

# Start with Strengths!

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Quickly now! Think of three wonderful things about a person with a disability in your life! Most people – parents, teachers, service providers, therapists – can't do it. I know; I ask when meeting participants at conferences. Most *can*, however, reel off a person's diagnosis (one or many), along with a laundry list of the person's "problems/deficits."

Hmmm – it doesn't take a genius IQ to figure out why so many children and adults with disabilities aren't as successful as they could be. If *you* were known primarily by your perceived problems and your medical diagnoses, you wouldn't be very successful either. Really, this is not rocket science, is it?

*"If human beings are perceived as potentials rather than problems, as possessing strengths instead of weaknesses, as unlimited rather than dull and unresponsive, then they thrive and grow to their capabilities." – Robert Conklin*

For those who may be sceptical, perform your own "research" for a couple of days. When a co-worker, friend, or family member asks, "how are you," respond by sharing your medical diagnoses, as well as a list of everything you don't do well – your "problems." What impact does this have on the person you're speaking to, and on yourself? Does the other person want to run away from you as quickly as possible? Or maybe he feels sorry for you and treats you as a poor, pitiful creature. On the other hand, the person might decide to help you "solve your problems," *whether you've asked for help or not*. And how do you see *yourself*? Here's one more example: in a job interview, share all the negative things about yourself. Yeah, that's a real ticket to success!

In reality, during a job interview or other situation, you keep your medical diagnoses and/or your "problems" private (*lie by omission*), and you share only positive information. You may also *embellish* to make yourself look better (*exaggerate just a bit*). Maximizing the positives, and minimizing the negatives is the norm, and it works to ensure our success in employment, at school, in relationships, and more. Why should it be any different for individuals who happen to have conditions we call disabilities?

Ahhhh, but it's even more important for them. Because of societal ignorance about disabilities, focusing on the strengths of a person can help minimize or eliminate the knee-jerk prejudice normally associated with disability. A focus on a person's strengths can also help others recognize that people with disabilities are more *like* people without disabilities than different.

Perhaps the scenario described in the first paragraph shouldn't be surprising for service providers, teachers, therapists, or others who can't immediately bring to mind one

particular person because they work with many people with disabilities. In addition, professionals usually are focused on a person's "problems/deficits" - not on their strengths - as part of their jobs. (More about changing this in a moment.)

The scenario, however, is alarming when a *parent* is unable to immediately share three wonderful things about her child with a disability. If a *parent* is not able to tout her child's strengths, *who will?* What does this do to how a parent sees her child, and how the child sees himself?

As a parent of a child with disability, I know how this happens. Sadly, the majority of what we hear from professionals is a laundry list of our child's "problems/deficits." Seldom are our children's strengths identified, much less discussed. But things don't have to be this way. We can all make the choice to focus on a person's strengths.

*"Those who believe in our ability do more than stimulate us. They create for us an atmosphere in which it becomes easier to succeed." - John Lancaster Spalding*

First, let's think about how we "define" strengths. They're not limited to functional or "normal" abilities. If I list my strengths, I don't include things like, "I can walk and talk." A strength can be (1) what a person does well (has great people-skills, is organized, is good at math); (2) what a person enjoys doing (loves to read, enjoys scrap-booking, is a rabid football fan, loves his pirate toys); and (3) what a person wants to do and/or learn to do (go to a baseball game, fly on a plane, learn to read, visit Presidential museums).

Many strengths may not be "observable" nor will they be found in traditional assessments. The only way to discover them is by talking to the person and his family and friends, and by observation - how does the person choose to spend his free time?

"Mary" was a professor at a university who was unable to see any strengths in her 19-year-old son, "Dan." She said Dan was "totally blind and functioned at the level of a six-year-old." When I asked about the possibility of Dan taking a class at the university where she worked (he could audit the class), she said that was ridiculous. I asked her how Dan liked to spend his time at home - what was his favourite thing to do? "Take a bath," she said. "He'd spend all day in the tub if he could." Then why not get him involved in a swimming activity at the university where he could do what he enjoys *and* be with other young adults in an inclusive setting? That was an "ah-ha" moment for her - until that instant, Mary had never seen that Dan's love of being in the water was a strength that could be built on and that could lead to positive outcomes.

*"Everybody is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid." - Albert Einstein*

When my son, Benjamin, was in kindergarten, he couldn't keep up during counting lessons as the teacher recited, "One bean, two beans, three beans..." The other children could pick up the small beans in time to the teacher's chant, but by the time Benjamin got two fingers around his first bean, the teacher was on five! So I sent his set of 12 toy pirates to school. He could easily pick them up with his whole hand, and the other boys

wanted to be his math partner. His love of those two-inch pirates was a strength that led to many good outcomes.

A list of strengths can include a person's abilities, interests, desires, hopes and dreams, similarities to others without disabilities, and more. Many people - the person with a disability, parents/family members, friends, classmates, co-workers, and others who know the person well - should contribute to their ideas.

Once those strengths have been identified, they need to be at the forefront of our thinking. At Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings in schools, or planning meetings for adults let's *start* the meeting with the person's strengths, instead of spending so much time on problems, deficits, weaknesses, etc. If we start with strengths, we might begin seeing a new person, as well as new strategies and new opportunities. Imagine the possibilities when the person is defined by strengths, instead of perceived deficits, and the impact on goals, activities, friendships, employment, and more. How might this make a difference in how we see the person, how others see the person, and most importantly how the person sees herself? Make your list of strengths long and add to it on a regular basis (individuals grow and change).

Professionals: spend as much time on sharing a person's strengths with the person, family, and others, as you spend on delays, problems, etc. (Note: as parents, we know that "deficiencies/delays" represent the eligibility criteria for services, but most of us already know what our children cannot do; we really don't need professionals to tell us these things!)

*"It requires building on strengths to make weaknesses irrelevant." - Peter F. Drucker*

Parents/family members: memorize at least three wonderful, affirmative characteristics that you'll now use to describe your loved one. And when a mother is bombarded with all the "negatives" about her precious child, those three positive things can provide a powerful shield of armor as protection from those barbed arrows.

Let's start with strengths. Doing so makes sense, it creates a more accurate picture of the whole person, it opens the door to new perceptions and possibilities, and it's the right thing to do!

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