

CAPABLE



How to Teach Your Kids the
Strengths, Skills, and
Strategies to Build Resilience



SISSY GOFF *and* **DAVID THOMAS**

LPC-MHSP

LMSW

CAPABLE

ALSO BY SISSY GOFF

Raising Worry-Free Girls

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I Am Capable

CAPABLE

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Strategies to Build Resilience

SISSY GOFF, LPC-MHSP
and **DAVID THOMAS, LMSW**



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For our Dads,
who both have lived out what capability looks like
and helped us find ours.
We love you.

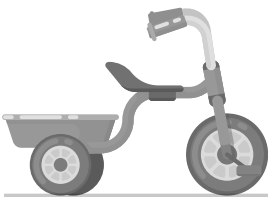
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Foreword

After nearly twenty years of being parents, we are finally accepting that there is no end to the twists and turns on this journey—valleys we could have never foreseen and mountaintops we didn't dare to imagine. It's been humbling and hopeful and hard, sometimes all in the same day. And it will no doubt be a variation on that theme until the very end. This is clearly one of the many reasons we love and look to our friends Sissy and David.

In this season of our family, our oldest son, James, is nearing the end of childhood and launching into college, which simultaneously makes us want to weep and let out a sigh of relief. Our youngest son, John, will soon be entering the oh-so-beloved middle school years, which gives us the occasional full-body sweats, remembering our journeys there. The body clearly keeps score—but we were made to do hard things, right!?!)

All that said, the deepest feeling we feel for our boys is gratitude. Both of their lives are miraculous. James was born six months before my catastrophic brainstem stroke. My neurosurgeon has said the first miracle in my story was that neither of us died in childbirth. Seven years after the stroke, against all odds, I got pregnant

with John, then delivered him before the planned C-section. And we became an improbable family of four.

We are so proud of who the boys have become and are becoming. And we are so proud of us, for who we have become and are becoming because of being their parents. Since they were very young, we would end our bedtime routine with a specific prayer. Upon reflection, we were saying this prayer as much over ourselves as we were praying it over them. We were filling their heads and hearts with this paradigm-shifting charge while reinforcing the same in our own. We would say, “James and John, God made you to do the hard thing in the good story He’s writing for your life.”

This simple idea has helped inform all our lives. And the community with which they have lived out this truth has helped them to further believe that joy and pain are not mutually exclusive. Thankfully, our boys’ souls are being shaped by compassion into something resilient and hopeful, which we believe is exactly what the world needs more of right now.

Yet, a question lingers. Are these compassionate kids capable of taking the resilient goodness of their stories into a future full of challenging unknowns? Do they have what it takes to not only show up but to contribute to a world that needs their unique gifts? Knowing God made you to do hard things is the beginning but being equipped to be confident and capable in how to actually do those hard things is the ongoing work.

Thankfully, our friends Sissy and David have done the good/hard work, not only of writing this book, but more importantly in the countless hours of study and practice that preceded it. What trusted and faithful companions they are to us along this weighty and winding path of raising kids who are compassionate enough to love the world and capable enough to help make it better. We’re on the journey with you, friends.

Katherine and Jay Wolf
Cofounders of Hope Heals and coauthors of *Hope Heals*,
Suffer Strong, and *Treasures in the Dark*

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The Case for Capable

“I don’t want to grow. I just want to be understood.”

When a fifteen-year-old said these words in my counseling office, I had no idea how prophetic they actually were—how reflective of the changes that were taking place in the world of teenagers. Of children. And how much those changes would, in turn, impact the world of parents.

This young woman didn’t want to take risks required to grow. She was lonely, sad, and struggling to make friends at a new school. But she was more committed to the comfort she felt in isolation than she was willing to experience the discomfort reaching out to a new friend would bring.

David and I are seeing it every day in our offices:

- She’s increasingly nervous on Sunday nights, and tearful on the drive to school, nervous about who she will play with at recess.

Capable

- He doesn't want to try out for basketball because he feels that all the other guys are better than he is.
- She doesn't want to have to go to youth group because she doesn't know who she'll sit with.
- He doesn't want to get his driver's license.
- She doesn't want to go to summer camp.
- He doesn't want to ask a girl to prom.

And so many more like these.

In over thirty years of counseling kids and families, we have never been more concerned. Concerned about the mental health of kids. Concerned about the lack of skills, the lack of resilience, the lack of sturdiness we see evidence of every single day in our offices. We have also never been as concerned about the pressure parents are facing.

In case we haven't yet been introduced, we are both therapists at a nonprofit counseling practice in Nashville, Tennessee, called Daystar Counseling. It's a little yellow house where we have the privilege of sitting with kids and parents who are just like you—doing their best to navigate life in these stressful, anxiety- and technology-ridden times. We sit with kids who are anxious, depressed, grieving. Kids who have experienced trauma, who are having trouble with friends or difficulty focusing in school. We sit with parents who want their kids to have more than they did growing up: more connectedness as a family and more resources to deal with all that life will inevitably bring. It's too much—for kids and for the grown-ups who love them.

Something has got to change.

That's where we want to help. We believe strongly that things can be different. Even in this day and time, we believe kids can be resilient. We believe that you, as a parent, can parent with deep care and transforming confidence. And we believe the answer is summed up, for both you and your child, in one word: *capable*.

What does capable mean? In chapter 3, you will see that David defines *capable* in the following way:

Capable kids have practiced *cop*ing and learned *competence* for life's challenges.

Coping = skills and strategies to navigate emotions.

Competence = strengths and abilities for life's circumstances.

Challenges = tasks or situations that test abilities.

What's happening instead of David's definitive statement above is that kids are afraid of the risks required in becoming capable. Sometimes they're avoiding them altogether. And parents, as a result, are abdicating their own capability, in fear that their failures are going to be the very reason their kids need counseling.

■ Kids in Crisis

"But my child doesn't seem capable."

"I think she may be anxious."

"I think he's depressed."

"She acts like a crazy person when she gets to this place, and I can't reason with her at all. How do I know when to push, when the smallest thing seems to cause a big meltdown?"

"His emotions are not only controlling him but controlling our entire household."

We hear these statements and more in our counseling offices. All are reminders of the mental health crisis that is plaguing kids of all ages.

You've likely read the statistics:

- One in seven ten- to nineteen-year-olds will experience a mental health disorder.¹
- Anxiety disorders affect approximately 15 to 20 percent of children and nearly one in three teenagers.²

- 20 percent of kids aged twelve to seventeen suffered from at least one major depressive episode in the previous year.³
- Approximately 15 percent of teenagers report some type of non-suicidal self-harm; 17 to 35 percent of college students report self-harm.⁴
- Suicide is the third leading cause of death among fifteen- to twenty-nine-year-olds.⁵
- Today's kids are significantly more worried than the general population about school and mass shootings.⁶
- The American Academy of Pediatrics announced a national state of emergency regarding children's mental health in 2021 and has not rescinded that announcement.⁷

It truly is too much for kids—the big emotions swirling around inside them and the lack of knowing what to do with those emotions. At times, the knowledge and tools are there, but the motivation to use them is what's missing. And we often feel stuck as to how to help.

In *Raising Worry-Free Girls*, I outlined how anxiety in girls “involves an overestimation of the problem and an underestimation of herself.”⁸ The same is true for boys. It's as if they're saying, “Whatever is making me anxious, whether it's taking a test or reaching out to a friend or just facing a school day, is too big. I'm too small. I can't do it.” And then what frequently follows is “I NEED YOU TO DO IT FOR ME!”

They may not always say these words with their mouths, but they're most certainly saying them with their actions. One of our favorite parenting statements from *The Yes Brain* by Dan Siegel and Tina Payne Bryson reminds us that “behavior is communication.”⁹ And what we believe so many kids are communicating with their words and actions today is “I'm not capable.”

Emotionally, what this translates to is this: “I can't handle all the feelings inside me. I want someone OUTSIDE me to fix it.” We talk often about how, in this day and time, we're so busy being the

resources for our kids that they don't develop resourcefulness. It's a little bit of a chicken-or-egg phenomenon. They don't feel capable. We step in. As long as we're stepping in, they don't have to be resourceful, which some of them don't seem to mind too much. (Thus, the "I don't want to grow. I just want to be understood" comment.) They would rather look outside themselves (to us) than do the hard work of finding tools inside. *In their minds, it's easier for you to be their coping skill than to develop coping skills of their own.* And so they yell. Or cry. Or feign helplessness. Maybe all of the above. Eventually, that lack of coping skills can cause them to slip into anxiety or depression. Their emotions are swirling, and they feel better if they can pull you into the swirl with them. It's enough to make a parent panic. (More on that soon.)

Please hear us say that your child is, in fact, capable. Of handling their big feelings. Of developing both the skills and motivation to navigate those big feelings. It's why we've written this book.

It's not just emotionally that kids are in crisis, however. It's socially as well. In all these years of counseling girls, girls have never been meaner to each other. The playground politics and push for popularity start earlier and have become not only more pervasive but more insidious. I hear story after story of girls making comments to each other—both in the real world and the virtual one—that we would never have imagined when we were growing up. Technology and social media have taken a profound toll on the girls and boys we love. As a result, kids are more isolated and more socially anxious than we have encountered in over three decades of counseling.

For many boys, relationships in real time have been replaced with relationships on headsets through video games. As a result, boys are struggling even more deeply in areas where they already lag behind: awareness, reciprocity, and ownership, to name a few of the foundational social milestones we talk about in our book *Are My Kids on Track*.¹⁰ I remember a teenage boy telling me, "It's easier to defeat a monster in a video game than ask a girl to homecoming." As a result, they're not asking. Or they're having panic attacks en

route to do the asking, because homecoming “asks” have become ridiculously pressured as well. You’re likely living it with your kids. Asking a girl to prom is now called a *promposal* because the invitation to prom requires as much creativity and fanfare today as a proposal for marriage did in our time. It’s too much. Something has got to change.

Kids are struggling emotionally. They’re disconnected socially. And that disconnection only serves to make them struggle more. And isolate further. All compounding to make kids feel anything but capable.

Here are a few of the comments we’ve heard recently in our counseling offices:

“I’m not ready to get my driver’s license. It feels too scary.”

We both have heard this one a lot in the past few years. When the two of us turned sixteen, we were chomping at the bit to have the newfound freedom that came with the little laminated card. But today, kids are afraid of learning to drive. They don’t feel capable of that kind of responsibility.

“I don’t have many friends at school. Why would I text someone I don’t know well and ask them to hang out? That’s so awkward. They’d think I was weird. I’d rather just stay home.”

I met with two girls this week who made these same statements. Neither of them feels liked at school. They don’t know what to say to someone they want to get to know better, so they don’t say anything. They feel incapable of making new friends.

“I don’t want to try out for soccer [or any other sport or extra-curricular activity]. I think it’s stupid, anyway. Why would I want to be friends with those people?”

Many kids would rather not play a sport if they can’t be the best at it. Even as a beginner. They don’t feel capable of measuring up to their own standards of perfection. So instead of having the humility to learn, they dismiss and demean both the sport and those who participate.

“Sometimes, I have friends ask me over to spend the night. But I don’t really want to go. I’d rather be home. I also hate it when my

mom goes out of town. I don't know why. I just feel safer when she's around."

The many kids we hear say words like these don't feel capable of spending any significant time apart from their parents (most often moms). They don't feel capable of independence. But again, they'd never use those words. They'd rather just act like they don't want to go.

"I'm so tired of trying with friends. It never works. I invite them, and they don't invite me back. I want to change schools."

I have had more kids talk about changing schools in the past five years than all the years put together I've been counseling. At times, changing schools might be the best option. But often, these kids don't feel capable of reaching out to anyone outside of their comfort zone. And recently, the comfort zones of kids seem to be getting smaller and smaller—to the point that they can mostly be found in a small rectangle called a screen.

After meeting with the girl who wanted to change schools, I spent a few minutes with her mom. "If she's home, she's in her room," she said. "Rather than spending time with friends, she's constantly scrolling the lives of others. She's in a bad mood, and lashes out at us a lot. We know it's because she's sad and lonely. But she refuses to put herself out there."

She doesn't feel capable. None of these kids does. But it can be hard to tell how kids are really feeling because they'd rather rage at you than admit loneliness. They'd rather withdraw than put themselves out there. They'd rather act like the sport or activity is stupid than take the risk to learn. It's easier for so many kids today to watch the lives of others on a screen while their own are passing them by. And what they're watching only makes the mental health crisis worse.

■ The Social Media Pile-On

Technology has changed the landscape when it comes to both the mental health of kids and their perceived capability. Jonathan Haidt

writes in his book *The Anxious Generation*, “The first generation of Americans who went through puberty with smartphones (and the entire internet) in their hands became more anxious, depressed, self-harming, and suicidal.”¹¹ When it comes to girls, in particular, Haidt says, “There is a clear, consistent, and sizable link between heavy social media use and mental illness for girls.”¹² For boys, “the hit to their well-being is seen less in their rates of mental illness (which did increase) and more in their declining success and increasing disengagement from the real world.”¹³

So, we’ve established two primary ideas so far. **Kids are in crisis.** Not only has their mental health declined significantly, but they also have become more socially anxious and isolated as a result. **Technology and social media are compounding the crisis.** But there is an additional phenomenon we have seen in our offices that acts as the third leg of the wobbly stool of incapability they’re standing on. And it’s one you might not be as aware of. **Kids are using more intense language to describe their emotions and experiences.**

I started noticing the change several years ago. From my perspective, at that time, we were moving as a culture to a better understanding of the mental health of kids. We were having richer conversations around emotions. Counseling had lost the stigma it had when I first became a therapist in the early ’90s. I remember a mom telling her daughter, “Honey, going to counseling doesn’t mean something is wrong with you. It’s actually people who are healthy who get counseling, not the other way around.” Kids were talking about their feelings more. As more kids opened up, the kids who were struggling didn’t feel as alone.

Then something shifted. Maybe it was partly our trying to name what our parents never named for us. Maybe it was also partly the movies and shows that were portraying mental health issues more frequently. Hollywood often missed the mark, though, as evidenced by *13 Reasons Why*. The TV series portrayed, in my opinion, incompetence and a lack of helpfulness on the part of parents while glamorizing both the self-harm and suicide of kids.

But right about that time is when the language kids were—and are still—using started to shift.

Kids no longer say they're "sad." They're "depressed."

I don't hear the word *worried* anymore from kids. They say they have "anxiety."

Kids are reporting "panic attacks" when they're crying hard and can't catch their breath.

Kids who are angry at their parents and trying to say the most hurtful thing they can think of don't say, "I want to run away," like we might have when we were growing up. They now say, "I want to kill myself."

Obviously, we were seeing kids who were having anxiety and experiencing panic attacks and depression as well. But it was the inflation of language around normal emotions that caused me new-found concern. I remember a group of high school girls telling me around that time that no one would listen to you if you said you were stressed. "'Stressed' is like saying you're busy," one girl said. "Everyone uses these really big words to describe their emotions nowadays."

In those days, I remember kids coming to see me who were listing the symptoms of anxiety and depression as if they were reading from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM). What I later realized was that, rather than memorizing the DSM, they were spending a great deal of time on the internet searching symptoms of depression or anxiety. These kids wanted me to provide them with a diagnosis, feeling that their emotions weren't valid without one. Or maybe a diagnosis would garner the attention of a desired group of friends. We had begun the trend of pathologizing normal emotions. Since that time, things have only gotten worse.

Today, they're using even more intense language.

What we might have considered conflict in a friendship is now being labeled as "toxic behavior." As a result, kids (girls, in particular) are not learning to work through normal issues in friendships.

They're dismissing those relationships as toxic and undeserving of repair.

Kids are reporting "out-of-body experiences" when anxious. They're using the word *dissociating*—and some are even diagnosing themselves with DID (dissociative identity disorder). "Formerly known as multiple personality disorder," according to the Mayo Clinic, "this disorder involves 'switching' to other identities. You may feel as if you have two or more people talking or living inside your head. You may feel like you're possessed by other identities."¹⁴ Cleveland Clinic reports that true DID exists in approximately 1.5 percent of the population and isn't diagnosed until adulthood, as it can be confused with "other behavior or learning challenges, such as attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder/ADHD."¹⁵

A few years ago, I started seeing more kids with tic disorder/Tourette types of symptoms than I had ever seen in my practice. They were reporting vocal tics and random, involuntary movements, similar to those found in tic disorders and Tourette syndrome. I researched it and found exactly what I was afraid of.

Harvard Health Publishing had reported the first example of a "social media-induced sociogenic illness."¹⁶ Sociogenic illnesses involve unexplained symptoms that develop within a group of people who have contact. Basically, witnessing the symptoms of that illness can cause anyone to develop the illness themselves. Historic examples of sociogenic illnesses have included everything from shortness of breath, fainting, and even hundreds of schoolgirls who couldn't stop laughing for days. It turns out that sociogenic illnesses can now spread via social media.

Neurologists began noticing more patients, particularly teenage girls, displaying the same type of tics that I was hearing about in my office. After ruling out any medical explanation, they found that these teenagers had been spending hours watching influencers with Tourette syndrome and other tic disorders who were trying to spread awareness. What they ended up spreading was the very symptoms they were talking about on social media. Literally, girls

were developing tics from watching TikTok. Can we say it together? It is *way* too much.

Whereas the internet had been the source of mental health information for teenagers, that source has now become social media. I had a seventh grader, not long ago, say that she started a social media account to “spread awareness around mental health issues.” Not sure what a seventh grader has to offer in terms of helpful mental health education, but she is an example of what many kids see as a trusted source. Concerning, isn’t it? Kids are using intense language, diagnosing themselves with all manner of disorders, and defining themselves by those disorders.

■ **Helping Kids Find Their True Identity**

I recently talked with a group of high school juniors and seniors and asked them how they believed teenagers are defining themselves today. They said all the things you might expect: grades, popularity, sports, friendships, extracurricular activities. But then one wise senior said, “I think we’re defining ourselves by our mental health. People are always saying things like, ‘Well, you know, I have anxiety,’ or, ‘Because I’m depressed . . .’ It’s like our mental health issues are the most important part of who we are.” When I asked her how she felt about that, she responded, “It bothers me for two reasons. One, I think it makes us focus on the negative—what’s wrong, rather than what’s right. And it also takes away the power of those words for people who are truly experiencing those issues.”

I would only add that I believe it’s limiting them. Before we go further, please hear me say that I think it is very important to name what is going on with the kids we love. I have seen more genuine anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation among kids in my office than ever before. I am working with kids who have genuine panic attacks, whose hearts are racing, who have trouble breathing, and who have to fight hard to work through the onslaught of emotion. I have seen plenty of girls who do have to put boundaries around

toxic relationships. I know way too many kids in our community in Nashville who have struggled with dissociating after a significant trauma. I know children and teenagers with tic disorders, both from social media and not, who are persevering to overcome them. I know a lot of courageous kids of all ages who are doing their best to find hope and healing amid a difficult diagnosis they're currently facing.

My concern is the kids who use the words flippantly—who think they have to use big words to get their friends or even their parents to hear them. Kids who are defining themselves by those big words. And using the words to remind others and even themselves that they're not capable.

We don't want kids to define themselves by their mental health issues.

We don't want something that is temporary to become a permanent part of their identity.

We don't want an issue that is a small part of where they are to become a larger part of who they are becoming.

We want kids to define themselves by their strengths, by their purpose, and by all the good that God is growing inside of them.

Your kids are capable—much more than they know.

Your kids who are depressed are still capable—capable of working through the depression and capable of finding joy and themselves again. Your kids with anxiety are capable. In fact, I talk about in my book for girls, *Braver, Stronger, Smarter*, that girls with anxiety are some of the smartest, most conscientious, and most capable kids I know. Boys are too. David talks about the same concept in his wonder of a workbook, *Strong and Smart*. All kids are. No matter how big or small the trouble they're facing. They just might not know it yet.

And so we, as the grown-ups who love them, have the privilege of reminding them. Of helping some of our kids see that their identity lies deeper than the diagnosis. Of helping some of our kids see that they don't have to use big words to be noticed—that who they are

is enough. Of helping kids move past the hurdles facing them today to discover how capable they truly are.

But how do we do that? When kids are in crisis? When our kids are isolated? When we're doing everything we can to hold off on the timing and trouble that we know technology brings? And how, especially when we're the ones who get the brunt of all their big feelings? It is enough to make a parent panic.