

THE CONTEXT

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Understanding what it takes
to make change.



The Context is an in-depth, episodic update on the realities faced by Chicago children and families and what we as a community can do to support them. In each edition, we share knowledge we have learned through holistically serving our youth and families in all facets of their lives.

Today's Topic:

How Goal-Setting, Done Right, Can Transform a Child's Future

by Taal Hasak-Lowy

Think about a goal you set, worked toward, and finished. Maybe it was big, like a degree or a marathon. Maybe it was small, like sticking with a new habit or learning something you'd put off.

Think about how it felt. Not just the accomplishment, but the person you became in the process. The quiet evidence you now carry about what you're capable of.

That feeling is not incidental. It is the point. And for children growing up in communities fractured by gun violence and poverty, access to that feeling can be life-changing.

Goal-setting is one of the most powerful tools in youth development. When young people learn to set and pursue goals, they learn to plan, problem-solve, and persevere. And they develop agency — a sense of control over their future. Research is clear: when children feel this sense of agency, they are more likely to make sound decisions and avoid risky behaviors.

But research is equally clear about something many well-meaning programs miss: children facing adversity cannot pursue goals without safety, relationships, and support.

The adversity these children have experienced has shaped their developing brains. When a child grows up under chronic stress, their nervous system adapts to a high-threat environment. The “downstairs brain” (fight, flight, freeze) often takes over, and the “upstairs brain” (reasoning, planning, learning) goes offline. Not as a choice. As a neurological event.

Goal-setting without a foundation of safety and regulation doesn't build capacity. It confirms a child's deepest fear: *I can't do it. I give up.* Every failed goal in an unregulated emotional state contributes to a shrinking sense of what's possible.

This is why the relationship comes first. Always. Before a child can set a goal, they need to feel safe. Before they can follow through, their nervous system

needs to learn, through repeated experience, that the world can be different from what it has taught them to expect. That learning happens through one mechanism above all others: a trusted adult who shows up consistently. Over time, that consistency changes the architecture of the developing brain. The upstairs brain becomes available. And then the real work can begin.

This is the model at Friends of the Children-Chicago. Every child in our program begins in kindergarten and is paired with a salaried, Professional Mentor for 12.5 years —No Matter What. The length of this commitment reflects what the science demands and what the children deserve: enough time for trust to become transformation.

Within that relationship, goal-setting becomes a highly effective tool. And crucially, children choose their own goals. A goal *assigned* to a child is very different from a goal *chosen* by a child. Their voice is the mechanism of ownership, and it changes everything about whether a goal sticks.

Professional Mentors help children set goals that are structured and achievable. They help kids understand the difference between outcome goals, which depend on factors outside their control, and process and performance goals, which belong entirely to them. *I'm going to turn in my homework on time. I'm going to show up and be present.* And when something isn't working, the mentor helps them adjust. The beauty of a goal is that it can be changed.

Goals are there to serve the child. Not the other way around.

When a child accomplishes a goal, we celebrate. Their name goes on the Goal Wall. They ring the Goal Bell. Their mentor says something specific: *the fact that you did this tells me something about who you are.* The brain encodes what gets noticed. Said enough times, by someone who genuinely believes it, across



enough years, that becomes the inner voice a child carries long after the program ends. *I'm someone who sets a goal and finishes it.*

For funders and policymakers who want to move the needle on outcomes for children in high-adversity communities, this is the lesson: invest in the conditions that make goal-setting and goal-achievement possible. Safety. Relationship. Regulation. Time. Programs that check boxes without building these foundations first are missing the mechanism of change entirely.

The goal isn't the point. The person who emerges from the goal is the point. A child who can name what they want, make a plan, adjust when things go hard, and keep moving toward a future they chose for themselves.

It starts with a five-year-old choosing something small that matters to them and learning that growth is possible. And a trusted adult saying: *you did that. That is who you are.*

FR1ENDS of the CH1LDREN

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▶ **Watch this 7-minute video** which summarizes how goal-setting can help children develop a sense of identity and agency.