

# Ricky Baker and Developmental Relationships

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EO1 Youth Development (Praxis)

In this article we use the *Hunt for the Wilder People* movie to explore Uri Bronfenbrenner's concept of developmental relationships.

## ***Moving from deficit to development***

The trailer for *Hunt for the Wilder People* opens with a list of what's wrong with Ricky Baker, it's a list with everything from stealing stuff, to burning stuff, and even walking slowly across the pedestrian crossing to hold the cars up!

At the RAP workshop we were encouraged to put on the glasses of youth development in order to look past what Ricky is doing (his behaviour), and see what he needs. If we focus on behaviour we end up trying to figure out how to stop him doing stuff. How do you stop Ricky from burning letter boxes? I don't know...

In the Circle of Mana model, we placed Ricky's mana at the centre, and asked the question, what does he need in order to grow into his potential. As the diagram below illustrates, for Ricky (and every other young person) the model identifies four basic needs: to belong, to become good at stuff, to take responsibility and to act generously.



## ***So why these four things, and where did these ideas come from?***

The Circle of Mana was developed out of the Circle of Courage, a model that was originally explained in a book called *Reclaiming Youth At Risk* (1990) by Larry Brendtro (a psychologist), Steve Van Bockern (a school principle) and Martin Brokenleg (a priest, a counsellor and a member of the Lakota people in North America). We asked them if we could update their model for the New Zealand context by placing mana at the centre, they all gave permission, and Martin generously responded:

“Mana is the right term to use as I reflect on the outcomes of the Circle of Courage in Hawaii and Aotearoa. As Indigenous populations continue to decolonize around the Pacific and the world, we know from history that true and sound ideas carry on and transform in new settings. Thank you to the Praxis community for your work and dedication to The Circle. I hope it emerges as a new fern that brings life and nourishment to the people of Aotearoa”

(Martin Brokenleg, 2019)

In their book *Reclaiming Youth At Risk*; Brendtro, Brokenleg and Van Bockern explain that the developmental needs expressed in the Circle of Mana represent a convergence of the values that are found in many indigenous cultures, and are supported by recent research across the fields of; positive psychology, resilience, family therapy and neuro-science.

### ***What are developmental relationships?***

Put simply, these are relationships in which the developmental needs of young people are being met. A young person looks for the people around them to meet these needs as they leave childhood and begin (re) negotiating their relationship with the world around them as an adult.

These needs are met (or not) through interactions in everyday unstructured settings, for example between the young person and their extended whānau or with their mates. They are also an essential dynamic in a young person's relationship with the adults who work with them in professional settings, for example a teacher, a social worker or a youth worker.

The old advertisements for toothpaste used to talk about 'the active ingredient' -this is the part of it that makes all the difference. Li and Julian (2012) use this picture to describe developmental relationships as the active ingredient that creates success in education, and in youth programmes. Basically, they suggest that unless developmental relationships are present it, no matter how good a lesson plan, or a policy, or a programme design, it won't be effective. The term developmental relationships comes from the work of Uri Bronfenbrenner, one of the leading figures in youth development from last century (incidentally, he did much of his early research among the Lakota people of North America). Bronfenbrenner defined developmental relationships in this way:

Learning and development are facilitated by the participation of the developing person in progressively more complex patterns of reciprocal activity with someone with whom that person has developed a strong and enduring emotional attachment and when the balance of power gradually shifts in favour of the developing person.

(Bronfenbrenner, 1979: p. 60)

Let's break that down a little, and use Ricky Baker's relationship with Hector to illustrate what Bronfenbrenner meant.

"Developed a strong and enduring emotional attachment".

At the start of the movie Hec and Ricky don't get on at all, in fact they get into a fight and both declare that they hate each other. However, by the end, they decide to go back into the bush together to try and get a photo of an extinct bird.

"Progressively more complex patterns of reciprocal activity".

They meet each other at Bella's place, where Hector only tolerates Ricky. Then they go bush Hector begins to teach Ricky how to survive. As trust develops, the relationship becomes more complex, Ricky moves from being a nuisance to 'giving back' (this is reciprocity), for

example, he carries Bella's ashes with him without Hec knowing. Later on he begins helping Hec to learn to read.

"The balance of power gradually shifts in favour of the developing person".

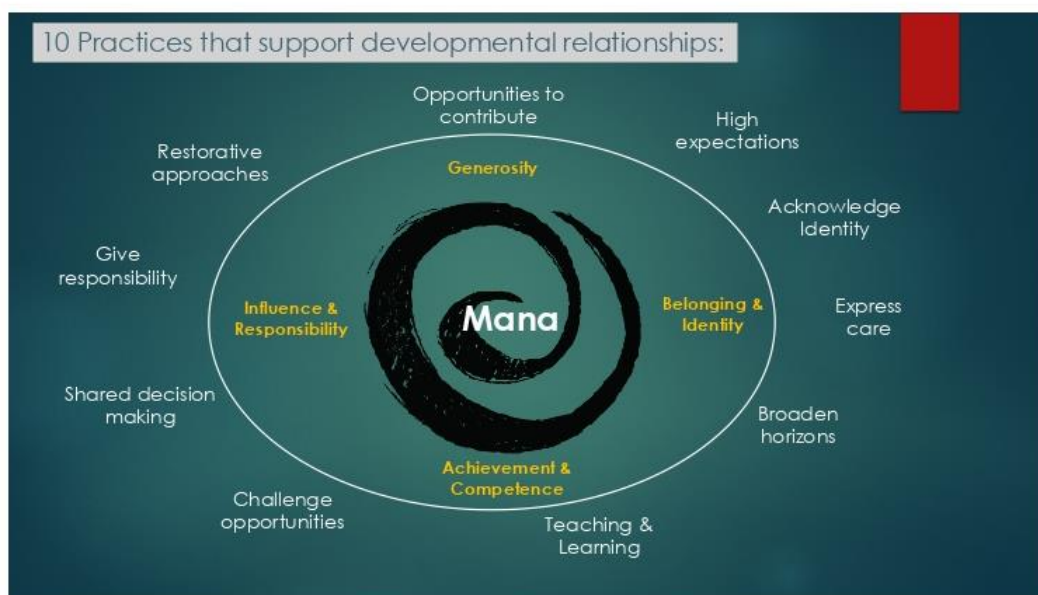
As the movie goes on, Hec relies more on Ricky, for example when they hold up the hunters together, or find the sick DOC ranger. In the chase scene towards the end of the movie, it is Ricky that drives. In the final scene, it is Ricky that brings Hec a camera and suggests that they go back into the bush.

Throughout the movie, Ricky's relationship with Bella and Hec is contrasted with his experience in the social welfare system, where he is seen by Paula (his social worker) as a problem to be fixed.

From the definition of **developmental change** that we explored at Block 1, we know that development has happened, because by the end of the movie Ricky has a different relationship with his world. It wasn't just his relationships with Bella and Hec that made a difference, but also other helpful people such as Kahu and TK that he came across during his journey. This reminds us that whether we play a major or a minor role in a young person's life, we are all able to make a contribution to what they need.

### ***What practices help to create developmental relationship?***

As we think about how to apply this model it is helpful to break it down further into what we can actually do (our practices) that helps meet the developmental needs of the young people we work with (and our own children). You could probably make a very long list, but we have narrowed it down to ten practices, and have organised them to relate (roughly) to the needs in the Circle of Mana as illustrated in the diagram below.



During the movie we become aware that Ricky's Circle is broken around belonging to family; he carries around a picture of his Mum and wonders about her, and he keeps asking Hec if he can call him uncle. Once we realise where a young person's Circle is broken, the practices (in the outside circle) around that need become more important. For example, when Bella celebrates Ricky's birthday she is both expressing care and acknowledging his identity, and as his needs begin to be met Ricky begins letting his defences down.

### **References**

- Brendtro, L., & Brokenleg, M. & Van Bockern, S. (2019). *Reclaiming youth at risk: Futures of Promise (3<sup>rd</sup> Edition)*. Indiana: Solution Tree Press.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
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