



# Empowering Exceptional Kids as They Grow

By **Dr. Chris Abildgaard, EdD, NCSP, LPC, NCC**

AS WE TURN THE CALENDAR YEAR ONE MORE PAGE AND OUR HOPE FOR A BETTER AND BRIGHTER NEW YEAR IS FRESH IN OUR MIND, LET'S LOOK TO THE FUTURE AND NOT HOPE FOR A BETTER YEAR; INSTEAD, LET'S SET ONE GOAL TO ATTAIN OVER THE NEXT 12 MONTHS. AS WE MOVE INTO THIS YEAR, MAYBE THAT GOAL WILL BE ABOUT LOSING THOSE EXTRA 15 POUNDS. MAYBE IT WILL BE ABOUT MAKING MORE TIME FOR SELF-CARE. MAYBE IT WILL BE ABOUT SAVING UP FOR THAT NEW KITCHEN.

**T**hose are all wonderful and valid things to strive for as we come off another very unsettling year. However, what about our kids? What do we hope they do or achieve this year? Is it better grades? Is it more friends? Is it getting their driver's license, so we don't have to

drive them around everywhere anymore? Once again, all excellent and valid hopes and dreams for our kids in 2022. I would like to challenge us all to add one other goal to our plates (and to the plates of our kids) this year. That is the goal of becoming heard, the goal of becoming seen, the goal of feeling empowered.

In the world we live in today, we need to process what those events starting in March 2020 did to us as people when our lives as a nation changed forever. This reality of a pandemic that we are now living through is emotionally earth-shattering. As we moved through the month, we in the mental health field saw a significant increase in people suffering from anxiety, depression, emotional regulation/behavioral outbursts, etc. And those were just the adults. The trickle-down effect to all of that landed on our kids and young people of this country. In a recent paper, Kang, et al. (2020) discussed that a multitude of risk factors brought on by the pandemic and our new way of having to live can bring about a heightened level of anxiety in children (and adults) and has been documented in research on previous pandemics.

This pandemic is only one variable that has impacted our lives over the past year and a half. Since March 2020, we as a nation have justly experienced a new cry for social justice, educational equity, and change to address systematic racism in our country. We as adults, as parents, as teachers, mental health providers, coaches, etc., have a duty to have those [courageous conversations](#) with others as a means of addressing where we are as a country, as a person, and as a child living through this time. Let's begin 2022 with that small yet powerful goal of working harder to help our young people feel heard, seen, and empowered. So, what does it mean to empower someone?

We can help people feel empowered when they feel seen. To “see” someone, even a child, means not to just visually see them with your eyes, but to see them as an individual who has stock in this world, in your society, in your classroom, in your family. You see their beauty, their strengths, those barriers they may have to overcome, and you allow that person to feel seen in a variety of settings. It starts from a very young age, where we as caregivers can help toddlers feel empowered by allowing them to feel the power of some independence. This can be as simple as helping them to make a choice between two items to play with or allowing them to hold your hand and walk out of their preschool classroom without you carrying them. This idea of letting them walk out, holding your hand, is a huge step in the empowerment process. As much as we as parents want to run to our kids after preschool, pick them up, and carry them out because we've missed them, it doesn't help the child's independent growth. In some situations, is it easier for us as the adult to scoop them up and carry them out? Sure, we all have been there. However, that idea of “scooping and saving” is not fostering a feeling of empowerment. Rather, it's encouraging a reliance on someone to help solve our emotional needs. This task of allowing children to



work through tough situations is hard and time-consuming. However, it can help promote a feeling of empowerment and independence that will help to shape their emotional stamina for years to come.

As our youth get older and enter their elementary, middle, and high school years, this idea of empowerment will change and grow based on their developmental level. Teachers and parents, invite young people to ask tough questions. Allow them to ask the “why.” Take the time to process through the directive or expectation so they as a young person can feel heard and more at ease with the task which was asked of them to do. Offer them observations of what you are seeing their interests are, of what you are seeing them feel, or concerns you



may have about how they are acting. Train your brain to make statements such as, “I noticed that you...” or “When I heard you say \_\_\_\_ it made me feel a little worried,” or “You looked happy when \_\_\_\_.” What these statements offer is a chance for conversation. The power of feeling like, “Wow, Dad wants to talk to me about this and not just punish me,” is massive. Am I suggesting we take away all rules and boundaries our young people need to be aware of and following? No, not at all. However, modeling how to have that conversation will help our young people feel seen and therefore empowered as a person. Maybe these conversations start at home with caregivers or in the classroom with their teachers. In time, the goal would be for our young community members to start having those same conversations with other same-aged peers. So, as 2022 kicks off, let’s think more about how to help our young people feel safe and experience some control over their anxious feelings. Let’s not be afraid to have the conversation that those feelings are okay and valid. Let’s model for them how to walk and stand on their own and feel they have people in their lives who see them. If we as a nation can kick off 2022 with the idea of helping young people feel secure and empowered, we can move in a positive direction to help improve the mental health of the people of this country. Wishing you all the best in 2022.

#### References:

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