



# Conference Review: The Good Childhood Conference, Melbourne

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The Good Childhood Conference was held at the Moonee Valley Racecourse in Melbourne on the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> October 2013 hosted by Berry Street ([www.berrystreet.org.au](http://www.berrystreet.org.au)). Berry Street's vision is that all children have a safe childhood, feel nurtured and have hope. The primary focus of the conference was to ask: 'What sustains a good childhood? How can we best support those who have not experienced a good childhood?'

Hundreds of conference participants listened to keynote speakers from far and wide including England, the United States of America and Australia. The schedule of concurrent sessions was extensive and made choosing a challenge. Session streams included child welfare, out of home care, indigenous, therapy, family violence, wellbeing, language and communication, homelessness, disability and education.

Maddie Witter's presentation "Foster Change by Building Hope" was particularly interesting. As the co-founder of the Kipp Infinity Middle School in Harlem, New York, Maddie spoke about their success in working with disengaged youth in grades 5 to 8 who struggle academically. The key principle or take home messages were; 'hope is malleable and can be taught' and that 'hopeful people are successful people'. At the Kipp Infinity Middle School the focus is teaching and building upon students 'Hope, Persistence and Self Efficacy'. Maddie reports that these characteristics can be taught using the following four techniques;

## 1) Stamina

Maddie described stamina as a predictor of success. Stamina in this context refers to focus over time leading to achievement or expert status. At Kipp Infinity they work with the students to create periods of focus on tasks. They break down these periods into manageable and achievable time frames to build success in each individual. They work on strategies with the young person to assist them to re-focus when they lose focus or stamina.

## 2) Individualised Goals

Every student is supported to develop individual goals. They present their goals and progress towards them visually on any given day (e.g. through two comparison thermometers). The teachers also use this visual comparison as a modality for engaging the student in the act of reflection. Their pro-

gress that day is reviewed and if for example they are falling behind, the student is supported to understand what factors may be leading to this. Students are in essence, taught to build awareness of the factors that impact on their progress and to objectively explain why this may have occurred (e.g. "my court case is on tomorrow"). This reduces the young person's tendency to internalise certain results as failures and therefore minimises the likelihood of them experiencing associated negative emotions. It also allows them to learn about their barriers to goal attainment.

## 3) Cultivating Choice

The students are provided the opportunity to exercise choice and control throughout the school day and through person centred planning and tailored learning environments.

## 4) Calendars

Calendars are used to assist the student to map out their goals and the steps they need to take to achieve results. These are also used as a tool to engage the students in reflection and provide feedback.

Upon returning from the conference, I decided to Google Kipp Infinity Middle School and was greeted with the following striking statistics. The school currently has 358 children in attendance, 99% of the children are Hispanic or African American and 95% qualify for free or subsidised lunch. However, the most notable statistic is the student attendance rate of 97% for the teaching year 2012/13.

Maddie moved to Melbourne in 2011 and supported the development of a new school for incarcerated youth called Parkville College where she currently works. Maddie not only realised that so many of the children she was teaching were not attending school consistently or progressing academically due to overwhelming feelings of hopelessness, but went a step further to co-found a school based on an ethos of building hope, persistence and self efficacy within each student. This was an inspiring story of a professional woman whose vision and dedication has allowed these young people the opportunity to experience a better childhood.