

Success Education: Tools for Building Productive Lives

Sandra C. Strauss

For more than a year, I facilitated an inmate support group at a local detention center. During that time, I witnessed the critical need for success education—teaching the rules for building successful lives. Initially, weekly discussions centered upon their concerns, frustrations and confusion in coping with the complex circumstances of their lives. They were caught in a web of mounting negative experiences and trapped in lifestyles without knowledge of effective living strategies.



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While low self-esteem may have been at the core of their criminal actions, their feelings of failure and inadequacy were a reflection of them, and reinforced by them. For many inmates, their histories of abuse or neglect undoubtedly contributed to their criminal involvement. Whether awaiting trial or serving out their sentence, many struggled to gain some hope for a better life amidst their anxiety and fear of what their futures held.

As a facilitator, it became clear what so many truly wanted to learn—how to achieve more productive, successful lives. Nearly all wanted experiences resulting in positive outcomes, but the road to getting there, the “rules” for success were unclear to them. Most readily admitted they never made the connection of how positive attitudes and actions resulted in successful outcomes and how self-worth played such an essential role.

A common experience was all-too familiar in many of their lives—the absence of positive role models and a supportive, nurturing environment. They missed out on some valuable personal development lessons that are sometimes taken for granted as a natural part of every childhood.

Instead of nurturing, participants shared their experiences of being raised in an atmosphere of negativity, labeled with destructive messages, and weighted down with feelings of inadequacy and lack. Their self-confidence was stunted. Dysfunctional environments had bred dysfunctional responses. Lives filled with possibilities and potential were dashed by feelings of low self-worth, planting hopelessness and despair in their hearts instead of promise.

I looked into the faces of the desperate, the disillusioned and the disempowered and was determined to redirect their beliefs about their capabilities. I began presenting a series of programs that focused on the truth of who they were, with gifts and talents to share, even if they couldn’t see or believe they had them yet. We talked about self-worth and how self-image impacts our experiences. We explored the very basics for experiencing success—how our choices about what we think, feel and do all impact upon the results we get, and to assess if those are the results truly desired.

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These classes were not mandatory for inmates to attend, but our “success” classes became so popular, some had to wait for months to get into them. Participants were eager to learn how to create better outcomes for achieving better futures for themselves as well as for their families. Many expressed a sincere desire to break a family pattern of “doing time.” They shared the choices they desired for creating their futures and what it would take for them to transform their experiences.

Their program evaluations reinforced my belief in both the need for and value offered by these classes. The evaluation from one young woman became my inspiration for developing a training manual of positive living strategies that could be used by others for cultivating the success potential within everyone.

“If I had learned these ideas earlier, maybe I wouldn’t be here now. Take these lessons out to others so they can go for their goals and not give up on either themselves or their dreams.”

I took her plea to heart and got busy developing a comprehensive positive living skills training manual, ***Building a Successful Life***, to fortify both teens and adults alike with life-transforming skills. I knew she was not the only one who wanted to start fresh and make a better life. Providing the necessary living skills could make a difference to those committed to succeed.

While success is our birthright, learning how to succeed is gained through observation, experience, determination and belief in the possibility of success. The first step, believing that you can succeed, is a major step for the disempowered. Learning these “success” skills can make a difference in producing different experiences and transforming lives.

Building a successful life is possible when success-proven tools are used and the blueprints leading to this desirable destination are followed. The definition of successful living is described in this program as “The quality of your life reflecting positive choices, actions and values. These give you the power to succeed, producing feelings of self-respect and well-being.”

While well-suited and flexible for corrections, the manual was envisioned for all settings where strengthening self-esteem and personal responsibility are vital—in schools, after-school programs, youth clubs, alternative education, human resource departments. The manual features success-building strategies for effective approaches to managing choices, increasing motivation, encouraging achievement and modeling success.

Building a Successful Life includes eight different units, each including a scripted training guide, activities, discussion topics, reproducible, illustrated NoteKeepers that reinforce important success concepts and affirmations to direct thoughts in a positive direction. The training units are designed to help build bright futures, by offering participants a positive perspective about their self-worth and their ability to create positive outcomes.

These training materials are specially designed to teach life-changing, success-enhancing concepts including:

- recognizing personal self-worth
- eliminating negative self-talk
- developing winning attitudes

- building self-respect and good character
- cultivating positive relationships
- making positive choices to produce desirable outcomes
- overcoming negative or adverse experiences
- making desirable changes
- choosing and achieving goals
- creating a productive and satisfying life
- understanding the connection between how choices create consequences

Each unit is self-contained and doesn't require attendance in previous sessions, important in settings with ever-revolving populations. The activities and NoteKeepers (illustrated workbooks highlighting the unit's major points) are reproducible for unlimited use. There is a range of self-assessment activities as well as topics for both large and small group discussions. Every session reinforces success-building principles for creating productive, responsible and fulfilling lives.

While the inspiration for ***Building a Successful Life*** grew out of my experience of working with inmates, it is designed to put participants on a success track to avoid the experience of incarceration altogether. One woman summarized her participation in the program by saying, "It's sad knowing I had to "do time" in order to learn how to build a successful life. Since these are the tools for living a better life, people need to know about them early in life, before they end up in places they don't want to be."

Creating a purposeful, productive life is what "success education" is all about—giving people the tools they need for carving out their share of success and taking them to their dreams.

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