a blindfolded child is guided by voice to the safety of a circle of classmates (Smith 1993). Many stories encourage children to be mindful when afraid. In *Will It Be Okay?* a frightened girl overcomes fear through the reassuring advice of her mother. In *Harald and the Great Stag*, a boy creates a clever but dangerous plan to save a magnificent stag from hunters. Both main characters have to calm their fears in order to succeed.

The origins of heroism

Courage developed during the early years may gradually evolve into the capacity for heroism. Heroism is "courage elevated by a noble purpose" (Smith 2004). Heroism can occur suddenly and dramatically, as it did, say, with honorees of the Carnegie Medal for heroism (read about child, teen, and adult feats of heroism at www.carnegiehero.org). Or it can occur without fanfare in response to a daily challenge. For example, children with cystic fibrosis and their parents can be engaged in a heroic struggle against the fatal disease.



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Unlike courage, true heroism does not occur until about the age of eight or nine when children can understand risks and alternatives, and make a deliberate choice to face risk on behalf of another. Even so, the foundation of this heroism is established in early childhood. Heroism finds its roots in two fundamental skills learned during the early years: caring about themselves and others and responding compassionately to suffering.

Caring about themselves and others

Heroes not only feel power and remain mindful despite fear; they also care about others as well as themselves. They overcome the drive for exclusive self-protection because of a higher value: protection of another life. Their heroism is an expression of community.

Children grow up learning to care about others by experiencing the devotion of another person.

Caring about others does not simply spring up unbidden from children's hearts. Children grow up learning to care about others by experiencing the devotion of another person. When they were very young, at least one person fell in love with them, nurtured them, and showed them the meaning of enduring devotion. Children begin life in the womb as a circle of one. If they are greeted by at least one other loving person, their circle expands to two. The circle widens as other caring family members are added. Even though "I" remains important, a "we" emerges that also has to be nurtured and protected.

Greenspan (1997) believes that the invitation to love during infancy is critical for intellectual and emotional growth. "Without some degree of this ecstatic wooing by at least one adult who adores her, a child may never know the powerful intoxication of human closeness, never abandon herself to the magnetic pull of human relationships, never see other people as full human beings like herself, capable of feeling what she feels" (p. 51).

This magnetic pull makes heroism possible. Heroic action is based on a reverence for life that originates in a loving relationship (Hunt 1990; Monroe 1996). A child's circle of two or three can eventually expand to include all people, not just relatives. Research on the origins of heroism (Oliner & Oliner 1988; Fogelman 1994) found that courageous rescuers grow up in families that provide emotional and practical support and emphasize acceptance of people who are different. "From the earliest ages, rescuers were taught by their parents that people are inextricably linked to one another. . . . The conviction that all people, no matter how marginal, are of equal value was conveyed to children of both religious and nonreligious households" (Fogelman 1994, 259).

As early childhood educators, we stand at a critical point in young children's lives. We are often the first adults to establish caring relationships with children outside the orbit of their families. We also provide them with the opportunity to interact and form relationships with other children.

Sometimes, the simple things we offer can have great significance: learning and using a child's name, gathering children in circles, and introducing activities that enable them to share their joy through self-expression. Each contributes to the formation of a caring community of children and adults. Within this community, children begin to gain personal power, self-respect, and kinship with other human beings. Every day becomes a small step toward courage and the development of character that strengthens the heroic heart.

Selected group activities can strengthen caring about others (Smith 1993). In the activity Missing Person, children, eyes closed, form a circle. One child raises a hand to volunteer and moves to the center of the circle, where he or

Suggested Children's Books

Brave Irene, by W. Steig. 1986. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux.

Do You Know What I'll Do? by C. Zolotow. 1958. New York: Harper & Row.

George and Martha, by J. Marshall. 1972. New York: Houghton Mifflin.

Harald and the Great Stag, by D. Carrick. 1988. New York: Clarion.

The Little Engine That Could, by W. Piper. 1954. New York: Platt & Munk.

The Mightiest Heart, by L. Cullen. 1998. New York: Dial Books for Young Readers.

A Story for Bear, by D. Haseley. 2002. New York: Silver Whistle.

Where the Wild Things Are, by M. Sendak. 1963. New York: Harper & Row.

Will It Be Okay? by C. Dragonwagon. 1977. New York: Harper & Row.

she is covered by a blanket. The other children then open their eyes and guess who is under the blanket. In Frankenclass, children trace various parts of their bodies on construction paper, cut them out, and then assemble them into one or more people.

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Friendship and loving relationships are common themes in children's books. *George and Martha* offers several stories of two endearing hippos whose friendship is constantly being tested by everyday misunderstandings and imperfections. Their adventures continue in the George and Martha series. *Do You Know What I'll Do?* is a classic story of a young girl's devotion to her baby brother. At one point, when her brother is frightened by nightmares, she tells him, "Do you know what I'll do in the middle of the night if you have a nightmare? I'll come and blow on it and you'll be happy." The accompanying illustration shows the girl poised at her baby brother's crib, blowing away a spectral nightmare hovering overhead.

Responding compassionately to suffering

The word *compassion* is from the Latin for "suffering with." Take two tuning forks and hold them close to each other and strike one. If they are in tune, the other will begin to vibrate. This relationship is called "synchrony" or "attunement." By nine months of age, a baby's face will mirror her mother's posed expressions of joy and happiness. The child's emotional experience has become attuned to that of her mother. Someday, heroism will depend on this emotional connection, an essential element in the development of conscience. Children are more likely to respond to another's plight if they experience the other's pain in their own hearts.

Researchers Zahn-Waxler, Radke-Yarrow, and Chapman (1992) at the National Institute of Mental Health asked family members of one-year-olds to pretend sadness by sobbing, pain by yelling "ouch," and distress by coughing or choking. The children responded to each of these stimuli by patting and hugging the sufferer or by rubbing the "hurt" spot. While their reactions were strongest when interacting with their mothers, the children also exhibited empathy toward complete strangers. Although their emotional reactions were not measured, the children must have felt some distress in response to the other person's suffering.

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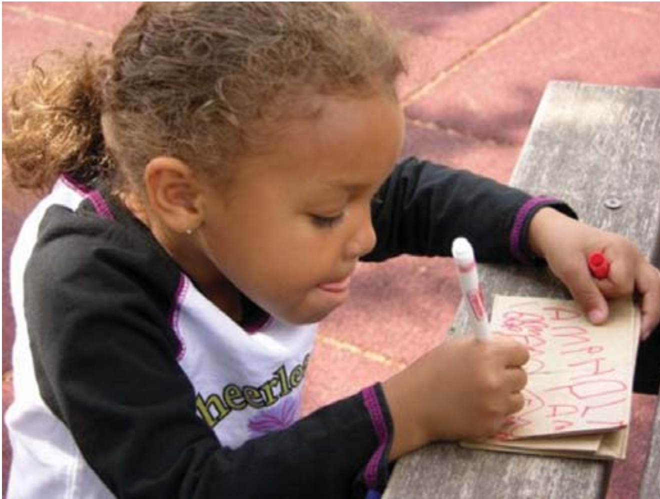
Initially, however, compassion is self-focused. An eighteen-month-old who sees his mother crying begins to cry too, but he cannot distinguish between her distress and his own. He is *egocentric;* he cannot see the world through another's eyes. He may try to help his mother, but his action is focused primarily on soothing his own anxiety. He may, for example, even seek to be comforted by her when she is crying.

Sometime before the sixth year of a child's life, however, this compassion can make an enormous shift. As their egocentric perspective becomes more *sociocentric,* children can begin to link compassion to empathy, an appreciation of the other person's unique and separate perspective. Now when his mother starts to cry, the child's heart goes out to *her*, not primarily to himself; Mom and her pain are the important issue, not his own feelings. The motive to comfort oneself is correspondingly transformed into a motive to help the victim (Hoffman 2000).

Eisenberg (1992) recorded the heart rates of preschool and elementary school children as they watched and responded to a video of a child being



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injured in a staged accident. High prosocial responders had lower heart rates while watching the video than low responders. Why? The prosocial children were more mindful and focused on the victim, so their heart rates declined. The children who were not helpful were focused on their own personal anxiety, so their heart rates increased.

One of the features of *antisocial personality disorder* is the absence of an emotional linkage with others (Black 1999). People without a conscience feel no distress when witnessing another's suffering, no remorse when they have harmed another. They are emotionally disconnected—they have become inhumane.

As a preschool teacher for eight years, I can count on the fingers of one hand the number of children in my classes who had lost this emotional synchrony. Each of them had eyes that seemed to reveal hearts becoming cold. For each child, I felt profound sadness mixed with great dread—sadness because this young human being lost something precious due to the mistreatment of others, dread because of what this child might become someday. Restoring warmth and compassion to these children's hearts is an enormous challenge. Only those adults who can offer a lifetime commitment of sacrifice and devotion can bring loving compassion into a child's life.

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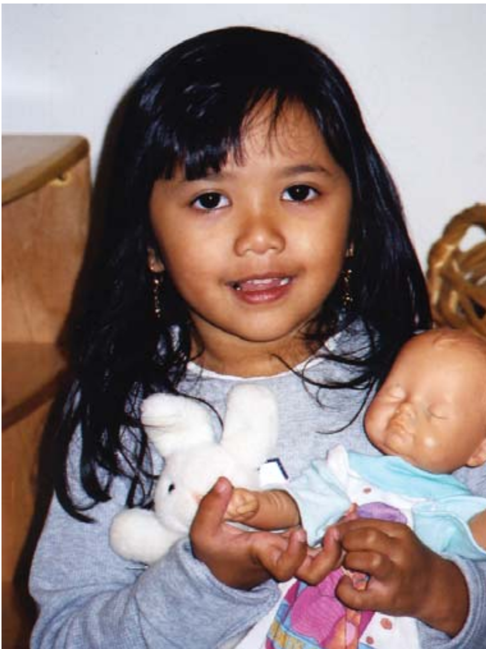
Early childhood educators are a part of a child's emotional life at a critical moment. Some vulnerable children are at the precipice of indifference. One person who shows them the power of healthy emotional relationships can tip the balance toward compassion. Given sufficient time, we might even have the opportunity to mend a heart on the verge of breaking and bring love and support that stirs children's happiness and brings hope into their lives.



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Emotional vitality and sensitivity are an important part of what we do. We share children's sadness when they are hurt and their happiness when they smile. Injustice that angers them may anger us as well. During certain passages in the books we read, our faces show sadness, fear, and anger just like those of our children. We are emotionally responsive to what our children feel.

Hoffman (2000) suggests that we use *victim-centered reasoning* as part of our classroom discipline. When children's behavior causes distress to others, we can emphasize the connection. We can confront them with responsibility for the consequences of their acts. For example, we might say, "Sharon, look at what you did! You chose to push Mark down, and he hurt himself. Look at his tears, the sad expression on his face." We might then give the child the opportunity to make amends. "Now go get a clean washcloth. If it's OK with Mark, you can wipe his tears and clean his face."

Group time can nurture the growth of compassion (Smith 1993). In the activity Sad Person, Sad Person, one child pretends to be sad and goes to the center of the circle while the rest of the group chants, "Sad person, sad person, it's OK to be sad and blue / Can someone in our group be kind to you?" The "sad" child then points to a classmate, who offers her a nutritious cookie (hugs can be substituted for cookies). In Poor Little Sad Eyes, children act out a poem: "Poor little boy [*or girl*] with the sad eyes [*point to eyes*] / See him now, how much he cries [*mimic crying, hands to eyes*] / He tries to stop with all his might [*clench teeth*

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and hands, grimace] / He doesn't know [*shake head*] that tears are all right [*nod head yes while pointing to 'tears'*]."

Many wonderful picture books emphasize compassion, and some arouse strong feelings in listeners. Inspired by a Welsh legend, *The Mightiest Heart* shows the painful consequences of misunderstanding. A devoted and faithful hound flees after being attacked by its master, who believes the dog killed his infant son. When the man discovers that his dog actually saved his baby from a predator, he is wracked by anguish. The search for reconciliation in this tragic tale will touch the hearts of both children and adults.

Other stories focus on compassion in a "cooler" context. In *A Story for Bear*, a young woman reads to a newfound bear friend. Although the bear does not understand her words, the emotional power of the storytelling evokes in him similar emotions, a magical and alluring discovery.

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Conclusion

Imparting these four fundamental skills—*persevering despite adversity*, *remaining mindful despite fear*, *caring about themselves and others,* and *responding compassionately to suffering*—is a vital contribution to happy and fruitful lives for children in both the present and the future. Each skill strengthens children's circles of caring. Together, the four skills form a foundation upon which children can build after leaving our care.

During their lives, there will be much more to accomplish: the formation of principles of justice, the development of risk-assessment abilities, the learning of lifesaving skills. Yet each of these depends on the foundation established during the first six years of life.

The gift of courage is a celebration of the power of the human spirit. The care we provide from the moment children enter our lives makes such strength possible. One day, hearing stories of those who found the courage to do the right thing, our children will think, "I too am one of these."

Every child who grows up to find the courage to stand up to fear and the heroism to care about others is a gift to humanity. Our efforts with young children make the difference. We must nurture courage, for we live in an age that requires noble deeds.

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