

strength-based parenting

• Children and adolescents whose parents used a strength-based approach to parenting were less stressed than their peers, were better at handling friendship issues, were better at meeting homework deadlines, and they received better grades.

• Children who built upon the foundation of their signature strengths (the seven strongest and genetically determined character strengths) improved more rapidly.

• Strength-based parenting enhanced the connection between parent and child.

• Children felt more trusting of and affectionate toward parents who appreciated their strengths, rather than narrowly focusing on their weaknesses.

• When tensions arose in the parent/child relationship, strength-based parents found it easier to remember the more pleasant aspects of their child's personality (www.viacharacter.org).

Strength-based parents help their children to maximize their strengths by using the SEA approach — **Spot** your child's character strength in action; **Explain** to your child how you observed them use their character strength; and **Appreciate** and reinforce them for demonstrating their character strength across all areas of their life.

Let's say one of your child's character strengths is kindness. Spot — you notice your child comforting another child who is sad. Explain — "I noticed that when Billy was crying because he lost at checkers, you came up to him and gave him a hug; that's a great example of you using your character strength of kindness." Appreciate — "I am so proud of you for being kind to Billy when he was feeling sad. Your teacher also told me how you are kind at school when other children are upset."

Researchers have identified twenty-four character strengths through which the six universal virtues are expressed:

Wisdom: Creativity, curiosity, judgment, love of learning, perspective.

Courage: Bravery, perseverance, honesty, zest.

Humanity: Love, kindness, social intelligence.

Justice: Teamwork, fairness, leadership.

Temperance: Forgiveness, humility, prudence, self-regulation.

Transcendence: Appreciation of beauty and excellence, gratitude, hope, humor, spirituality.

In order to become a strength-based parent and utilize the SEA approach, sit

down with each of your children and read through the list of character strengths, with an eye toward identifying their signature strengths (their seven most potent character strengths).

A signature strength will feel natural to your child and will be easy for them to apply; it will feel essential to who your child is as an individual, and your child will find that using a signature strength is energizing. Children who are 11 through 17 can also take a free online survey at www.viacharacter.org that will provide a profile of their 24 character strengths, listing them from the strongest contributor to their well-being to the weakest. You can also learn about the characteristics of each character strength at the website.

The next step in adopting a strength-based approach to parenting is to compare your children's signature strengths to your own (consider taking the free VIA adult survey). When you share a common signature strength, it will be

easy for you to view the world from your child's perspective and to value this particular strength. However, when one of your signature strengths contrasts sharply with your child's, it may increase conflict as you might not appreciate how this strength enhances your child's life.

For instance, the prudent parent who tries to avoid unnecessary risks or making mistakes may become exasperated by the zestful child's behavior when his or her energy and enthusiasm gets them into trouble in school. On the other hand, even the most prudent parent will find themselves grinning when they recall how their zestful child's adventurous spirit and endless enthusiasm saved the last family camping trip when dreary weather brought down everyone's mood.

One of the limitations of a parenting style that stresses a child's weaknesses is that a child may respond to feedback with defensiveness and rigidity. Utilizing a strength-based approach, misbehavior can

be reframed as a misapplication of a signature strength, improving the odds that the child will respond positively to feedback. A strength-based parent speaking to a humorous child might say something like this: "You are such a funny kid. Everyone enjoys your sense of humor and playfulness. Your teacher would really like you to wait until recess to crack your friends up."

So, if you are experiencing friction with your children due to your attempts to stamp out their character flaws, consider using a strength-based

approach to parenting. You are likely to find that spotting, explaining, and appreciating your children's strengths will bring you closer together, increase cooperation, and ultimately will accomplish your goal of preparing your children to live happy, responsible adult lives.

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