

KEY ONE



Unlocking Potential: From I Am Curious to I Am Capable

Imagine hearing fantastical stories of a wonderful place that one day, you will be gifted a key to enter. A magical realm, where you will be surrounded by people that are just like you, you will participate in fun, grand adventures, and solve new and amazing mysteries. In the stories, this magical realm is dominated by individuals that are all your size (this is exciting because in your current realm everyone around you are giants), you will face and conquer new tasks and be surrounded by loads of friends. The stories paint a picture of a fabulous, colorful, interactive place where you are the star. There is a sense of curiosity as the count-down begins until you are given the keys to this new kingdom called "SCHOOL."

During this time of anticipation, curiosity is the primary driver of thought and exploration. The young person is curious about the unknown; in this case SCHOOL. As human beings, we are faced with many new experiences and each new experience is fueled by curiosity. Curiosity inspires us to dream, explore and try new things. Curiosity is a great motivator and is the antithesis of complacency. Curiosity fuels discovery and adventure. Curious people achieve more.

Back to the Story...

After years of waiting and anticipation, the day finally arrives; the first day of SCHOOL. To commemorate this exciting day, you have been dressed in the finest “school uniform”, with a new accessory—a backpack-filled with “school supplies” and you are being posed for a picture to catalog this historic event. The excitement continues as you wait for the “school bus” to come and collect you and whisk you off to the magical realm of kindergarten. Your curiosity has culminated to this moment and you look around and wonder, “What was I thinking?”

Curiosity is fraught with challenges; a threshold you’re not sure you want to cross. In each new situation that curiosity introduces, there are challenges that have to be faced in order to conquer and carry-on. Curiosity requires courage.

The Story Continues...

As you sit on this mystical “school bus” your excitement begins to sour into anxiety. All of a sudden you realize everything that is familiar has vanished. Everything around you is new and unknown. This promised realm of excitement and adventure is suddenly scary and unpredictable. You have been given the key to unlock new experiences, but you are not sure you want to walk over the threshold.

In order to participate in all that curiosity has to offer, and take full advantage of every experience and every adventure; you need courage. Courage allows you to face the challenges of your curiosity.

Back to the Bus... Scenario 1

The feelings of fear, abandonment and confusion begin to overwhelm your senses and threaten to rob you of the excitement and anticipation of your big day. You become overcome by these emotions and start to cry. You feel like you are locked in a box in complete darkness. You are overwhelmed by a

feeling of fear and hopelessness. When you have faced situations like this in the past you have been yelled at and told to “act right”, or you were just ignored and left with the darkness and fear. You feel like you are suffocating and you close your eyes wishing you could just disappear when someone new steps up on the bus and comes to sit by you. “Hi, I’m Emily. Is this your first day of school too?” Your feelings of fear, loneliness, and confusion override your curiosity, exploration and adventure and you hear a voice yell, “Get away from me! I don’t know you! I don’t like you!” You realize the voice is yours. You’re not sure why you said that. You feel more confused and afraid and alone. Emily moves away and you are left alone with your big emotions stuck in a cycle of fear and frustration. This exciting adventure has quickly taken a turn for the worst and you don’t want to continue. You want to get off the bus and run home.

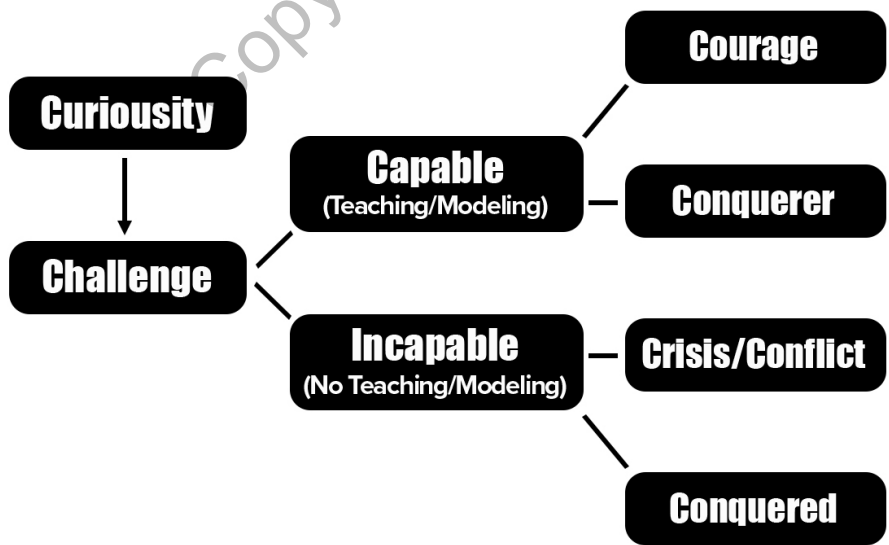
In this scenario, the cycle of curiosity, challenge, courage has been broken by crisis. An overwhelming sense of fear and trauma paired with a deficit of skills to manage a challenging situation has derailed what could have been an otherwise positive experience. The young person is lacking the tools to move through the process from curiosity to challenge to courage because they did not possess the strategies to CONQUER the challenge. It is difficult to display courage when faced with a challenge if you do not have the tools or experience to Conquer difficult situations. If you are going to conquer a challenge, you have to feel Capable.

Back to the Bus... Scenario 2

The feelings of fear, abandonment and confusion begin to overwhelm your senses and threaten to rob you of the excitement and anticipation of your big day. Just as you are about to be overcome by these emotions, you remember how you have been taught to stay calm. When you faced new situations in the past, you would be reminded to take big breaths like you were blowing out birthday candles, or to think about your favorite snuggly smooshmallow and close your eyes and

pretend you are snuggling it. You start to close your eyes to envision your favorite snuggly when someone new steps up on the bus and comes to sit by you. “Hi, I’m Emily. Is this your first day of school too?” Your feelings of fear, loneliness, and confusion suddenly vanish and are replaced with renewed curiosity, exploration and adventure.

In this scenario, the cycle of curiosity, challenge, courage continues because the young person had the key of being CAPABLE. They were able to embrace courage because they were equipped with skills to face a frightening situation and conquer the emotions that threatened to derail the experience. Courage is defined as, “the ability to do something that frightens one.” Where does that ability come from? Ability is derived from the word ABLE. When you are able to do something you have knowledge of and are proficient with a specific skill or skill set. You have used the skill in previous situations and had the opportunity to master the skill over time in multiple settings. When you are able, you possess both knowledge of a skill and have practiced the skill in different environments. Capable is being introduced to a skill or knowledge, have an awareness of the skill or concept, but are not considered proficient with the skill or knowledge. You are much more likely to be courageous when you feel capable.



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The difference between the Back to the Bus scenarios is being capable to face a challenging situation with courage. In the first scenario, the child did not have the teaching or modeling to face a challenging situation with courage and conquer the overwhelming feelings. In the second scenario, the child had teaching and modeling to face the challenge with courage and conquer the feelings that threatened to derail the experience. In order to unlock the potential of every child so they can face each challenge courageously you must give them the key of capability. The first key to unlock potential is moving from curious to capable.

Moving from curious to capable starts with self-awareness. Unlocking potential starts with exploring self-awareness, identifying personal strengths, understanding personal challenges or shortcomings and accurately labeling feelings and emotions. If you want to unlock the potential in children, you need to be willing to explore your own self-awareness. Self-awareness begins with answering the following questions:

*Capable aligns
with the social
emotional
competency of
Self-Awareness*

- Who am I?
- What do I like?
- What do I dislike?
- What am I good at?
- What is difficult for me?
- What excites me?
- What drains my energy?
- What do I look forward to?
- What causes me anxiety?
- What do I want to do?
- What do I avoid doing?

Each question starts with curiosity, introduces a challenge, requires becoming capable, and leads to courage. Even in your strengths you face challenges. Every strength you identify has an equal and opposite weakness that creates challenges. For example, you may identify a strength as being very organized. A potential challenge to being organized is becoming frustrated with last-minute changes. Maybe you pride yourself on being flexible and your ability to go with the flow. This may make it difficult when you need to be on time or face a deadline.

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The following table shows some common strengths and the challenge or weakness associated with the strength.

Strength	Weakness
Analytical	Removes feelings from decisions
Thorough	Perfectionist
Disciplined	Rigid or demanding of self/others
Independent	Trouble working with others
Decisive	Doesn't consider other perspectives
Determined	Dominant, focuses on "my way"
Empathetic	Conforms to others over self
Patient	Loses sense of time, misses deadlines
Diplomatic	Not assertive or directive
Good communicator	Talks too much, doesn't give others a chance to talk
Enthusiastic	Overwhelms/exhausts others, comes on too strong
Creative	Dreamer, unrealistic

Brinkman, R., and Kirschner, R. (2002).

Being self-aware and understanding how your own strengths and weaknesses influence your day-to-day interactions helps you to be more proactive in empowering the young people around you with the tools they need to be capable and conquer their challenges. Curiosity naturally motivates you to explore and discover new experiences, new people, new places and within each "new" is a potential challenge. The first step to empower kids to conquer is providing them with the tools to be capable. Becoming capable starts with teaching.

Unlocking potential starts with proactively identifying basic skills that are necessary for individuals to be capable to successfully navigate in new and/or uncomfortable situations. In the bus scenarios, the only difference between scenario 1 and scenario 2 is teaching and

modeling (how to stay calm) the child had received to prepare them to handle the challenge of the unknown. Educators and parents have a unique privilege to provide the teaching and practice to equip children with strategies to navigate challenging situations and new situations that their curiosity will inevitably present. Unfortunately, educators and parents alike tend to doubt their own ability to teach social behavior in a way they don't tend to doubt their ability to teach academic or basic care skills.

We consider teaching the alphabet and phonics or tying shoes and buttoning a shirt as natural academic or basic care skills that we teach children. However, we neglect to consider teaching how to stay calm or follow instructions as a natural behavioral skill to teach. We make great efforts to insure our children are equipped with academic skills for them to be successful. Oftentimes we overlook the importance of teaching the behavioral skills they will need for academic skills to shine by lacking the ability to work with others, lead a team or function in a collaborative environment. If you are going to engage in promoting the development of successful contributors to society, you must empower youth with the academic and social skills they will need to be capable.

Moving from Curious to Capable Requires Teaching

This seems like a simple and maybe even obvious statement; however, generations of teachers and parents have found that teaching behavior does not seem simple or obvious. We spend significant time planning, developing, introducing and implementing academic curriculum to ensure all children are receiving quality teaching that is developmentally appropriate for them to master academic benchmarks. When it comes to teaching behavior skills, educators and parents feel ill-equipped, unsure, and unprepared. If we are going to unlock each child's potential, we must begin to embrace teaching of behavior skills in a similar way we embrace teaching academic skills. Teaching behavior skills is very much the same as teaching academic skills when you are able to define behavior.

Behavior is defined as the way in which one acts or conducts oneself, especially toward others. Behavior can be summarized as something you can see ("When I asked you to take out your homework you rolled your eyes."); hear ("As I walked past you I heard you say something like, 'that is stupid.'"); or measure ("It has been five

minutes since you were asked to begin and you haven't started yet.""). Being specific about behavior and describing behavior as actions that can be seen, heard, and measured helps you to be clear in identifying what you want to teach. This also allows us to break behavior down into smaller sequential steps that can be taught using the same framework we use for teaching academics. Behavior can be taught through social skills that are broken down into smaller, specific steps.

Social skills make up the curriculum for behavior teaching. Everyone can be a teacher of behavior when social skills are the basis of what is being taught. The American Psychological Association (APA) defines social skills as "a set of learned abilities that enable an individual to interact competently and appropriately in a given social context" (2020). In simpler terms, social skills are what people use to successfully interact with others. It is important to note that social skills include both verbal and non-verbal communication, and strong social skills are demonstrated by a person's ability to successfully live, work, and understand others.

Social skills are essential for individuals to lead fulfilled lives; social skills allow you to work with others, resolve conflict and build and sustain relationships. Each of these concepts can seem broad and too general to teach specifically, but when you break each concept into specific skills the teaching is much more manageable.

Effective education and parenting programs have taken these broad concepts of social competencies and condensed them into specific social skills. Here is a list of some essential social skills:

- Following directions
- Staying calm
- Accepting a consequence
- Disagreeing
- Accepting a "No" answer
- Asking for help
- Sharing
- Listening
- Having a conversation
- Making an apology
- Introducing yourself
- Greeting others
- Resisting negative peer influence

The Key to Capable is Teaching

Each of these essential skills can be broken down into specific steps and taught in a similar format that is applied to teaching academics. Just as you breakdown broad academic concepts into smaller essential skills, you can apply this same strategy to teaching social skills. Here are steps from an academic lesson plan framework applied to teaching social skills:

Objective: Identify the social skill and define what students are going to learn during the lesson.

- Learn to stay calm in tough situations.

Hook: Capture students' attention and activate their prior knowledge.

- Have you ever felt so upset you couldn't think straight?
- Use an example from recent news or social media of someone losing control.

Direct Instruction: Specifically define the skill.

- When you lose control or when you see others lose control it's important to know how to stay calm. Staying calm in difficult situations can be really hard, but it is easier to do if you have a plan.
- There will be times when you feel frustrated, angry, overwhelmed, sad or even exhausted from day to day. When these feelings start to feel like they are going to take control we are going to use "straw breathing".
- Straw breathing is a process where you breathe in through your nose for a count of three, hold that breath for a count of four, and then breathe out as if there is a tiny straw in your mouth for a count of seven.

Practice: Provide opportunity for practice as a large group, break-out groups or individually.

- Let's try straw breathing together. (Lead the practice of straw breathing 2 or 3 times.)

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Reflect: Allow students to analyze and summarize what they learned, assess their understanding and identify specific examples of how they can demonstrate proficiency in their new skill as well as areas where they could use additional support.

- After the class has practiced straw breathing and the room is quiet, ask, “What does calm feel like? Sound like? Look like?” You will receive universal responses of, quiet, peaceful, controlled, safe, etc. Reinforce these responses.
- “There will be times when you are feeling stressed, overwhelmed, frustrated. In those times I might prompt you to take a couple of straw breaths and give you some time and space to stay calm. Once you have had a chance to take a few straw breaths I will check back with you and see what we can do to help you get back on track.”

By clearly identifying specific social skills you can easily apply an academic lesson plan framework to the teaching of a positive behavior that will give kids the skills to be capable to face challenges with courage and conquer new experiences. Unlocking the potential of capable kids begins with teaching.

Teaching Tips to Increase Capabilities:

- Plan to teach a social skill at a neutral time. Teaching behavior is most effective when it is calm and there are no distractions.
- Consider the developmental ability and interest of the individual or group. Use individualized or real-life experience to connect the skill to a positive outcome.
- Practice makes possible. Learning is internalized through doing. Repetition builds mastery. The more they practice the more likely they are to use the skill when it is necessary. Acknowledge and praise the effort to practice new behaviors.
- Prompt behavior to prepare a child before a new experience. “We are going to a play group. Remember how we talked about sharing?” “If you start to feel frustrated in math, remember how to stay calm.”
- Connect behavior learning to real-life experiences and academics. “When doing a math problem, is it important to follow directions?” “Would *The Little Gingerbread Man* have a different ending if he had accepted a “no” answer and stayed inside?”

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These tips for teaching will increase learning and develop capabilities to empower children to conquer challenges. Teaching and practice is the foundation for individuals to feel supported, valued, and capable.

Excellent teachers understand that learning does not end with teaching. Learning is a process that includes teaching, modeling and prompting. This same principle applies to learning behavior. Learning to apply the knowledge of a social skill or behavior requires modeling and prompting just the same as academic skills require modeling and prompting. Teaching social skills empowers us to actively model the skills during interactions and to prompt those skills when they are needed. Putting these pieces of the process together-teaching, modeling, prompting-empowers children to be capable and is the first key to unlocking their potential.

Key Take-Aways:

- ✎ Behavior is learned in the same way academics are learned.
- ✎ Becoming capable requires teaching social skills.
- ✎ Building capability is a process: teach, model, practice.
- ✎ Feeling capable develops courage to conquer.
- ✎ Being capable builds confidence.

Key to Capable Unlocks:

- 🔒 **Door to self-awareness.** Capable kids are self-aware. When you feel capable and equipped with the skills to be successful you are more willing to self-reflect and accurately identify personal strengths, challenges and individual feelings.
- 🔒 **Door to self-determination.** Capable kids have choices. The key to choose between, “I can,” and “I can’t”. Teaching social skills provides the key to open door of self-determination where they develop, an “I can,” attitude.
- 🔒 **Door to confidence.** Capable kids have confidence. Every new experience or challenge a child feels capable to face represents an opportunity to conquer and builds confidence.



ACTIONABLE TOOL FOR UNLOCKING POTENTIAL

Tool: Skill-Building Cards

Description: A set of simple, reusable cards that teach essential social skills (e.g., staying calm, following directions) using a structured, repeatable format. These help children become capable by practicing skills in a supportive way.

Steps:

1. Create index-sized cards, each with a social skill title (e.g., “Staying Calm”).
2. On the back, list 3-5 steps to perform the skill (e.g., 1. Take a deep breath. 2. Count to 5. 3. Say ‘I’m okay.’).
3. Introduce one card at a neutral time (e.g., during breakfast or circle time).
4. Model the skill, then practice it together 2-3 times.
5. Prompt the skill before challenging situations (e.g., Let’s use ‘Staying Calm’ at recess).

Activity: Calm-Down Kit

- Provide a small box with items like a stress ball, a breathing guide (e.g., In for 3, out for 7), and a Skill-Building Card for “Staying Calm.”
- Practice using the kit when the child feels upset, reinforcing capability through repetition.



EDUCATOR REFLECTION ACTIVITY

The Capability Toolkit

Objective: Reflect on how you teach social-emotional skills to build students' capability and self-awareness.

Instructions:

Take 10 minutes to list 3-5 social skills (e.g., staying calm, following directions) you've explicitly taught students this year. Refer to examples like "straw breathing" or "asking for help" for inspiration.

For each skill, write:

- How did you teach it? (e.g., direct instruction, modeling)
- What was the outcome? (e.g., Did students use it in a new situation?)

Reflect: Identify one social skill your students struggle with that you haven't taught yet. Brainstorm a simple lesson plan (objective, hook, practice) to introduce it, using the document's academic-style framework (e.g., "Objective: Learn to stay calm in tough situations").

Answer: How does teaching this skill empower students to move from curiosity to capability, as in the bus scenario?

Wrap-Up: Share your lesson idea with a colleague or journal about how this strengthens your role as a "first teacher" of behavior.