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# Review 2008

*Essential articles on parenting and education*

## Discovering and Developing Your Child's Strengths

by Jenifer Fox, Head, Purnell School

*Imagine waking up one day and having everyone you encounter understand the ways in which you are unique and extraordinary. What if everyone viewed the things you did as needed contributions, and rather than looking for what is wrong with you, people pointed out what is right with you? If that happened, you would be super-charged. You would feel free and released from the burden of having to defend yourself. You would be psyched to jump out of bed and get to work. You would feel, well, strong. Wouldn't it be nice if just one day of your life could be like that?*

— from *Your Child's Strengths*

It is parent-teacher conference time and you arranged your schedule three months in advance to attend. If you are like most parents, you feel a certain amount of anxiety around this event. You attend hoping there won't be any surprises and that you won't discover that your child is experiencing any unexplainable difficulties. Unfortunately, most parent-teacher conferences focus on grades rather than children, with the primary goal of addressing a child's area of weakness. Few parents go to conferences with the main goal of discovering where and how their children excel. I know; I was a teacher for ten years and the parents of the students who were getting A's in my class rarely attended conferences, or if they came, they usually breezed by my table, winked and whispered, "Keep up the good work."

Parent-teacher conferences become an occasion to look forward to when they are viewed as prime opportunities to talk with teachers about your child's strengths. What exactly are strengths? Strengths are the activities that energize and excite your child when he is doing them. This is opposed to his weaknesses, the activities that leave him feeling depleted. There are three kinds of strengths: Activity Strengths (the things you do that energize you), Relationship Strengths (the things you do with and for

others that make you feel energized and proud) and Learning Strengths (the ways that learning makes the most sense to you). All of these strengths are discoverable, and your child can develop and use them to find success.

### Balancing the Strength-Weakness Equation

For too long, we have focused on weaknesses at school. We believe that children will get ahead when we spend the most time on the areas where they are the most challenged. The problem with this notion is that it is a one-sided or half-baked approach to education. In the long run, children don't make their biggest contributions in life in their areas of weakness. Children overcome weaknesses, but they rarely excel in them or end up building their lives' work around activities that make them feel depleted.

By looking at a child's strengths we are not failing to consider his challenges, we are merely balancing the equation that has been out of proportion for too long. Strengths are the things that make children feel energized, but that doesn't mean that they are naturally talented in their areas of strength. For example, your child may love playing hockey but may never play first string.

On the other hand, just because your child has a talent for something, it doesn't mean he has a strength in it. We all know a child who is a good, maybe even great, piano player who refuses to practice and finds excuses to avoid lessons. This is an example of talent that is not a strength.

### How Parents Can Help

Parents and teachers are good at identifying talents and pointing out challenges for children, but they cannot tell them what their strengths are. Discovering strengths involves self-reflection about a variety of activities and relationships one encounters. Children are the only ones who really know how they feel and they must discover their strengths on their own.

How can parents help them begin to do this? There are many ways; one of the first things parents can do to help children discover strengths is to ask them questions about how they feel when engaged in various activities. Start by choosing three different tasks that can be done at home and ask your child which ones he prefers. Once he chooses, begin to ask him

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some funneling questions about the activity. A funneling question is one where you keep asking why and continue breaking the question down to find the part of the activity that your child likes the best.

For example, Kelly just finished writing a creative story and had the following conversation with her father:

"Dad, want to read my story? I think you'll like it."

"Do you enjoy writing, Kelly?"

"Yeah."

"What is it about writing that you like?"

"I like to make up characters."

This brief example demonstrates that the thing Kelly likes to do is to "make up characters," which she can ostensibly do in a variety of places

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other than simply writing stories about them. She can make up characters in artwork, acting or filmmaking. She most likely enjoys making up a particular kind of character; understanding this will further shift her focus and help define her interests more clearly. This is important in discovering strengths because when left to the broadest reflection ("I like writing"), both Kelly, her parents, and maybe her teachers may miss an opportunity to discover her potential for sustained interest.

For people to become experts at anything, they have to be able to sustain enough interest to practice it.

Kelly may dislike many of forms of writing and if she didn't funnel the question to discover that developing characters was what energized her, she may one day land in a college major or even a job she hates where she is doing a lot of serious writing that is unappealing to her. People make this kind of mistake all the time. Consider the unhappy real estate agent who loves houses, but not selling. To discover strengths, children must be prompted to funnel and narrow until they are able to precisely name the thing that most energizes them.

### Developing Strengths Takes Work

It has already been noted that schools put too much focus on their students' weaknesses. If children spend all their time in remediation of their weaknesses, there won't be time left over for them to develop strengths, and in the end all you have is a child who went from really bad at something to mediocre. Mediocrity is not enough to sustain a lifetime of meaningful work.

That said, discovering strengths is not about opting out of things that challenge people. It takes practice and commitment; it is not simply about following one's bliss. In fact, once children identify their strengths, they have a responsibility to work at and practice those things so they can become experts at them.

### Beyond Academics

Strengths are not just about what people feel energized doing, so they do not simply relate to classes studied in school. Strengths are also about what children do in their relationships. It is important for children to identify the things they do for others that make them feel strong themselves. For example, leading others may energize one person, while listening to others energizes another. They can't be everything to everyone, so determining their strong areas in relationships will help children know where to focus their energy for the best results.

### Playing to Our Strengths

Strengths are the new glue that can bond families and unite them to schools. Over the next few years, you will hear more and more about how strengths can help children enrich and focus their lives. This is good news for everyone because when people are playing to their strengths in work and in their relationships, we all win.

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