

5 Tips for REACHING



& TEACHING High-Risk Kids



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Introduction

The term **at-risk** or **high-risk** is often used to describe students or groups of students who are considered to have a higher probability of failing academically or dropping out of school. The term may be applied to students who face circumstances that could jeopardize their ability to complete school, such as homelessness, incarceration, teenage pregnancy, serious health issues, domestic violence, transiency, or other conditions, or it may refer to learning disabilities, low test scores, disciplinary problems, grade retentions, or other learning-related factors that could adversely affect the educational performance and attainment of some students. While educators often use the term *at-risk* to refer to general populations or categories of students, they may also apply the term to individual students who have raised concerns—based on specific behaviors observed over time—that indicate they are more likely to fail or drop out.

~ Great Schools Partnership ~

Risk factors include growing up in an area with heavy gang activity, a history of gang involvement in the family (family members who are current or former gang members), a history of violence in the home, too little adult supervision, too much unstructured free time, particularly during after-school hours and on the weekends, a lack of positive roles models and exposure to media (television, movies, music) that glorifies violence. Kids at risk develop low self-esteem, a sense of hopelessness about the future because of limited educational or financial opportunity, and sometimes, mental-health issues or behavioral disorders, such as oppositional defiant disorder (ODD) and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

~ American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry ~

Gangs are bastions of conditional love, and one of the ways to counteract it is to offer community, which will always outstrip the gang.

~ Greg Boyle, Homeboy Industries ~

People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.

~ Maya Angelou ~

1. Be Authentic

If you've spent any time with children, you know that they are the world's best lie detectors. They seem to intuitively know when the adults around them are sincere.

For kids living in high-risk environments, this is doubly true. These kids have learned to read body language and voice tones like FBI profilers. For some, this is a matter of survival. They have developed the ability to "hear" when an argument is escalating into violence; to "see" a looming problem like an eviction; and to "feel" the tension that means "it's time to run".

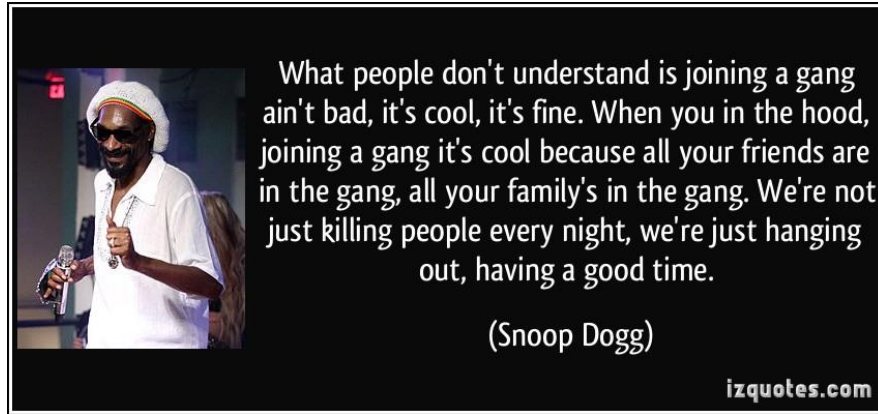
In this risky world, disobeying adults is often warranted, and only occasionally punished. These kids will generally act on their own instincts, rather than your directions. They will trust their own feelings in any given situation, rather than your guidelines. Of course, they have neither the maturity nor the life experience to realize that this approach is badly flawed.

This reliance on their own judgment has kept them safe many times. It becomes reflexive, even in situations where it's clearly detrimental.

In a classroom, this will look like defiance, disrespect or disobedience.

There are a few ways to combat this:

- Create an environment in which it is "safe" for them to follow directions without question. A space where the rules are clear, fair and consistent; where corrections are given with love and respect; and where their compliance does not come with humiliation.
- Practice being non-competitive in interactions. Project calm, loving, assertive energy. If you have hidden doubts about your own authority, they'll know.
- Remember that your tone of voice and your facial expressions will have more impact than your actual words, at least at the outset.
- Be willing to build relationships with them. They are accustomed to superficiality and manipulation. Authenticity will be met first with confusion, and then with joy.



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## 2. Listen

If you listen to high-risk kids, especially if they're younger than 14 or so, they'll tell you everything you need to know.

If you don't know what gang territory they live in, for example, or what the acceptable colors are, then you're not listening.

If you don't know what their lives are like, then you're not paying attention.

Are they verbally abusive or sarcastic or fond of name-calling? This is how people talk to them. Are they quick to take offense? Easily insulted? Slow to apologize? This accurately reflects the adults in their lives. Do they hit first and ask questions later? They are accustomed to being hit first, with explanations coming later.

Do they routinely mischaracterize the statements of others? Remember that poor language skills will directly impact their ability to think clearly and communicate effectively. They need words to identify emotions, concepts, ideas – words they often don't have. Boys, especially, may not even be able to identify any emotions other than rage or sexual arousal. Fear, sadness, loneliness, etc., can all be interpreted as anger.

Listen to your kids. Listen to their conversations, their weekend adventures, their favorite music. Give them the words they need to think critically. Help them build a vocabulary that includes optimism, hope, determination and self-worth.



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### 3. You're Not Colorblind. That's a Good Thing.

How many times have you heard someone say “Oh I don’t see color.” Or “There’s no such thing as race ... we’re all a part of the human race.” Or “We’d all be better off if we stop talking about color and just focus on our humanity.”

Usually, people who express this have the best of intentions. What they are hopefully trying to say is “I don’t treat people **badly** because their race or color or ethnicity is different from mine.”

The problem with this idea is that race/color/ethnicity plays a critical role in how people experience the world. Racial bias – individualized and systemic – is not a thing of the past. For millions of people, it is a daily reality. Even more so for kids in high-risk environments, because they have few protections against it.

What can you do about it?

- Work to identify and eradicate your own biases. Yes, you have them.
- Plant the seeds of critical thinking by asking the kids “Why?” and “I wonder why this happened/why you feel that way/why he said that?” Don’t judge the answers; the point is to think it through.
- Make sure there is diversity in your program materials, guest speakers, etc., but don’t feel the need to point it out. Let it become the new normal.
- Recognize that this is a large and complex issue, and you’re not going to solve it by yourself. Commit to learning about racism and confronting it when you see it.
- Advocate for high-risk kids. Don’t let others silence or dismiss them. Speak up for them!

If you don’t see their color, you don’t see them.



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#### 4. Know the Difference between Discipline and Punishment

You are administering effective discipline when:

- The child's safety and well-being is your primary goal.
- Your boundaries are clear, fair and understood.
- Your boundaries do not change based on emotions.
- Your boundaries are enforced consistently and impartially.
- You are feeling calm; you have no internal doubts about what you're requiring.

You are administering punishment when:

- The assertion of your authority is your primary goal.
- Your boundaries sometimes inadvertently result in favoritism.
- Your boundaries change based on your energy level or your feelings.
- Your boundaries have been breached without comment in the past, leading to an overcorrection.
- You are feeling angry, self-righteous or betrayed.



## 5. Be the Change You Want to See

Kids in high-risk environments develop a set of destructive behaviors and attitudes which have long-term effects on school performance, social acceptance and economic success. You cannot argue, punish or reason them out of these attitudes.

But you can provide them with an alternate world view.

You can model peaceful conflict resolution.

You can give them opportunities to achieve their goals.

Here is what one teen said after completing the YouthBridge program at Warren-Sharpe in 2012:

*I felt like I was in a box. I couldn't get out, and my teacher couldn't get in. She tried to help me, but there was no way in or out. She could see the door, but I couldn't. Then I got arrested with my friends. For the first time, I realized I had choices. For the first time, I thought hey maybe there really IS a way to get out. I did my 6 months in jail and came back to program. I didn't trust myself, at first. But I trusted my teacher. She said there was a way, and she had never lied to me, so I kept looking until I found it.*

You can BE the change.

## Additional Resources

Children's Defense Fund

<http://www.childrensdefense.org>

National Center for Children in Poverty

<http://www.nccp.org>

Center for Public Education

<http://www.centerforpubliceducation.org>

National Black Child Development Institute

<http://www.nbcdi.org>

Youth.gov

<http://www.youth.gov>

Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in American

<http://www.momsdemandaction.org>



### About the Author

Kay Bolden is an author, speaker, CEO and accidental farmer. Since 1991, she's been at the helm of Warren-Sharpe Community Center in Joliet, creating programs to address youth gangs, family empowerment, and food security. The Center's food pantry supports over 600 households every month, and the youth-run farming initiative, Green Sprout Urban Farm, is a pilot program seeking to eliminate urban food deserts.

Kay is the author of *She Lives in You! The Kathleen Bolden Story*, *Veggie Casserole: Kids Cook the Darndest Things*, and *More Wine, Please ... A Heathen on the Way of St. James*. Her articles have appeared in *Woman's Day*, *Mothering Magazine*, *American Baby*, the *Chicago Tribune*, *Chicken Soup for the Single's Soul*, and numerous other publications.

Contact her via email ([kay.bolden@att.net](mailto:kay.bolden@att.net)) or Twitter (@KayBolden). Or, just take a ride down to Green Sprout Urban Farm. She's probably out there picking veggies with her kids.

Thank you for reaching and teaching high-risk kids!  
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