

# Nurturing resilience and wellbeing in children and young people: *What brain science tells us about normal development, behaviour and life skills*

Positive Schools, Singapore  
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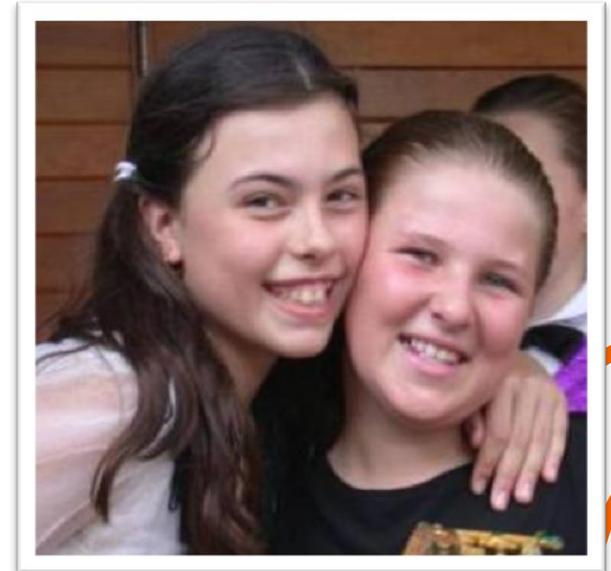
# Outline of presentation



- Adolescent development & behaviour...
- Building resilience and life skills...
- Timeless principles of good parenting & good schooling...

# Nurturing resilience and wellbeing

“Children with high levels of social and emotional wellbeing are loved and safe, with positive family relationships, connections and support networks; they have a strong sense of identity and self-esteem and are resilient to setbacks. Positive family relationships and supportive neighbourhoods can protect children from some of the impacts of disadvantage.”



National Action Plan for Child and Youth Wellbeing, Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY), 2013

# Why are children important?

- Vital for the future strength and success of society
- Not just small adults - differing needs as grow and develop
- Competing with needs of adults - likely to be overlooked
- Cannot speak for themselves - need advocates



*When I see a child, I feel two emotions: tenderness for what she is now, and awe for what she might become.* Louis Pasteur

# Why are adolescents important?



- Adolescence is a unique and fascinating time of life.
- Profound and rapid changes occur in adolescence with potential for huge impact on both current and future wellbeing

# Adolescent health problems:

- result in great personal, social and monetary costs (costly now)
- are mostly psychosocial and preventable
- contribute to the leading causes of adult morbidity and mortality (costly later)



*Adolescence is the crucible for the shaping of health in adulthood and in later life.*

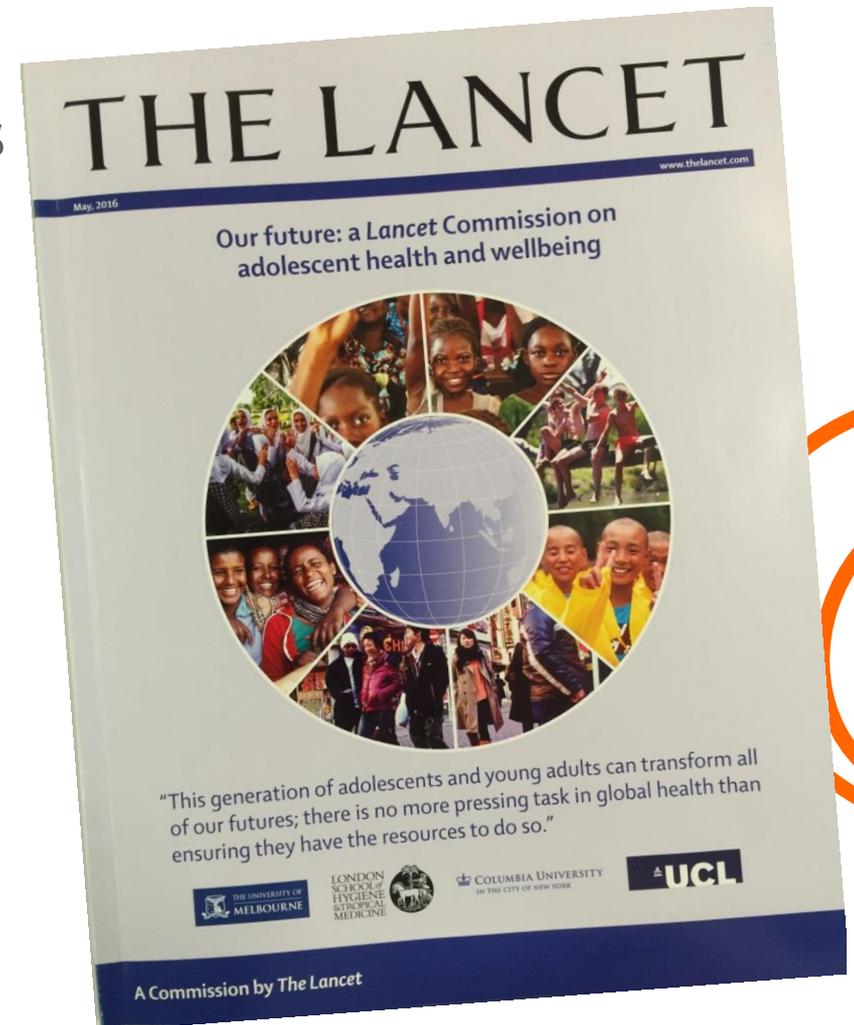
Richard Jessor, WHO 1989

# Adolescent Health Commission

“This generation of adolescents and young adults can transform all of our futures; there is no more pressing task in global health than ensuring they have the resources to do so.”

May 2016

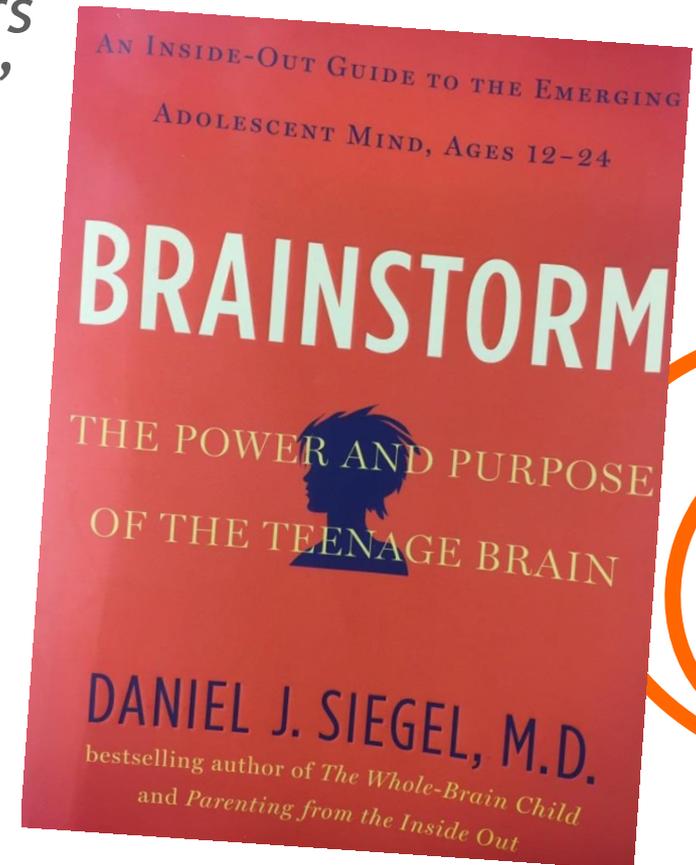
[www.thelancet.com](http://www.thelancet.com)



# Myths about adolescence

- *Raging hormones cause teenagers to 'go mad' or 'lose their minds' (eg, impulsive, risk-taking behaviour)*

FALSE: what teenagers experience is primarily the result of changes in the development of the brain



Daniel J Siegal MD. Brainstorm: The power and purpose of the teenage brain, 2015.

# Myths about adolescence

- *Adolescence is simply a period of immaturity and teens just need to hurry up and get through it, ie, 'grow up'*

FALSE: teenagers don't just need to survive adolescence; they can thrive because of this important period of their lives.

- *'Growing up during adolescence requires moving from dependence on adults to total independence from them'*

FALSE: the healthy move to adulthood is toward interdependence (giving care and receiving help from others), not complete 'do-it-yourself' isolation.

Daniel J Siegal MD. *Brainstorm: The power and purpose of the teenage brain*, 2015.

# Generation Y: born 1980 - 1995



*...towering self-esteem and unabashed assertiveness*  
Hugh Mackay

# Generation Z: late 1990s - ?

## Characteristics:

- **Global** (through technology and pop culture)
- **Digital** (devices)
- **Social** (social media)
- **Mobile** (fluidity of work & housing)
- **Visual** (YouTube the search engine of choice)



*Gen Z will have an average of 17 jobs, 5 careers and 15 homes*  
The Sun-Herald, Sunday, June 14, 32-33, 2015

# Puberty

&

# Adolescence

- The unique set of events involving changes in physical appearance and hormones from those of a child to a mature adult

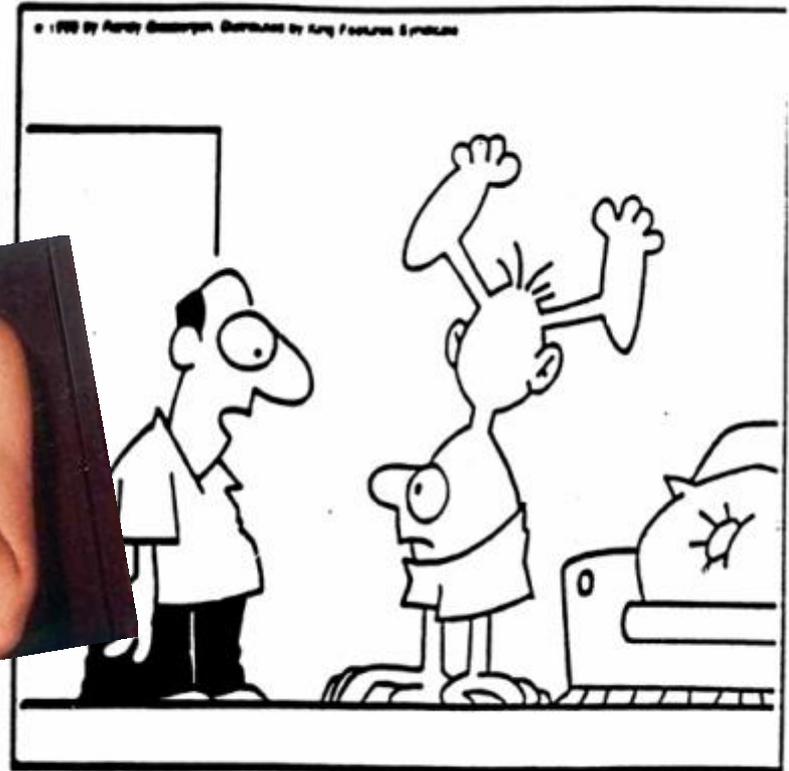
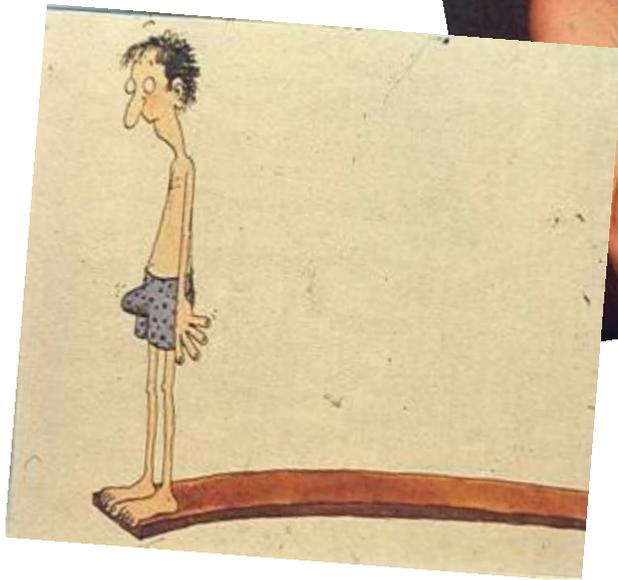
- A longer and more complex period of cognitive and psychosocial development during the second decade of life



**"No, Jimmy, the Tooth Fairy won't be visiting you anymore. I'm the Pimple Fairy!"**

# Understanding puberty

Coming to terms with the physical & sexual changes of puberty...



*'You're a teenager now, Lester. Your body is changing in ways that are hard to understand'*

# Understanding adolescence

‘A time of cosmic yearnings and private passions, of social concern and private agony’  
(Haim Ginott, *Between Parent and Teenager*, 1969)



"I'VE GOTTA BE ME ... BUT I CAN'T HELP THINKING SOMEONE ELSE WOULD BE MORE QUALIFIED!"

*Adolescence is an essential time of emotional intensity, social engagement and creativity.* Daniel J Siegal, 2015

# What's going on with social development?

- Much of the study of social development in adolescence focuses primarily on the changing roles of family (or adult caretakers) and friends.
- *Social engagement* = connecting with family and friends in different ways.



*Supported by brain development*

Smetana JG et al, Adolescent development in interpersonal and societal contexts. Annual Review of Psychology, 2006:57, 255-284

# What's going with cognitive development?

- **Cognitive** - moving from concrete to abstract thought
- **Moral** - developing a set of moral beliefs and standards
- **Spiritual** - acquiring a sense of awe and wonder beyond the every day, the mundane



*Supported by brain development*

## ‘Infuriatingly normal behaviour’

“Teenagers dominate the telephone, play unbearably loud music, never tidy their rooms, are incredibly moody, and push their parents to the limit.”

Bennett, *Growing Pains*, 1987



*Primarily the result of  
brain development*

*Teenagers push back on existing ways of doing things to create  
new ways of being in the world.*

Daniel J Siegal, 2015

# Risk-taking behaviour

- “Adolescents experiment with new activities, testing their limits, exploring new skills, and enjoying the often exhilarating sense of freedom involved.”
- Novelty-seeking & creative explorations - characteristics of the mind related to brain development



*What adults see as problems, young people often see as solutions.*  
Dr Richard MacKenzie, 1987

## A rite of passage equal to none

‘While teenagers are more physically fit and healthier than children and adults, they make up the largest group with avoidable causes of death.’

*Primarily the result of brain development*



*Dad, I would like to learn to drive in a different car, one with more power.*

# Brain maturation in adolescence

- The brain is a collection of cells that communicate with each other using chemicals called neurotransmitters.
- Adolescence is a period of profound and dynamic brain maturation - the pre-frontal cortex (PFC) continues to develop into early adulthood.



Gied JN, *Structural Magnetic Resonance Imaging of the Adolescent Brain*. Annals of The New York Academy of Sciences, 2004

# Brain maturation in adolescence

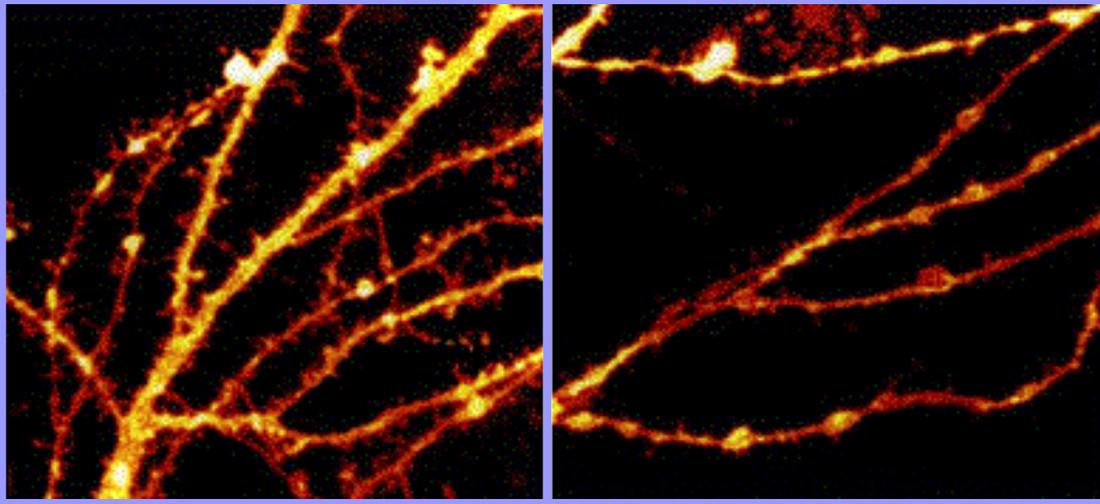
- “During the teen years, our minds change in the way we remember, think, reason, focus attention, make decisions, and relate to others...”
- How we navigate the adolescent years has a direct impact on how we will live the rest of our lives”



Daniel J Siegal MD. *Brainstorm: The power and purpose of the teenage brain*, 2015.

# Neural integration

Images by Diane  
Murphy, PhD,  
National Institute  
of Health

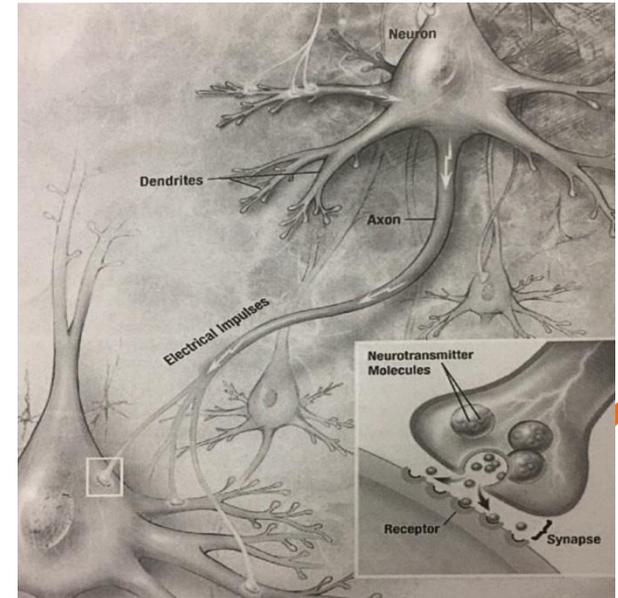


- Neurons are pruned and myelinated through a combination of biological and environmental factors
- The net effect when complete is faster, yet fewer connections in the brain.

# Behavioural implications

An increase in the activity of the neural circuits utilizing **dopamine** -> drive for reward:

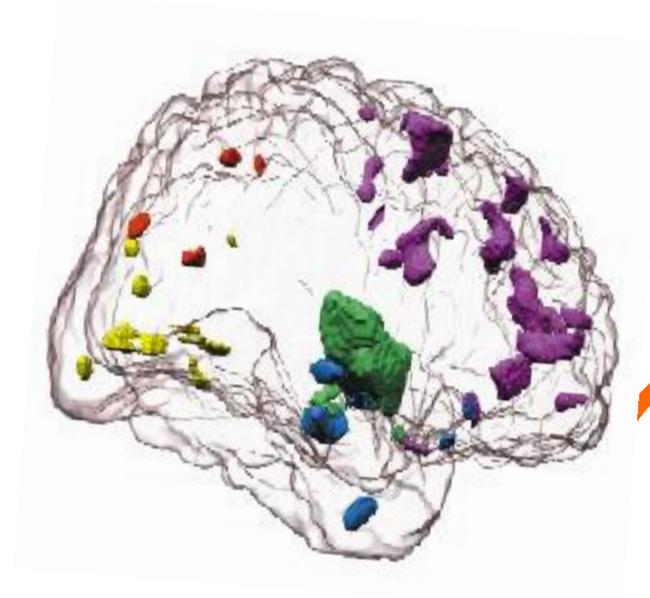
- Increased impulsiveness - action without pause
- Literal thinking - pros > cons (the risk seems worth it)
- Increased susceptibility to addiction



Daniel J Siegal MD. Brainstorm: The power and purpose of the teenage brain, 2015.

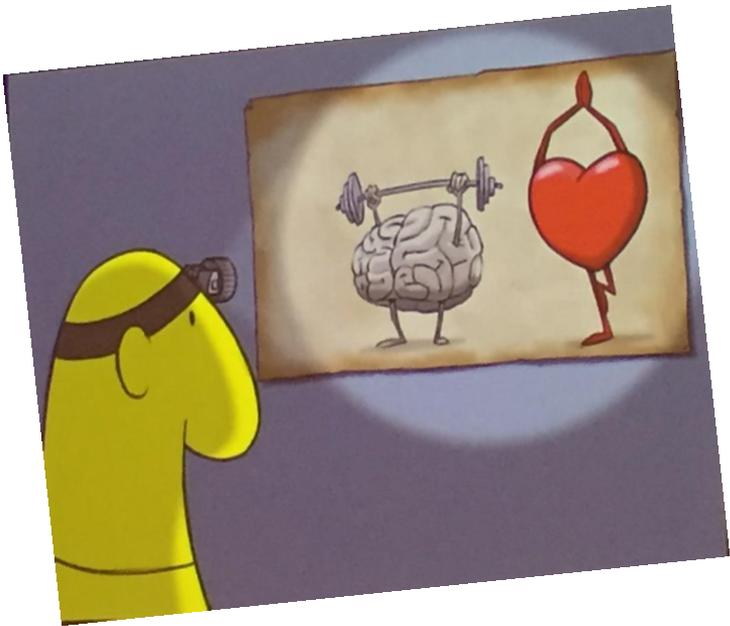
# Neuroplasticity (neuron + plasticity)

- *...how the brain changes in response to experience*
- “The adolescent brain is more ‘plastic’ than it will ever be again, capable of remarkable adaptability in the light of the many social, physical, sexual and intellectual challenges that this developmental phase brings.”



Lee FS, Heimer H, Giedd JN et al. *Adolescent mental health - opportunity and obligation: Emerging neuroscience offers hope for treatments*. Science, 346:547-549, 2014.

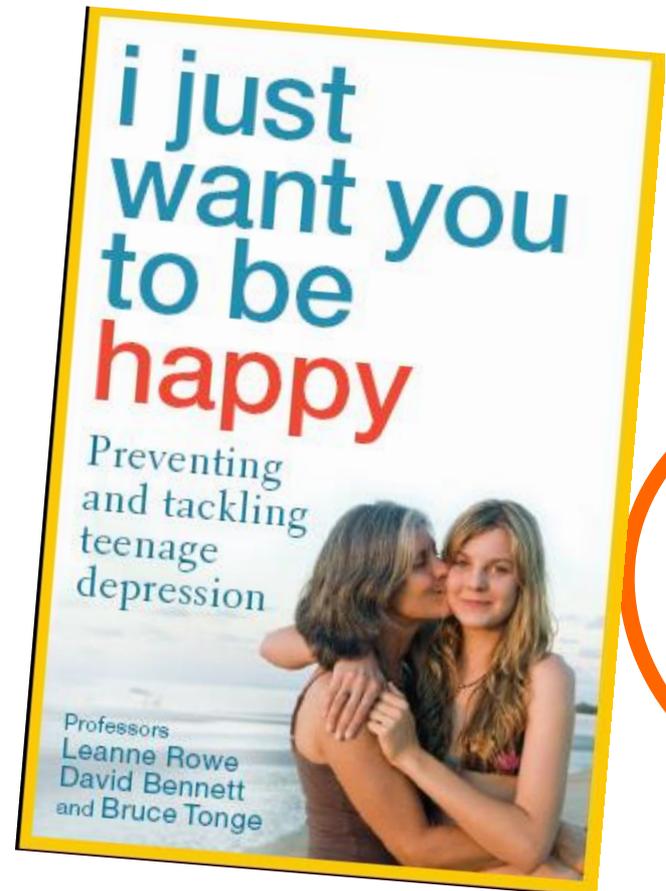
# ‘Living in the now’ - Mindfulness



- Gives us the opportunity to see what is and to be with what is
- Fosters acceptance and allows compassion to flow - we become gentler and kinder --> improved relationships
- Practicing mindfulness literally changes our brain by producing growth in brain areas associated with learning, memory processes and emotional regulation...

# Young people - happy or worried?

- What were the things that most concerned you as an adolescent?
- Who were you able to turn to for guidance and support?
- What made you happy as an adolescent?



*Life is just one damn thing after another.* Elbert Hubbard

# 'Authentic happiness'

- The evidence indicates that meaningful and engaged lives are more important than pleasurable experiences in determining wellbeing.
- Healthy individuals – and a healthy society – strike a balance between commitment to the self and commitment to the common good.

Seligman et al, 2005

[www.authentichappiness.org](http://www.authentichappiness.org)

Seligman. *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Wellbeing*, 2012 (incorporates a greater focus on *relationships* and *accomplishment*)

## What is 'mental health'?



‘...a state of wellbeing in which the individual realises his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of everyday life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community’

WHO. Mental Health: New Understanding, New Hope. Geneva 2001.

*The highest form of wisdom is kindness. The Talmud*

# The concept of 'mental fitness'

- Reduces stigma in talking about *mental health*
- The need for more proactive, preventative, holistic approaches to mental health
- A fit mind and body are equally important and need regular exercise and practice
- Mental fitness is measurable



Robinson, P. L., Oades, L. G., & Caputi, P. (2014). *Conceptualising and measuring mental fitness: A Delphi study*. *International Journal of Wellbeing*, 5(1), 53-73.

# Bravery, imagination, generosity

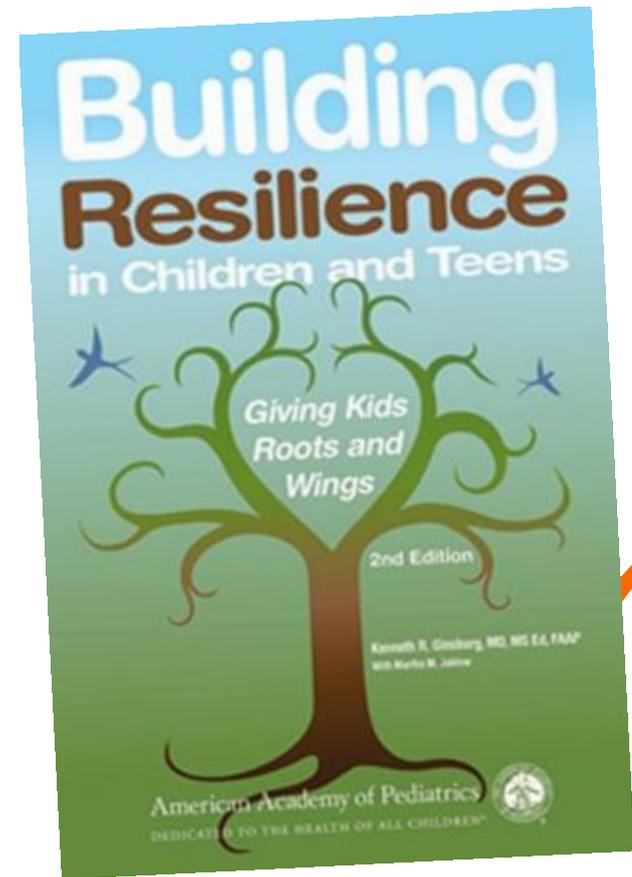
- ‘*Bravery* is facing your greatest fears’
- ‘*Imagination* is an alternate world you can escape to when you feel down’
- ‘*Generosity* is something that everybody has, but it takes strength of heart’

Kell, Aged 10, Sydney.



## What is resilience?

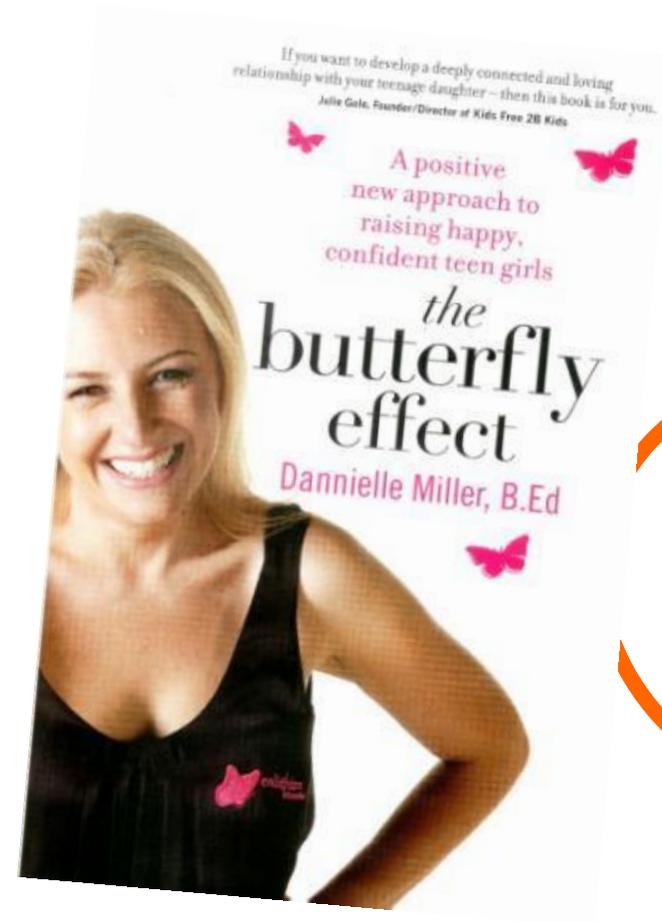
“Resilience is the capacity to rise above difficult circumstances, allowing our children to exist in a less than perfect world, while moving forward with optimism and confidence.”



Dr Kenneth R Ginsburg, *Building Resilience in Children and Teens: Giving Kids Roots and Wings*, 2011

# Resilience is a set of personal qualities..

..that allows one to thrive in the face of adversity: self efficacy, social competence, adaptability, an action-oriented approach, problem solving skills, a sense of purpose and future...



## Resilience requires a positive frame of mind



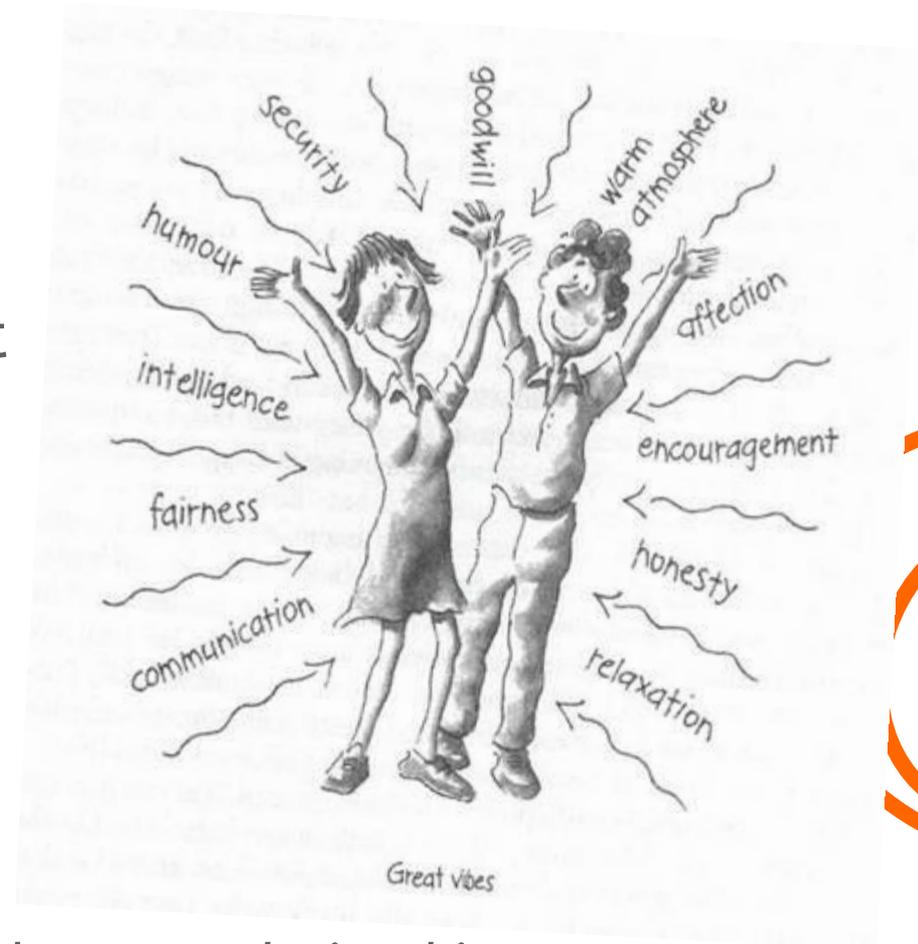
“Young people should be able to approach life’s challenges with a positive frame of mind, a confidence that one can deal with the situation, and a repertoire of approaches that are well-adapted to one’s own personal style of doing things.”

Michael & Marjorie Rutter, *Developing Minds: Challenge And Continuity Across The Lifespan*, 1993

# Resilience requires relationships

“... the central importance of caring relationships between children and adults for the development of resilient adolescents and young adults ...”

Michael D Resnick, *Protective Factors, Resiliency and Healthy Youth Development*, Adolescent Medicine: State of the Art Reviews 2000

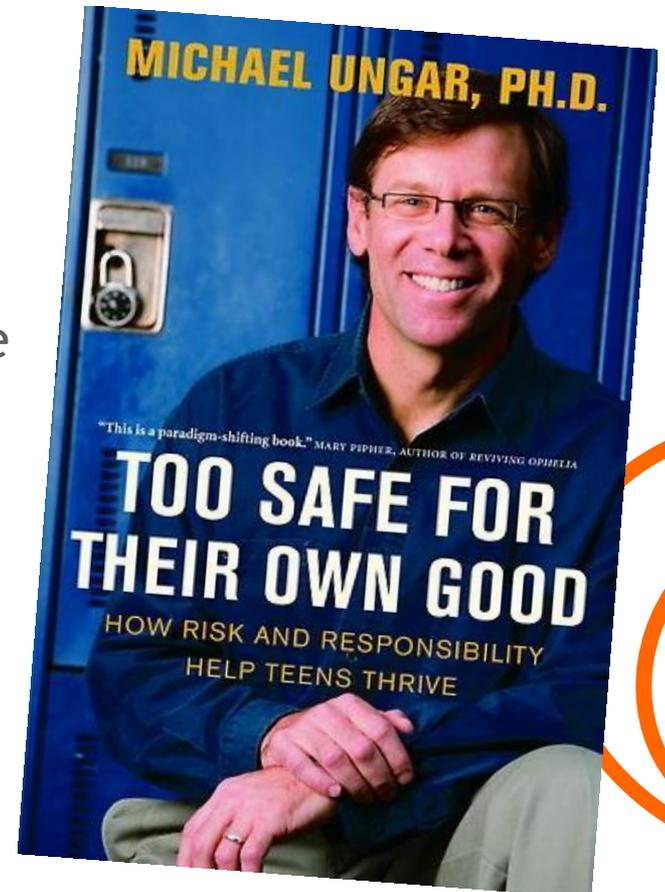


*Happy teenagers are teenagers with warm relationships.*

[http://raisingchildren.net.au/articles/happy\\_teenagers.html](http://raisingchildren.net.au/articles/happy_teenagers.html)

# Resilience requires protective factors

- Individual factors: personality characteristics such as autonomy, self esteem and a positive social orientation
- Family cohesion: warmth, an absence of discord and caring adults
- External support systems that encourage and reinforce a child's coping efforts (school, church, community)



*Resilience is simultaneously a quality of the individual and the individual's environment.* Michael Ungar, 2005

# Resilience can be taught and encouraged

“Teach them to be resilient, self-reliant and courageous. If we rush to rescue children from distress, they don’t get the opportunity to learn that they can suffer and recover on their own.”

Wendy Mogel, *The blessing of a skinned knee*, 2001



# The evidence is overwhelming

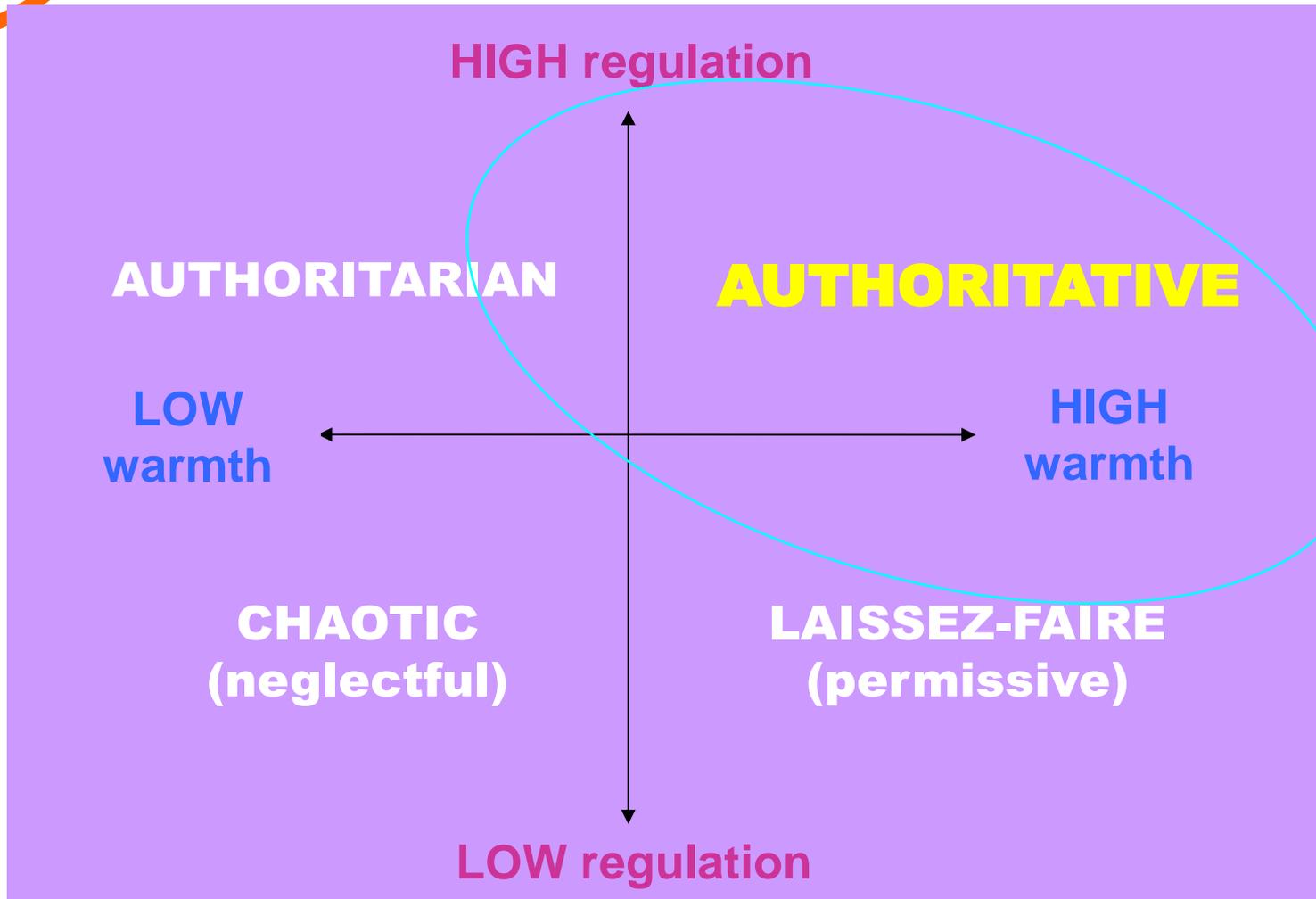
Strong parent-child or carer-child relationships:

- promote emotional, social and cognitive development, emotional resilience and healthy lifestyles
- are associated with increased resilience against a range of difficulties including mental illness



*Resilience: Family cohesion, warmth and an absence of discord* Masten and Gamezy, 1985

# Parenting style



“Develop rules and be affectionate” Diana Baumrind

# Timeless principles of good parenting

- Warm, involved and responsive
- Firm & strict and demanding of maturity
- Fosters and encourages psychological autonomy



Baumrind, D. (1971). Current patterns of parental authority. *Developmental Psychology Monographs*, 4 (1, Pt.2)..

*The most infallible way to make your child miserable is to accustom him to obtain everything he desires.* Jean Jacques Rousseau



"YOUR MOTHER AND I FOUND OUT YOU'VE BEEN BLOGGING.  
WE DON'T KNOW WHAT THAT MEANS, BUT WE'D LIKE YOU TO STOP."



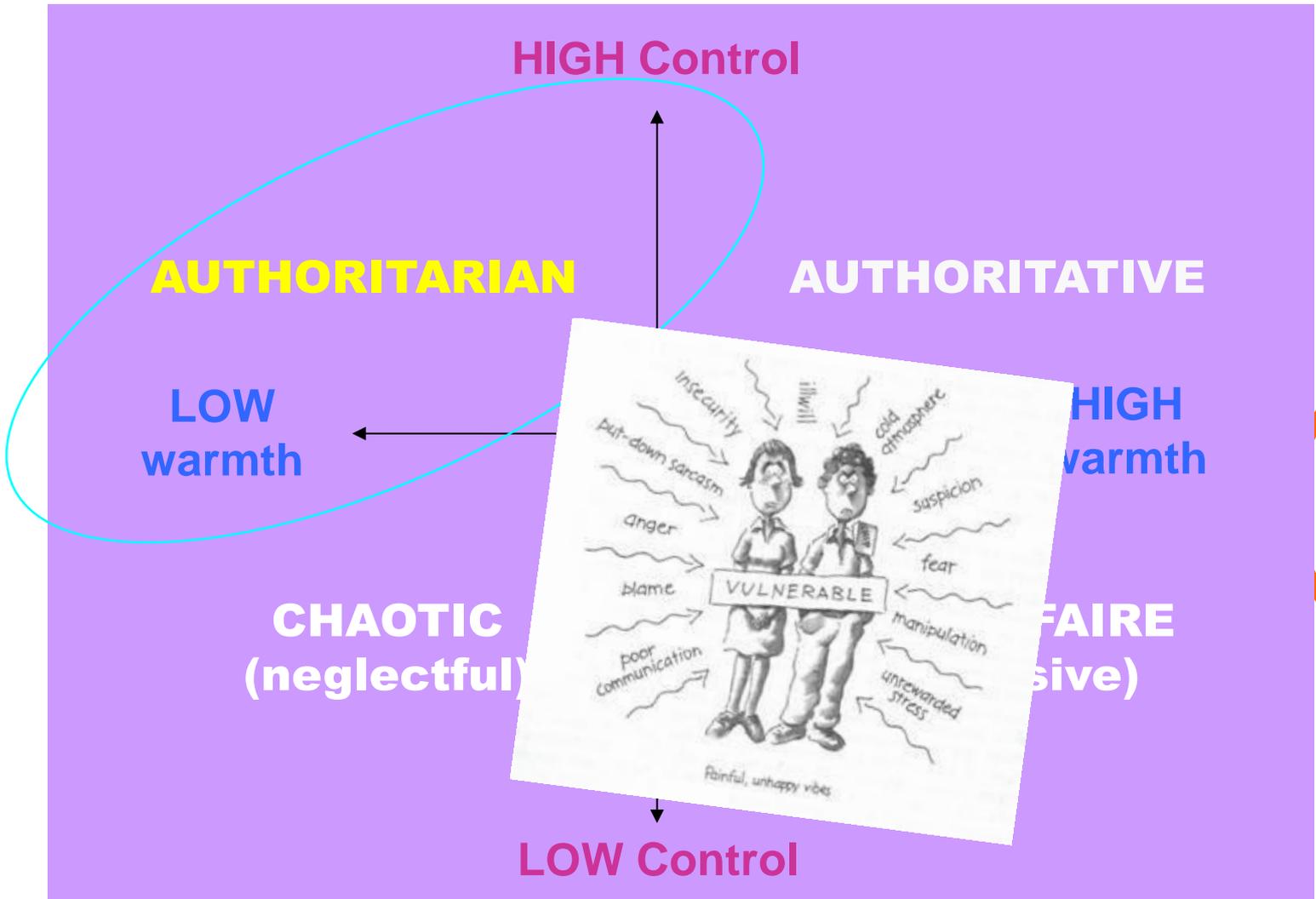
## Adolescents from authoritative homes:

- Achieve more in school
- Better self-reliance & self-esteem; less depression and anxiety
- More positive social behaviour, self-control, cheerfulness & confidence
- Less likely to engage in anti-social behaviour



Lawrence Steinberg, 2001

# Parenting styles - 'authoritarian'



## Kids in problematic families

- Children whose parents have mental health & substance abuse problems are likely to have mental health problems
- Children whose parents parent badly are more likely to turn out badly.

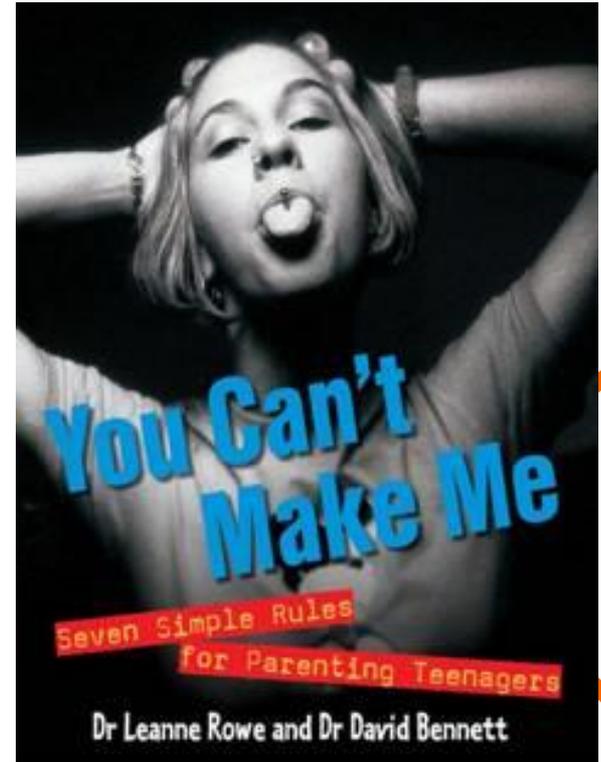


*Domestic violence has longer term effects*

# Show love and respect in small ways

What brings out the best in you as a person/parent/carer?

- Ask your teenager what makes them feel loved
- Remember that teenagers worry and often feel 'out of sorts'
- Challenge moodiness gently



# Parenting website

<http://raisingchildren.net.au/>



Search this site

Search

[grown-ups](#) [newborns](#) [babies](#) [toddlers](#) [preschoolers](#) [school age](#) [pre-teens](#) [early teens](#) [special needs](#)

The complete **Australian resource for parenting** newborns to teens



### Talking to Teens



An interactive guide to help you handle teenage behaviour

▶ GO

### Common health issues



Get the facts on over 100 illnesses and health conditions which can affect your child

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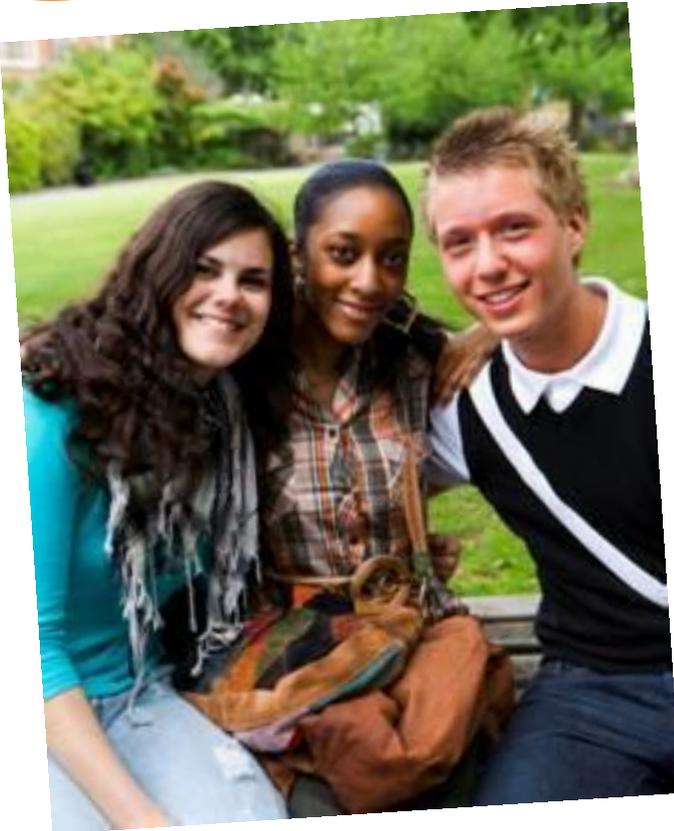
Australian Government  
Department of Families, Housing,  
Community Services and Indigenous Affairs

# A good school feels positive & safe

- Feeling part of the school
- Experiencing school as safe: emotionally, physically and academically
- Perceiving teachers as supportive and caring
- Experiencing high behavioural & educational expectations
- Believing rules and discipline are fair



# Timeless principles of good schooling



- Development and enhancement of academic and social competence
- A positive school ethos and ‘optimistic classrooms that have a sense of hopefulness and joy’

# The Hawn Foundation - Mind Up

- Goldie Hawn, with a team of neuroscientists, doctors, educators, and positive psychologists created the MindUp Curriculum.
- Teaches children about the brain to better understand human behaviour, how to quiet their mind, relax, reduce stress, develop pro-social behaviours.



[www.thehawnfoundation.org](http://www.thehawnfoundation.org)

# The challenge of 'letting go'

'This can be our finest hour. To let go when you want to hold on requires utmost generosity and love. Only parents are capable of such painful greatness.'

Haim Ginott, *Between parent and teenager*, 1969

