

Tammy Friend ([00:03](#)):

Welcome to the Guide for Life podcast, exploring topics related to the personal competency skills that empower Arkansas students and teachers to thrive at home, school, on the job and in the community.

Tammy Friend ([00:22](#)):

Thank you for joining us today. I hope you're getting settled in the new school year. I'm Tammy Friend. And today we have Dr. John Hodge, author of *Standing in the Gap* and *You Can Get in the Way*. Also co-founder and president of the Urban Learning and Leadership center, an organization dedicated to the development of schools, working to improve student achievement and close the achievement gap. Hello, Dr. Hodge, thank you for being with us today.

Dr. John Hodge ([00:49](#)):

Thank you very much. Glad to be here. Honored.

Tammy Friend ([00:52](#)):

Yes. So I had the privilege of hearing you speak. You were the keynote speaker at the Arkansas School Counselor Association's annual conference in July in Hot Springs. And I was really moved by your anecdotes, your stories of some teachers that made a difference in your life growing up. And so I was hoping you'd share with all of us, and teachers getting starting the new year, counselors, maybe remind them of the impact, the positive impact and the importance of the work they do. But first, will you share a little bit about your journey into education?

Dr. John Hodge ([01:30](#)):

Oh, wow. Well, I started in college as an athlete. I did not think I was going to be a teacher. My initial goal was to maybe going to law enforcement or law. Teaching sort of just was a second idea. And one of my college professors told me, he said, "John, you really seem to have a talent. And I think you would be a great educator. And if you decide to go into education, we just happen to have this scholarship for you."

Dr. John Hodge ([01:59](#)):

So I went into education. I was an English major, then shifted to English education. And when I had my observation and practice, or student teaching experience, I could tell it was a fit. It just was. I loved the kids, even when they weren't behaving in the perfect way. I got to do my student teaching in my old neighborhood, in my old high school. My baby sister was in the class next door. So it was just an amazing experience for me. And it affirmed that this was the right path.

Tammy Friend ([02:34](#)):

Sure. Yes.

Tammy Friend ([02:36](#)):

Tell us, if you don't mind sharing, your story, about your friends growing up and the difference a teacher made?

Dr. John Hodge ([02:45](#)):

Well, I'd like for everybody here to, just as I'm talking, to think about your own childhood. My childhood was, the early years were just awesome, Tammy. They were just great. I had a very loving neighborhood. We played outside all day. So I know that sounds weird to those of you in your twenties, because you don't play outdoors anymore as much, but we were outdoors all day and it was such that you could literally walk into somebody else's house and ask for a drink, or they would fix it for you or tell you to fix it yourself. And back then we were drinking Tang. It was the best drink in the world. In my neighborhood, if you were a football fan, we had Jeff Davis who was an all American from Clemson. We had Desmond Gatson, Chip Richmond, Tony McKee, all of these guys were famous back in the day.

Dr. John Hodge ([03:38](#)):

And so it was a wonderful experience. Around 1970, our world changed. So let's think about what the kids are going through right now. We just had COVID, which was a world changer. Everything happened at the same time everywhere. But those kinds of things have been happening to communities in isolation for a long time, where there's a major shift in the job market. And that's what happened to us growing up. Pretty much, you were guaranteed a job in the tobacco industry. You could graduate from high school, get a job at RJR Tobacco, work 20, 30 years, and literally send your kids to college. That was what we aspired to do. Well, in 1970, we saw our last televised cigarette commercial that signaled a change in the tobacco industry. They were admitting for the first time aggressively and publicly that smoking could kill you. And the reaction was, they downsized. They downsized, in Arkansas and where I'm from, North Carolina, downsizing means people get fired.

Dr. John Hodge ([04:42](#)):

That impacted neighborhoods like mine in profound ways. So a lot of the adults that we knew growing up lost their jobs and the tragedy was their skillsets didn't transfer. You couldn't take what you learned at RJR to Sears and make the same wage. So they were out of work. And because of that, really hardworking people had to leave our neighborhood and people we didn't know, moved into the neighborhood and the whole dynamic changed.

Dr. John Hodge ([05:14](#)):

I mean, it was like people we didn't know would come to our neighborhood at night and stand on corners. And we didn't know what that meant. I mean, we were little kids. We had no idea what that meant. And other people would drive up to those corners at night and give the guys on the corners money. And the guys on the corners would give them little bags and we're six, seven years old. We didn't know that there was heroin in those bags. So our moms, in their infinite wisdom, told us to walk to and from school together. And the reason they did that was safety. And Tammy, this might sound a bit weird here too, but in my neighborhood, other people's mothers could spank you.

Tammy Friend ([06:00](#)):

Oh no.

Dr. John Hodge ([06:03](#)):

Can you relate to that?

Tammy Friend ([06:05](#)):

I can. Yes. Maybe its a generational thing too.

Dr. John Hodge ([06:08](#)):

It is. Yeah. So you were literally raised by the village. And my best friends in the world grew up on the same street, went to the exact same schools. But the results, where we are today, are quite different. My best friend in the world is a guy we used to call Crazy Ernie. And he earned his name in second grade. We were doing show and tell, and Crazy Ernie is asked by our teacher to do his little presentation. So he comes to the front of the class. We sit crisscross applesauce on the floor and he pulls out of a box, this goldfish bowl with three goldfish swimming around. He did a presentation on goldfish. I'm not making this up. And he told us the feeding schedule, how long they would live, how much they cost. And he ended his presentation with the following statement, and he has not lived it down since. Crazy Ernie says to God and everybody else in the classroom, "I talk to my goldfish, and they talk back to me." And we were told not to laugh at people. So we kind of grinned and smiled. And my other friend, Paul, Little Paul, he yells out, Crazy Ernie. And so that name stuck. So we all grew up together. In fact there were eight of us. Seven of the eight of us were born in August of the same year.

Dr. John Hodge ([07:45](#)):

So we think the power went out, maybe October, November, and mom and dad had nothing to do, but make us. So we are all born around the same time and we go through junior high, high school. And Crazy Ernie and I end up college roommates. So we go from, same neighborhood, born seven days apart, I don't remember a time not knowing him, to college roommates. Now senior year, well, this guy decides he's going to start a business. And that business exploded. I mean, big time. We graduated and I go away to the Army. It's kind of like an unwritten rule in my family, if you're born a boy, you got to serve your country. So I go away to the Army. Few years pass. I come back to my neighborhood and Ernie has really made it. I mean he did it, but his next door neighbor was shot and killed.

Dr. John Hodge ([08:46](#)):

And so the question became, how is it that Ernie made it? And John... John John is doing okay. But the smartest kid, of my little friends, the smartest one was... He just got caught up in the wrong stuff, Tammy. He did. A lot of kids do. And he was murdered. And that murder actually sparked my deep desire to understand the factors that contribute to success. I left the military because after seeing this funeral, I didn't think that I could take a life and I was in the infantry. So it really didn't fit. But I had this quest like, "Well, why is it that Ernie made it?"

Dr. John Hodge ([09:30](#)):

Crazy Ernie. We all had nicknames. Crazy Ernie. John John, Little Paul, everybody, these guys are. And Bee, the smartest one, did not. Best athlete in the neighborhood, in our little group, went to prison. Why is that? And so my career in education sort of took off and I moved from North Carolina to Virginia, was doing real well. And my mother and my sisters decided to get me married.

Tammy Friend ([09:59](#)):

Oh, it was them?

Dr. John Hodge ([10:01](#)):

It was them. Yeah. It was not my idea at all. It was them. So it was a blind date that turned into a wedding in about a three year period. But it was mama and my sister's, trust me. They were like, "You better come down here and meet this girl." So I did. And the weeks and days leading up to the wedding... I'm not a bachelor party guy. That's just not my style. I wanted a cookout for... I think you might call it a barbecue in Arkansas, but I wanted a cookout where you could come by the house and have a hot dog and some Tang, a very special brew of Tang that is made in the hills of North Carolina. Can't find it at a grocery store. Right?

Dr. John Hodge ([10:50](#)):

And so we're having our Tang and Little Paul stands up and remember Little Paul grew up in the neighborhood. He becomes a doctor, but in the second grade, Little Paul couldn't read. Now, here he is. We are at my little gathering and he's a doctor now. And he stands up, full of Tang, and he says, "John John, tell me something." He says, "Don't take this the wrong way." But he says, "People actually pay you to talk. That's what you do for a living."

Dr. John Hodge ([11:21](#)):

And you know how it is Tammy? You hadn't seen your friend in a long time. You want to give him your resume. And I was trying to explain, "Well, no, I do other stuff." He said, "No, no, no, no, no." He says, "But they really pay you to talk now." And I didn't know how to take it. And I had a little Tang in me too. So I was getting a little angry.

Tammy Friend ([11:37](#)):

Sure. What are you trying to say, Little Paul?

Dr. John Hodge ([11:38](#)):

And he says, "When we were little, didn't you stutter?" And the answer is, yes, severely. So I never talked. I was very quiet and I still kind of struggle with that. I'm a sometimes to myself kind of guy, because he you'll notice pauses. I'm very deliberate in what I say. There are ways to get around it, but here's what was happening that night. And this is what I want every single educator, counselor, social worker, listening to us right now, I want you to understand what was happening that night because it's consistent with the research and resilience. What was happening that night is a little boy who could not read, was asking a little boy who could not speak, "How did we get here? And they're calling you doctor and they're calling me doctor." And I know where we grew up. So this is not supposed to happen.

Dr. John Hodge ([12:43](#)):

So what was it? What was the key variable? And the key variable is, it should motivate you and scare you to death. The key variable was that out of the eight little boys I talked about, when we were together in Arkansas, four of them, the very four who made it in life, had the same fifth grade teacher, who absolutely did not care what your neighborhood looked like, who your mama was. And she didn't care what the teacher or counselor said about you. She loved you anyway. And she made me, John John, and Crazy Ernie and Little Paul feel smart. And what the research says to us is that if a child is blessed enough to meet the right one, the whole trajectory of life can change. And so we encourage people in our organization to be that person. But the real challenge, Tammy, and this is why I'm so impressed by what you're doing with Guide for Life.

Dr. John Hodge ([13:54](#)):

The real challenge is to make the best of what we do so systemic that it doesn't matter which teacher you get, which counselor you have or what school you go to. That is the real goal. And I commend the state department in Arkansas for doing this kind of thing, because it's really needed. I'm always on the road. I see a lot of the social, emotional challenges that we're facing now, surpass anything I've seen in the past. They just do. And I've worked in the state of Louisiana after Katrina. So I've seen some things, right? But collectively you look at the entire country as a whole. There's some challenges that we are facing that are just different than it used to be. So that means we have to be very pronounced and targeted and purposeful in addressing the social, emotional needs of kids. And let me add this, we need to watch out for the adults too.

Tammy Friend ([14:56](#)):

Absolutely. Yes.

Dr. John Hodge ([14:58](#)):

Right? Yes.

Tammy Friend ([14:58](#)):

Absolutely. Yes.

Dr. John Hodge ([15:00](#)):

Because they're going through a lot.

Tammy Friend ([15:02](#)):

Yes. And a dysregulated adult cannot regulate a dysregulated child.

Dr. John Hodge ([15:07](#)):

Absolutely.

Tammy Friend ([15:08](#)):

You have to start with the adults.

Dr. John Hodge ([15:11](#)):

Right. And what we call it is non-therapeutic emotional support. Okay? Because you don't want the implication to be out there that you're replacing therapy because you cannot, should not. But they're basic things, like how to deescalate, that not just the kids need this, the grown people, the grown people need this too. How to compartmentalize, how to let go temporarily, because we don't want our emotional baggage to mix with a child's emotional baggage. Because children model what they see they do. Sometimes we're the best example. So we have to be what we want kids to become. If we want kids to show up enthusiastic for learning on Mondays and Fridays, and it's hard to even say it... We have to show up enthusiastic for learning on Mondays and Fridays. And that might mean you fake it some days. We fake other stuff.

Tammy Friend ([16:16](#)):

Sure.

Dr. John Hodge ([16:16](#)):

It is worth saying, "Hello. I'm glad to see you," to a child who might not hear that from anybody but you.

Tammy Friend ([16:26](#)):

Absolutely.

Dr. John Hodge ([16:27](#)):

So what our organization advocates is holistic approaches to education. We're very aligned with CASL. We've worked with them through the Wallace Foundation in the past. And we simply say, "You have to address the social, within the school, the social domain. You have to address the academic domain and also the moral domain." So what that means is, these are our behaviors. So how are members of the school community behaving?

Dr. John Hodge ([17:00](#)):

Adult to adult, adult to child, child to child, child to adult. The academic domain is how members of the school community engage in teaching and learning. That's all of us. Counselors, teachers, social workers, kids. And the moral domain. It's the big one for me. Depending on the school, it depends on how much it should be focused on or not. But for me, the moral domain is so important because it deals with what members of the school community believe. So it's all about, do I believe a child can be successful regardless of their neighborhood and who their parents are? And the overwhelming answer is yes.

Tammy Friend ([17:44](#)):

Sure.

Dr. John Hodge ([17:45](#)):

But sometimes we allow circumstances to justify failure. We allow circumstances to lower our expectations. And to me, lowering your expectations is loving a child into failure. Going to allow, I get why you're doing what you're doing. So I'm just going to not expect much for you. And that long term does not help the child. So we have to lift and support. It's almost like it's social scaffolding. We support, support, support. And when the child can stand on her own or on his own, we remove the supports and they're ready to go into life prepared. And that's what our organization is all about. That's the core of our philosophy. We are passionate about what we do. Would love to work in Arkansas, by the way. I love doing keynotes. I think that they are important. I also know though, that unless we really get it down on paper and monitor what we're trying to do and use data to guide our actions, you might be able to make some changes, but they won't be systemic.

Dr. John Hodge ([18:55](#)):

What we want is, let's say John and Tammy are teaching in a school or they're counselors in a school. We put together protocols that if John and Tammy leave and move to another state, we onboard two other qualified adults and they can roll with the same system. That is the key. And if we do that, what we've seen, we've been in business since 2003. What we've seen over time is that if that is done, you have

fidelity of implementation and the data improves for kids. I loved my time in Arkansas. I'm so glad that computer didn't work.

Tammy Friend ([19:38](#)):

It didn't. And let me just say that was a demonstration. I mean you monitored and adjusted for sure. So Dr. Hodge's presentation, the slide presentation wasn't working, there were some technical difficulties and he just rolled with it.

Dr. John Hodge ([19:54](#)):

Tammy, I learned in the military once you get shot at and you live, everything else is downhill. So I don't worry about stuff. I just told... Seriously.

Tammy Friend ([20:04](#)):

Sure.

Dr. John Hodge ([20:05](#)):

Laptop didn't work. Let's roll with it. And it made me talk about things that I would not have talked about if I had the slides on. So I think it brought out some truths that I needed to share. I might not have talked about Crazy Ernie as much if the slide had worked. So sure. I consider that a really important... It was an important lesson for me also.

Tammy Friend ([20:29](#)):

Well, and it was very authentic. Because you did, you went off script.

Dr. John Hodge ([20:39](#)):

Oh yeah. I went way off script. Yes I did.

Tammy Friend ([20:39](#)):

It was so engaging thought provoking. Just very, like I said, I was like, "I need to reach out to Dr. Hodge and see if he would spend some time with us on Guide for Life." And so, You Can Get in the Way, did that just come out this summer?

Dr. John Hodge ([20:54](#)):

Yes. It came out July 7th and basically it's the keynote you heard in the form of a book. That book started out 300 pages. And I'm married to a teacher. And she said to me, "John, with what's going on in the world and the level of stress in schools, nobody's going to read 300 pages, sweetie." And my editor was thinking the same thing. So it's a mini book. If you want to do a really important read in a day, then this book will allow you to do that. And basically for counselors, they'll understand this language, getting in the way is simply becoming a roadblock to the many risk factors that kids face from sometimes communities. Unfortunately, sometimes homes, neighborhoods. If we are willing to act. You don't have to be an expert, but simply being willing to act and support children in an ongoing way can make a huge difference in life.

Dr. John Hodge ([21:58](#)):

And for me, I hate to be so dramatic, but I need to be honest. I believe that if some of my friends who did not do as well had my same fifth grade teacher, I really think they would've made it. And so the passion that you see when I'm speaking in front of audiences, it's coming from that place. I think for some children, it is a matter of life and death. So being the adult who's willing to act, who's willing to be a roadblock to risk factors is crucial. And the research tells us that sometimes one adult can just make all the difference. But what if I'm in a K-Five school and every teacher I have is like that. You know what I mean? Just imagine.

Tammy Friend ([22:40](#)):

Oh sure.

Dr. John Hodge ([22:41](#)):

Gosh, that could be powerful. I'm so passionate about that. What if I go to a high school and I meet eight teachers just like that, who are willing to really form a bond with me and push me and support me? We could change this country. We could be even greater than we are right now. So it's a passion coming from a real place. It's right here. I don't have to make it up. It's in me. And just like today, you said, "Well, John, you want to just shoot this now?"

Dr. John Hodge ([23:14](#)):

Yes. Let's roll with it. And we, as an organization, we have about 40 people. Many of them are more knowledgeable than I am about certain areas. So if a school or school district has a certain need, we will put specialists in those school districts. But we start with a diagnostic of the school. It's a visit. We take notes, we ask questions. We interview teachers and kids and parents and principals and assistant principals and counselors and social workers. And we generate a report and that report has building blocks for success. So that's the stuff that the school or school district is doing well. And we yell, "Keep doing this. This is great." And then there's another section called, opportunities for growth. And those are the things that really might need to work on. When you look at your data and disaggregate it, we see there may be some areas that require a little more focus. And so we list those. And then the last section is called recommendations. And what makes our company different than larger ones, is that we don't give you a list of 20 things.

Dr. John Hodge ([24:27](#)):

We say these are the three to five things that we think you should do right now, that will have the most impact on school culture and student achievement. Now some school districts and some schools can take that report and sprint. They can just run with it. Others say, "Okay, well, yeah, we agree. But do you have a specialist in this area or that area who can help us?" And we supply that specialist. So the way we do business, and again, would love to come back to Arkansas. Had a great time there. Wonderful people. I'll never forget it because it was the first time I signed autographs for my book. And I just thought that was kind of cool. Even though I messed up people's signatures. Forgive me guys. I'm sorry. I'm just not used to it.

Dr. John Hodge ([25:19](#)):

I haven't worked out the style of a signature yet for my autograph, but it was a special experience for me. And based on what's been happening in the last few weeks, I don't know. It just seems like this message is resonating with people. So we'll see what happens.

Tammy Friend ([25:36](#)):

Absolutely. It definitely resonated with me and really everyone around me. And my copy of You Can Get in the Way, Amazon tells me will be at my house tomorrow.

Dr. John Hodge ([25:47](#)):

Oh my goodness. Oh, wow. Thank you. Thank you.

Tammy Friend ([25:50](#)):

But the next time you come back to Arkansas, I hope to get to meet up with you so you can sign my copy.

Dr. John Hodge ([25:56](#)):

Oh, I would love to. You know what? I tell you what. If you email me your address, I will send you a signed copy. I sure would. I mean that. You've been great Tammy, wonderful to work with, and you can give the one you bought to somebody else. Okay. I'll make sure you have one.

Tammy Friend ([26:13](#)):

I will pay it forward. Okay.

Dr. John Hodge ([26:13](#)):

Right, right. Thank you. Thank you so much.

Tammy Friend ([26:19](#)):

Thank you again for giving up your time and spending it with us this morning. I hope to keep in touch and follow your journey and the progress and all the work that you're doing.

Dr. John Hodge ([26:33](#)):

Well, and congratulations on the Guide for Life. That's some powerful stuff. What I like most about it is it answers a question that I ask a lot of audiences. What skills, traits, characteristics do kids need for success in school and life?

Tammy Friend ([26:49](#)):

Yes.

Dr. John Hodge ([26:50](#)):

Because school is all about preparing for life. So I commend the Department of Ed in Arkansas for doing this and I wish you the best of luck.

Tammy Friend ([27:00](#)):

This transcript was exported on Sep 06, 2022 - view latest version [here](#).

Thank you, Dr. Hodge.

Dr. John Hodge ([27:01](#)):

Yeah. Thank you so much. All right. Bye-bye everybody.

Speaker 1 ([27:05](#)):

Guide for Life, instilling real world skills in Arkansas students. Thank you for listening to today's podcast. The transcript for today's episode and links to our resources can be found in the show notes. And remember to share and subscribe to the Guide for Life podcast.