The Power of One: How a Single Connection Can Shape a Life

by Dr. Michael Gordon

Yesterday, I was chatting with some friends when the conversation turned, as it often does, to family frustrations—difficult relatives, strained family dynamics, the usual complaints. Then William said something no one expected: "You know, sometimes I feel lucky I don't have parents." The comment hung in the air. No matter how challenging family can be, most people would still choose having one. Was he really saying a life without parents had advantages?

William explained that he had been placed in foster care at just six months old. Over the course of his childhood, he cycled through more than 14 placements—never finding a permanent or safe home, never forming a bond with someone he could truly call family. Listening to him, I couldn't help but wonder how this man—after so much early instability and trauma—had gone on to become a teacher, a father, a husband, and a respected member of our community. How had he managed to overcome circumstances that derail so many others? He didn't hesitate with his answer: "A substitute teacher when I was in fifth grade saved my life, without question."

He continued: "When I was 11, I was actively suicidal, failing every subject, and just a mess. I had no friends and spent most of my time crying. I really didn't want to live anymore. For some reason, this substitute teacher noticed me and made an effort to connect. It wasn't any specific advice she gave. She just took an interest in how I was doing, helped me with my work, and let me know I could come to her if I was struggling. She told me I was a good kid who could have a decent future. She cared about me in a way I had never experienced." It made all the difference—even though she was only in his class for a few weeks. For the first time, William began to feel that he had worth. He said he has thought about her almost every day since and even tried—unsuccessfully—to find her years later. He wanted to thank her for her kindness.

William's story isn't just moving—it reflects something psychologists have been documenting for decades: the extraordinary impact a single caring connection can have on a life. One of the most well-known studies on this subject is the Kauai Longitudinal Study, conducted by developmental psychologist Dr. Emmy Werner. Over more than thirty years, she and her team followed 698 at-risk children born on the Hawaiian island of Kauai in 1955. While many of these individuals experienced significant medical and psychiatric challenges into adulthood, about a third grew into resilient, successful adults despite their early hardships. What made the difference?

Werner identified several protective factors, but one stood out: resilient children almost always formed a close bond with a nonparental adult—a teacher, coach, neighbor, or mentor. The attentions of just one **compassionate** person appeared to buffer them against the effects of early adversity. Being seen and valued by someone who doesn't have to care—but chooses to anyway—is a powerful elixir for good. Subsequent research has amply confirmed that these kinds of relationships are among the strongest predictors of resilience and positive outcomes. That person might be a teacher, a mentor, a therapist—or, sometimes, simply a friend.

At its core, friendship is about connection, about someone who takes the time, when it matters most, to offer support and kindness. A good friend can remind you of your worth even when you've forgotten it yourself. I don't think William was truly glad to have grown up without parents. Perhaps, listening to the rest of us vent our frustrations, he was recognizing the strange irony of having been spared some of those struggles.

But it also reminded him that he had found the support he needed despite his rocky start in life and that life-changing influences can emerge from the most unexpected corners, often in the form of a single person who chooses to care.