

THE PAPER FOR  
PROFESSIONALS WHO  
WORK WITH  
TROUBLED YOUTH



# STARR POINTS

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## Beyond reason: the private logic of trauma

**Fight, flight or freeze.** A ground-breaking Starr Commonwealth training program is helping professionals who work with challenging youth transform the way they view and treat behaviors related to pain and trauma. Dr. William Steele, Founder of the internationally recognized The National Institute for Trauma and Loss in Children (TLC), says trauma-related behaviors in struggling children and teens are primarily survival tactics. They conform to a private, inner logic and habit of thought that may not make sense to the world – or even to the child – but make perfect sense to the brain.

Dr. Larry Brendtro is Dean of the Starr Institute for Training (SIT) and co-author of *Deep Brain Learning: Pathways to potential with challenging youth*. In this book, Brendtro discusses normal human brain development and exciting new research in neuroscience that shows the brain's ability to heal neural links and pathways where meaning and learning reside. This is key for non-resilient children and adolescents suffering from loss, grief or trauma. Without the resiliencies required for healthy psychological development and the healthy neural pathways they create, the human brain will seek protection through the lower order

"survival brain," home to our most basic, reflexive human functions, including the powerful "fight or flight" reaction that can actually override higher order brain functioning in cases of extreme panic. The problem compounds as repeated negative experiences carve deeper and deeper pathways until the increasingly familiar route of "survival mode" becomes the brain's first choice for any and every challenging circumstance.

*Children who have been rejected or traumatized become highly alert to cues of danger or rejection. They carry pain of the past in memory traces and are biased to expect hostility from others (Dodge & Somberg, 1987). These trust-wary kids are in an approach-avoidance conflict; they desperately want to reach out for love, but they fear being hurt so back away.*

*Trust-wary youngsters adapt predictable coping strategies with adults in authority (Seita & Brendtro, 2005). Some fight overtly by displaying defiance, opposition, antagonism, and rule-breaking behavior. Some use flight by becoming withdrawn, isolated, or lonely or by retreating into drug use or fantasy. Some use mechanisms to fool adults by masking their real feelings and manipulating, provoking, and outwitting adults. Predictably, since they are at odds with adults, these youth often gravitate to like-minded peers to find a substitute sense of safety or belonging. Often this peer group is composed of similar trust-wary youth which further insulates youth from adult influence.*

*Kids who distrust adults do not have some disorder but are using coping strategies to protect themselves against the "enemy." Traditional reward punishment strategies have little leverage with such youth but only feed into past patterns of coercive adults fighting defiant youth (Brendtro & Larson, 2006). Fortunately, there are specific methods which enable helpers to parry this resistance and form bonds of mutual respect. (Brendtro, Mitchell & McCall, 2009)*

The good news is emerging scientific research on the neuroplasticity of the developing brain reveals its capacity to create new pathways that make positive, long-term change possible. Through the Starr Institute for Training, a large and growing network of educators, clinicians and childcare professionals worldwide have been trained in the innovative, strength-based practices that have been proven to encourage this transformation and create lasting behavior change in troubled youth.

### References:

Brendtro, L., & Larson, S. (2006). *The resilience revolution*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree.

Brendtro, L., Mitchell, M., & McCall, H. (2009). *Deep Brain Learning: Pathways to potential with challenging youth*. Albion, MI: Starr Commonwealth.

Dodge, K, & Somberg, D. (1987). Hostile attribution biases among aggressive boys are exacerbated under conditions of threat to the self. *Child Development*, 58, 213-234.

Seita, J., & Brendtro, L. (2005). *Kids who outwit adults*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree.

### FIGHT

Behaviors can include verbal attacks, aggressiveness, assaultive behavior and defiance.

### FLIGHT

Responses can include running away, refusal to talk, avoiding previous relationships and activities, dissociation, numbing out, substance usage and abuse, eating disordered behaviors, depression, becoming suicidal and engaging in other at-risk behaviors.

### FREEZE

Responses can include the inability to make decisions, unable to care for oneself, lethargy, non-responsive, unable to interact or sustain relationships.

Steele & Malchiodi (2011)  
Trauma Informed Practices  
The National Institute for Trauma and Loss in Children (TLC)  
Starr Institute for Training



## TLC Training. Breaking the chains of trauma in children.

To understand the behavior of a traumatized child, you first have to understand the experience behind it. The National Institute for Trauma and Loss in Children (TLC) helps school and agency social workers, counselors and psychologists better understand the effects of childhood trauma, while providing the tools to guide children through critical times.

- Gain skills through trauma-specific intervention techniques
- Understand and learn how to "witness" a child's traumatic experience to appreciate what they're going through
- Discover more about evidence-based research outcomes that support the value of TLC's structured sensory programs in schools and agencies.

Join us February 24, 25 & 26 in San Antonio to learn to better see the world through the eyes of a child. Register today at [starrtraining.org/sanantonio](http://starrtraining.org/sanantonio).



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**Websites:** [www.starr.org](http://www.starr.org) / [www.starrtraining.org](http://www.starrtraining.org) / [www.montcalmschool.org](http://www.montcalmschool.org)

## THE LONG VIEW

Dr. James Longhurst, Senior Vice President of Clinical Research, is a licensed psychologist for Starr Commonwealth and is involved in all case planning and clinical services for the organization. Jim is a member of the American Psychological Association and the American Correctional Association and is a certified facilitator for Starr's Oneness of Humankind initiative for the healing of racism.



## Starr Commonwealth Programs

### Albion, Michigan

Juvenile Justice (residential)  
Sexually Reactive Youth (residential)  
Abuse/Neglect (residential)  
Alternatives (substance abuse, residential)  
Montcalm School for Boys and Girls

### Battle Creek, Michigan

Day Treatment  
Intensive In-Home  
Starr Life Skills  
(supervised independent living)  
Foster Care  
Starr Suspension Center  
Credit Enhancement Program  
Juvenile Diversion Program

### Columbus, Ohio

Sexual Offender Program (residential)  
MyPlace Independent Living  
Treatment Foster Care  
Community-Based  
New Paths (delinquent residential)  
Emergency Shelter Care

### Detroit, Michigan

Alternatives  
(substance abuse, community-based)  
New Boundaries (residential transition  
and reintegration support)  
Starr Life Skills  
(supervised independent living)  
Foster Care

### Starr Institute for Training

The National Institute for Trauma  
and Loss in Children (TLC)  
Circle of Courage  
Glasswing  
No Disposable Kids

For Michigan referrals, please call  
toll-free 800-837-5591  
or e-mail [michintake@starr.org](mailto:michintake@starr.org)

For Ohio referrals, please call  
toll-free 866-289-9202  
or e-mail [ohiointake@starr.org](mailto:ohiointake@starr.org)

## Making the connection

The following excerpt is from "The Resilient Brain" by Larry K. Brendtro and James E. Longhurst (Reclaiming Children and Youth, Spring, 2005). Here, the authors offer specific strategies for reaching challenging youngsters effectively and with compassion.

### Reach out to guarded youth.

Rather than wait for problems, one practices "preemptive connecting" with wary youth. This should be unobtrusive so as not to create impressions of favoritism. Connecting does not require a major investment of time; bonds can be built in natural moment-by-moment interactions. Small doses of connecting behavior are most effective. Forcing intimacy only frightens away youth who already are in an approach-avoidance conflict with adults. Those with histories of negative encounters with adults are strongly influenced by small cues of respect, humor, and goodwill. The emotional brain signals, "This person is safe."



### Understand behavior.

This is not as simple as it might seem. Many behaviors of youth confuse and disturb us, and it is easy to make incorrect assumptions as to "what motivated you to do that?" Intense emotions overwhelm children's ability to think and act rationally. They need someone who can help them identify, understand, and sort out their feelings and thinking. Trying to reason about consequences of their behavior while their "emotional brain" is still in charge may frustrate them further. This is especially true in instances where the current experience triggers past pain or trauma. As we understand the behavior from their perspective, we become sources of safety and encourage the "thinking brain" to assume control.

### Avoid a judgmental tone.

Two centuries ago, pioneering educator Johann Pestalozzi suggested that the crowning achievement of education was being able to correct a student while at the same time communicating positive regard. We don't ignore problems, but criticism conveying anger or disgust only drives youth away. To be effective, criticism must be delivered in tandem with empathy and positive concern. To avoid adversarial encounters, one responds to needs and searches for strengths.

### Connect in times of conflict.

All children have natural brain programs motivating them to attach to trusted persons when they are upset or in trouble. In crisis, the child's brain is signaling "find somebody who is safe," but traditional discipline by punishment or exclusion only creates further threat. Conflict and crisis present unparalleled opportunities to build trust, respect, and understanding. There are now specific training programs which provide mentors the ability to connect with youth in conflict and develop their strength and resilience. For example, Life Space Crisis Intervention (LSCI), Response Ability Pathways (RAP), Positive Peer Culture (PPC), and the EQUIP program all use problems as teaching opportunities.\*

\*LSCI: Long, Woods, & Fecser (2002); RAP: Brendtro & Larson (2005); PPC: Vorrath & Brendtro (1985); EQUIP: Gibbs, Potter, & Goldstein (1995).  
For strength-based training resources, see [www.reclaiming.com](http://www.reclaiming.com) and [www.starr.org](http://www.starr.org).

STARR COMMONWEALTH IS AN INTERNATIONALLY RECOGNIZED LEADER IN THE SCIENCE, PROFESSIONAL TRAINING AND CLINICAL PRACTICE OF STRENGTH-BASED TREATMENT FOR TROUBLED YOUTH AND IMPACTS AN ESTIMATED 1.3 MILLION LIVES ANNUALLY. TO DATE, THE STARR INSTITUTE FOR TRAINING HAS EQUIPPED MORE THAN 78,000 EDUCATORS, CLINICIANS AND CHILDCARE PRACTITIONERS IN 50 STATES AND 49 COUNTRIES WITH EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICES FOR YOUTH.

13725 Starr Commonwealth Rd. Albion, Michigan 49224  
Starr Points is a quarterly newsletter published by Starr Commonwealth, an internationally recognized leader in transformational programs for children, families, schools and communities. Founded in 1913, Starr's treatment philosophy is rooted in seeing something good in every child, which serves as the guiding principle in its strength-based approach. Starr offers a full spectrum of community-based early intervention and prevention services along with specialized residential programs. Through the Starr Institute for Training, parents, clinicians, educators and childcare professionals now have access to Starr's highly successful and innovative techniques aimed at bringing out the best in every child. For more information, visit [www.starr.org](http://www.starr.org).

