



**A Conversation with Jerry Yager, Psy.D.
Executive Director, Denver Children's Home**

One of the philosophical underpinnings of the Office Depot Foundation National Backpack Program is the belief that the backpacks that the Foundation donates give children important tools they need to succeed in school. We asked Jerry Yager, executive director of the Denver Children's Home, to comment based on his organization's experience with the backpack program during the past several years.

(Dr. Yager has granted permission for these quotes to be used by media.)

Q. Do the backpacks received by the Denver Children's Home make an impact on the children you serve?

A. The research has been exploding in terms of how exposure to high-risk situations impacts the wiring of a child's brain. Children who are exposed to poverty, abuse, neglect, domestic violence or community violence – or who have a family member with mental illness – develop very negative templates about themselves. When they go into new situations, they already have an expectation that they're not going to succeed and that others won't treat them fairly. They have low self-worth and poor expectations that others will care about them or respond to them in ways that will meet their needs. They have very high arousal levels and are very anxious. This is seen in behaviors such as not listening, not following through on tasks, not learning, poor memory, and aggressive and impulsive behaviors. They are often defined as defiant. They already feel separate and alone. The backpack represents to these kids that they are part of the group – that someone cares about them and that the world is going to give them something... and they are not going to be left out.

The backpack by itself will not change the trajectory of their lives, but it can be the start of a pattern that allows them to achieve success. When they start school feeling special, it increases their self-esteem, gives them a sense of pride, and suggests that they are not going to stick out in a negative way and might be able to compete with someone who might have more resources than they do.

Q. Can you provide an example?

A. When distributing the backpacks last year, we had a 6-year-old boy whose family struggles financially in taking care of the child and in providing the amount of attention the child needs to successfully transition into school. He came in kind of slouched over, with an angry face. When he received his backpack, he started to march around the room. This child felt special – and the message on the faces of the adults in the room was, "You are special." Half of the adults in the room were laughing and the others had tears in their eyes. That interaction really begins to change the trajectory of these kids' lives.

These kids are so good at eliciting negative interactions with adults. They are often either left out because they're quiet and withdrawn, or they are



stressed out. Discipline in itself is not going to help these kids develop the coping skills they need to be successful. This commitment to giving kids something positive is important to the kids but also serves as a model for other adults in their lives. There are so many ways we can get out and help.

Q. Do the benefits you've describe remain with these children?

A. We just had our student council make a presentation to the board. The thing that came through loud and clear from the kids was, "When we came here, we didn't think we could be successful. But through adults investing in us, we now believe we have the capability to be successful." When someone shows up for them, they feel like they can show up as well. Teachers give us similar feedback. We have kids who come in here with just the clothes on their backs. You can imagine what getting something like a backpack means to them. We really do count on this.

