

Building Success from Strengths



Parents know their child's strengths. This intimate understanding is a deeply protective force. Recognizing who teens can become — based on who they already are — gives them the kind of sense of self and confidence needed for a successful adulthood.

The world can be unpredictable at times, and teens withstand pressures from many directions to “find” themselves. They may try on different “hats” as they answer one of the most fundamental questions of adolescence, “[Who am I?](#)” But how we see them forms the basis of how they see themselves. So we must see them in the best light. Why? So they know they are capable of becoming their best selves.

Reinforcing Desired Behavior

Remember when our two or three-year-olds wanted our attention more than anything? When the mainstay of effective discipline was to catch them being good and redirect them when they're not? It worked in shaping their behavior because we focused our attention on them when they were behaving well. It also worked because they felt good when they pleased us. Our teens want and need our focused attention and to please us every bit as much as they did when they were toddlers. And, they'll get that attention any way they can.

Too many parents focus their energies either on how their adolescents are performing (grades, trophies, and scores) or behaving. When parents focus on performance, their children might deliver but also may feel insecure about whether or not their parents approve. Our strongest reaction and most focused attention is typically on those behaviors that are unacceptable. Our children subconsciously learn to repeat the worrisome behaviors that we focus on most.

“Catch them being good, and redirect them when they’re not,” holds true throughout adolescence. When we genuinely recognize our teens’ greatest attributes it reinforces the ongoing display of their strengths. It lowers their performance anxiety because they know they please us as they are.

Recognizing strengths does more than help teens feel good about themselves. It positions them to understand that they possess the capacity to do the right thing, to move beyond temporary setbacks, and to correct mistaken decisions.

Praising Effectively and Loving Unconditionally

We must take care not to praise just for the sake of it. Certainly, when we show our appreciation for helping around the house, our teens will be more likely to complete their chores. Or, when we notice their efforts in school, they will probably engage more in their homework.

But it is more than that. We must focus on shaping the young men or women our teens are to become. To reinforce our teens’ best selves, we must notice, and be able to authentically describe what defines them as people. Being rooted in who you really are during adolescence — when so many others try to define you — is highly protective.

Seeing our teens for who they really are is part of loving them unconditionally. What is love? Love is seeing someone as they really are. As they deserve to be seen. Not based on a behavior they may temporarily

display, or by what they might produce. Loving is an active, thoughtful process.

Spend quality time with the other adults who have known your child from the early years. Come up with a description of who your teen really is, and always has been. Are they compassionate and caring? Are they generous? Fair? Do they have grit? Tenacity? A glass-half-full attitude?

Recognizing strengths does more than help teens feel good about themselves. It positions them to understand that they possess the capacity to do the right thing, to move beyond temporary setbacks, and to correct mistaken decisions. Consider those qualities that are particularly useful in helping teens make positive changes in their behaviors. These are things we might not think about as strengths, but are qualities our teens may possess that will help them flourish.

- **Insight:** When people can see further within themselves, they are more likely to see solutions others may not.
- **Resilience:** When people have proven the ability to bounce back, they can imagine overcoming future challenges.
- **Drive:** When people are goal oriented, they are better able to keep the long-term goal in mind and resist short-term distractions.
- **Protective nature:** When people are driven to protect others, they are more likely to be able to protect themselves.
- **Wisdom and thoughtfulness:** When people are thoughtful, they tend to be open to gaining wisdom from others.

Strengthening Family Relationships

Adolescence is an time period of tremendous opportunity when young people open themselves up to the possibilities of the world. However, as they imagine where they fit in the world, teens can be vulnerable to how others view them. While others may too narrowly define their worth, families serve as the anchor that reminds them of their goodness. Families are also

well aware of faults. This makes our positive feelings even more powerful. When we offer that essential security, it solidifies and strengthens our relationships.

It's Not What We Feel, It's What They Know We Feel

Loving our teens and recognizing their strengths will only have impact if they know how we feel. If they are aware of how we see them. Often we may think we are expressing our love, or pointing out strengths, but they experience it differently. It might be that they remember criticism better than they do praise. It might be that they only absorb our disappointment when we address their challenges. They don't realize that we believe in them so much more.

We have to be intentional and specific in communicating our thoughts and feelings about their strengths. By doing so, we will have a greater role in shaping them.

Being unconditionally loving doesn't mean you always like the way your teen is acting. It is because you love them that you are fully committed to guiding them away from unacceptable behaviors. Similarly, seeing the strengths in your tweens and teens doesn't mean you are blind to problems. It means knowing what is good about them to position ourselves to be able to address worrisome behaviors.

Building from Strengths – A Strategy to Restore Relationships

As a pediatrician, I have advised thousands of families over the years. The conversations often begin with the family expressing concerns about either the teen's behavior or mood. As I listen to their concerns, I work hard to hear both their worries and the depth of their caring. I've witnessed the teens trying not to show how upset they are that they've disappointed their

parents.

It is my job to get families on the same page and to help teens understand they are in a safe place. I concentrate on the fact that the room is filled with caring people. I turn to the parents and ask them to tell me where the caring comes from: "Tell me who your teen really is. What makes you proud? Tell me about things you've seen from the time he/she was a toddler." More often than not, parents will cry as they describe the goodness in their child. The tension diminishes. Shame and defensive anger is lifted. Now we can begin the real work.

Parents worry because they love. During those moments where we feel the most challenged, we can draw from our children's strengths. Teens may question who they are. But we must never question who they are. Our clarity will get them through tough times and serve as the foundation to strengthen our families.

Addressing Problems

Recognizing teen strengths is critical work. Now build upon that knowledge to positively shape behavior. Believe that every person has goodness within them, and when they stray from that, they will seek to restore that goodness.

Sometimes teens will feel powerless or stuck. They may have made a mistake. They may feel anxious about taking first steps. When we focus only on the problem, they may feel guilty and have trouble moving forward. We must help them gain confidence. We do this when we provide feedback about their demonstrated abilities. When we recognize them for their successes.

The words we say to rebuild confidence can be kept relatively simple. Just be sure they are genuine.

"I know you can _____, because you have always _____." For

example, “I know you can make things right with your friends, because you have always been a compassionate, caring brother.”

Returning to Their Better Selves

Recognizing a strength even when a negative behavior demands immediate attention does not mean we ignore that behavior or our need to address it. The goal is to build upon a point of strength. This allows us to deal with problems without making our teens feel shame that can push them away.

I want to share an approach I teach professionals that allows us to connect respectfully with youth who need to return to healthier, wiser behaviors. It invites teens to problem-solve, while you serve as the guide along the journey.

I describe this as the “heart-stomach-head-hands” approach. Your heart sends you real feelings when you care. Your stomach often tightens when you are worried. Your head solves problems. And your hands represent your support and unwavering presence. Your parental love – and worry – makes you a real expert here. Allow yourself to trust your instincts and share what you feel with your teens.

- Heart: Share all that you know about your children that makes you care so deeply. Leave them with no doubt that your caring is more than your “job” as a parent. It is rooted in the special things you know about them.
- Take a deep breath: Show that you are pausing to reflect before you share. Get your thoughts together.
- Stomach: Explain why you are worried. Despite all of the strengths you see, you fear that some of their choices may undermine the possibilities that life holds.
- Head: Come up with a plan together. Recognize that teens are the experts in their own lives. And that staying calm enables them to think.
- Hands: Ask your teens how you can best be supportive. While they may be the experts in their lives, you are the guide along their journey

towards adulthood. You come prepared with wisdom and experience.

The fact that you are a key support system doesn't mean you should act alone. In fact, a strengths-based approach is critical in helping to [guide teens towards the professional help](#) they might need and deserve.

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Slideshow

Protect all Youth in the Community

We can help protect our own children by calling out undermining messages they endure every day. We can also resolve to change the way our communities portray all youth. Our own children will reap the benefits as well. Take these actions to make a difference.

Slideshow

Focus on the Positive

Take note and point out the good things adolescents do in your neighborhood. From painting a mural to supporting a local business owner to simply helping someone across the street. It doesn't have to be an heroic act. Spread the word about the good they've done.

Slideshow

Get Youth Involved

Look for opportunities for young people to make positive contributions in your community. Planting a local garden, covering up graffiti, helping out at an afterschool program -- the list is endless. Receiving gratitude from serving others helps them become their best selves.

Recognize all Youth

We tend to notice only those in the extreme range -- the high achievers or the troublemakers. Remember, recognize, and encourage all those who come in between.

It's Not Just About Our Own Teens

We must shine a light on the undermining messages too many youth endure. The harmful messages that imply they are troublesome, even dangerous. Worthy of an eye roll.

We can protect our own children by seeing them in the best light. But we can also protect ALL children by resolving to change the way our communities portray youth.

We must:

- Notice the acts of generosity and compassion shown by youth and spread these good news stories. Don't notice only the heroic acts, but also the everyday acts. Recognize kindness as normal.
- Point out the idealism of youth and recognize that societies grow and evolve because our youth imagine something better.
- Advocate for the recognition of all community youth. We must move away from noticing only the highest achievers or delinquent youth.
- Give youth opportunities to contribute to our communities. When they serve others, they'll receive gratitude instead of condemnation. And that will help them rise to be their best selves.