

Character strengths

What do we mean by strengths?

Strengths can be described in lots of different ways. Here, we are talking about strengths of character. Your character is what makes you the person you are. It is about how you relate to other people and the world around you. When you are using your true strengths, you feel full of energy.

Character strengths are different from talents or skills or knowledge. So you could have wonderful talents like playing football or cooking, but that is not what we are talking about here. You may also have passed a lot of exams or be a highly skilled nurse or teacher but that is not what we are talking about here either.

Sometimes we talk about character as if it's just one thing – we may say someone has good character or that they don't. But character is actually made up of lots of different strengths and everyone has a different profile of strengths. Character strengths are things like curiosity, bravery, kindness, humour, hope and modesty, and lots more.

Recent evidence suggests that recognising our own strengths and using them in our daily lives can help us build happier, more meaningful lives.

We change the world by tiny individual acts of honesty, courage, kindness and integrity, by celebrating our own strengths, just a little more each day, and helping others to do the same.

Jenny Fox Eades

Why focus on strengths?

Absolutely everyone has character strengths. You have a set of strengths. Each of your friends and colleagues has a set of strengths. And each child you work or live with has their own set of strengths. They are all there to be discovered, valued and used. When children and young people use their strengths, they develop into adults who are not only respectful, but are also respected for who they truly are.

The magic of character strengths is that all strengths can be built and developed by everyone. All of us can grow in all of the character strengths, although we have a tendency to be stronger in some aspects of character than others.

Everyone has weaknesses too. Many of us spend time and energy thinking about what we're not so good at. We wish or struggle to do better. We strive to work harder to do what we're not so good at, as we think this will help us become better people. It may do, but it may exhaust us in the process! When we work or live with children, we may focus on what a child is not good at and try to help them fix it. For example, a child may find it difficult to work with others in a team. We might focus on this weakness, worry about it and try to fix it by getting them to work more often with others. But this may be frustrating for the child and for you. Instead it may be more helpful to think about the strengths that the child shows when working on their own, for example: curiosity and perseverance. If you nurture these strengths, the child may feel better about themselves and in time, may feel better about working with others.

Focusing on and trying to fix problems and weaknesses is fairly common in schools and homes. Looking for people's strengths is less common. But research has shown that finding and using our strengths is really important for improving health, happiness and our sense of self-worth.

As adults working or living with children, you have a powerful tool to help children lead happier, healthier, more fulfilling lives. You can help children notice and value their strengths and you can help them use their strengths more in their daily lives. Talking to children about their strengths will help to build their confidence. You will help them to flourish.

What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters, compared to what lies within us.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Character strengths

So what kind of things are we talking about? Researchers have spent a lot of time finding out which strengths of character are valued across cultures. They came up with a list of 24 character strengths:

Name of strength	Description of strength
Appreciation	Noticing and appreciating beauty, excellence or skilled performance in all aspects of life
Bravery	Not shrinking from threat, challenge or difficulty
Caution	Not saying or doing things that might later be regretted
Creativity	Thinking of new and productive ways to do things
Curiosity	Taking an interest in experiences
Enthusiasm	Approaching life with excitement and energy
Fairness	Treating all people the same according to a sense of equality and justice
Forgiveness	Forgiving those who have done wrong
Gratitude	Being aware of and thankful for good things that happen
Honesty	Speaking the truth and being genuine
Hope/Optimism	Expecting the best and working to achieve it
Humour	Liking to laugh and joke and bring smiles to other people
Kindness	Doing favours and good deeds for others
Leadership	Organising group activities and making sure they happen
Love	Valuing close relationships with others

Love of learning	Mastering new skills, topics and knowledge
Modesty	Letting your accomplishments speak for themselves
Open-mindedness	Thinking things through and examining them from all sides
Perseverance	Finishing what you start
Perspective	Being able to provide wise advice to others
Self-control	Controlling what you say and do
Sociability	Being aware of the motives and feelings of yourself and others
Spirituality	Believing in the higher purpose and meaning of life
Teamwork	Working well as a member of a group or team

Park, N. & Peterson, C. (2009). Character Strengths: Research and Practice. *Journal of College & Character*, X(4).
 Fox Eades, J.M. (2008). *Celebrating Strengths: Building Strengths-based Schools*. UK: CAPP Press.

All these strengths are important to human life. We all have these strengths to a greater or lesser degree and all of them can be developed. It's best to focus first on your top strengths – the ones that come most easily and naturally to you. These can help you build the other strengths into your life.

Did you know?



Hope, kindness, sociability, self-control and perspective have been found to be protective against the negative effects of stress and trauma.

Park, N. & Peterson, C. (2008). Positive psychology and character strengths: Application to strengths-based school counseling. *Professional School Counseling*, 12(2): 85-92.

How to develop your own strengths

- Find out your own strengths. Take the adults' strengths test at www.authentic happiness.sas.upenn.edu - click on the "VIA Survey of Character Strengths". You will have to register on the website to be able to do the test, but it won't cost you anything. It will take about 45 minutes to answer all the questions. Then you will get a rating of your top 5 strengths which are called your 'signature' strengths. Give it a try – it can be helpful just knowing what your strengths are.
- It is important to focus on your top strengths, for example, you might say: "I'm a kind, sociable, brave, curious person with a good sense of humour." This focus on your top strengths will give you a greater sense of happiness and confidence in general.

- Accept that you will find some character strengths more difficult than others, for example, perseverance may not be your strong point, but don't dwell too much on this. For example, you may be enthusiastic about projects but find it difficult to persevere and get them finished. Don't worry too much about your lack of perseverance. Focus on your enthusiasm and how that makes you feel good and helps you get started with projects. Think about how to use your enthusiasm to get other people involved in a project – perhaps they will help you complete it!
- Be a good role model for the children you work and live with. Know your strengths, be proud of them and use them daily if you can. Being aware of your own strengths helps you to be aware of strengths in the children you work and live with.
- You could make a list of your top strengths and put it somewhere to remind you – on your desktop or in your diary or wallet.

Did you know?



There is evidence that effective teachers – judged by the improvement of their pupils on standardised tests – show high levels of the character strengths: sociability, enthusiasm and humour.

Park, N. & Peterson, C. (2009). Character Strengths: Research and Practice. *Journal of College & Character*, X(4).

- Think up new ways of using your top strengths every day if you can. Evidence suggests this will increase your happiness and decrease any depressive symptoms. For example, if you are kind and sociable, make sure you make an effort to smile at everyone you see or buy flowers for someone unexpectedly or throw a dinner party. If you are courageous and persevering, make sure you set yourself plenty challenges to overcome like planning to run 5km or agreeing to write a newsletter for your club or workplace.
- Talk about character strengths at home and work to help people become more aware of them, and less focused on weaknesses and problems.
- Try to make a habit of asking yourself: "What went well for me today?" or "What did I do well today?" This helps you to focus on your strengths and will increase the character strength of gratitude which is particularly important for our wellbeing. It will also help to lift your mood, which will help you cope better with any stress you are feeling. It's very easy and common to fill our thoughts with what didn't go well in our day. Restore the balance by thinking of what went well.

For example, just before going to sleep or when you're washing the dishes after tea, gently remind yourself of the good things in your day, big and small:

- I got that project finished
- I made that necessary phone call
- I made time to listen to my friend
- I made time to go out for a walk in the fresh air
- the dog made me laugh
- my children are healthy
- the sun felt good on my face
- the car started.

How to help children develop their strengths

- Focus on children's strengths instead of their weaknesses. You can identify their strengths just by looking at the list above and thinking about their general behaviour. Or you could encourage them to do the strengths survey online, which is suitable for 10-17 year olds (see activity below).
- Notice children's strengths and talk about them. It can be frustrating or difficult to work only on weaknesses or problems. Young people may become defensive and lacking in motivation. For example, a child may be seen as hyperactive or disruptive, but what are their strengths? Perhaps they are enthusiastic, creative or curious. If you focus on these things, their strengths are likely to increase and their weaknesses may become less obvious.
- Focus on character strengths instead of achievement. This will have a more positive effect on a child's confidence. For example, not every young person can get A grades or get A grades all the time. Some children will find it difficult to learn to read and write. But every child has the potential to develop their character strengths, for example, to use their sense of humour, to be braver, to be kinder or to be more grateful.

Did you know?



The most important character strengths for our wellbeing and happiness have been found to be gratitude, optimism, enthusiasm, curiosity and love. If we are to encourage children to have long term happiness and fulfilment, we should be encouraging them to develop these strengths in particular.

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- Make a point of noticing strengths in children and compliment them on or thank them for their strengths. Children will glow and will want to use their strengths even more. For example:
 - Thank a child for their honesty in admitting to a mistake.
 - Congratulate a young person on their perseverance in getting a task finished.
 - Say how much you enjoy their humour when a child makes you laugh.
 - Point out their fairness when they treat their friends equally.
 - Tell them how kind they are being when they do a favour without being asked.
 - Tell them they have good self-control when they are able to wait for a treat.
 - Show them you are proud of them when they forgive their sister, brother or classmate for having upset them.
 - Celebrate good teamwork in class or groups or between siblings.
 - Tell a child they are showing great courage when you see them coping with a difficult situation, like a parental separation or a bereavement.
- Help children to think about new ways of using their top strengths on a regular basis. Their strengths will grow if they are imaginative in thinking up ways to bring them into their daily life. When they are using their top strengths daily they will be happier and have a better sense of their own worth. For example:
 - If a child is particularly brave, help them to find challenges they can overcome.
 - If a child is particularly creative, help them find problems they can solve or new things they can make.


- If a child is particularly sociable, help them think of ways to be even more friendly to the people they meet or to spend more time with their friends.
- If a child is particularly kind, help them think of ways to do favours for friends and family.
- If a child is a particularly good leader, help them think of things they can organise.

The underlying idea behind the emphasis on strengths is that we get more of what we focus on.

Jenny Fox Eades

Activities

Here are some activities you could try, to help children and young people recognise and develop their strengths:

Top 5 Strengths	
<p>Young people aged 10-17 years can do the youth version of the strengths test at www.authentic happiness.sas.upenn.edu - click on the "VIA Strength Survey for Children". It will take them about 45 minutes to answer all the questions. Then they will get a rating of their top 5 strengths which are called 'signature' strengths. Discuss their top five strengths with them. Ask them to think about whether they agree that these are their top 5. Ensure their understanding of these strengths by asking for examples of when they use each one in their lives.</p> <p>Don't be surprised if appreciation, forgiveness, modesty and open-mindedness are low on their list. In general, children and adolescents will find these difficult – they will develop as they get older.</p> <p>You can do a number of different activities after a group of children have completed the strengths questionnaire:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If you are working with a group of children you could compare everyone's top 5 strengths and see how many strengths there are in common. It helps children to see that everyone has different strengths. It also helps highlight that absolutely everyone has strengths that should be celebrated and valued. • You could make one long list of all the top 5 strengths from everyone in the group or classroom and put them up on the wall. This helps remind everyone that as a group we are stronger than as an individual. This activity can help to clarify the importance of team work and cooperation with others. • You could ask everyone in a group or class or family to write up their top five strengths on a piece of paper and play a guessing game - which profile belongs to which person? This helps us to notice strengths in others. 	

Deliberate Acts of Kindness



This activity is about the character strength of kindness. It involves doing things for others with no motive other than being kind for its own sake. Doing something kind for others does not only help others, it helps us too by making us feel better about ourselves.

Ask the child or group of children or young people to think of things they can do for others. Tell them that it doesn't matter whether it's a big thing or a little thing – lots of thoughtful little things are just as important as big ones. Tell them it's even better if it's a secret - so the person doesn't know it was she/he who did it! Ask them to report back about a week later to talk about what they did and how they felt about it.

Here are some ideas to start you off:

- Pack up some old clothes and take them to a charity shop
- Open the door for someone
- Visit someone in hospital
- Visit an elderly relative
- Offer to carry shopping for someone
- Write a thank you card to someone for a gift
- Phone up someone on their birthday and sing 'happy birthday' to them.
- Tell someone they look great
- Smile at everyone you see for a day
- Do a chore for someone that you know they hate doing
- Thank your teacher for a good lesson
- Write a friend a note to say how much they mean to you.

You at your best



Ask young people in a group setting to introduce themselves in a different way than they would normally. Instead of asking them to say where they live or who is in their family or what they are studying, ask them to describe themselves at their best. Say, for example, "Think of a time when you did something or acted in a way that made you feel you were a good person – I don't mean an academic or athletic achievement, but something like being really brave when facing a difficult situation, or being really kind to someone in distress. Tell us the story of what happened and how you felt about it."

This encourages young people to think about who they are as a person in terms of their strengths. It also helps them get to know others on a deeper level.

The Incredibles



This fun activity helps you to discover the superheroes in your family, class or group!

What you need:

- Paper
- Colouring pens
- Pencils
- Child-safe badge blanks that you can decorate yourself.

What you do:

- Some of the television science fiction and fantasy series have several superheroes with different skills. In order to solve a problem, or to save the world, they need to use all their different skills and work together as a team.
- Think about each of the people in your family, class or group. What are their special skills? What kind of superhero are they? How do they use their hero-skills to help your family, class or group sort out its everyday challenges and reach its goals?
- Make a list of the super-heroes your family, class or group needs to help meet its challenges or reach its goals.
- Then decide who has the special skills to be the different superheroes. For example, who is the super-comforter, super-fixer, super-tidier, super-cheerer-upper, super-brave-person, super-nurse, super-peacemaker, etc?
- When you've decided which super-skill each person has, work in twos or threes to make superhero badges for each other.

Some things to talk about together:

- What are some of the goals and challenges your family or group faces?
- What superheroes have you already discovered?
- What new superheroes might you need?
- How can all the superheroes work together to help your group or family reach your goals or deal with your challenges?
- How can we let each other know when a superhero is needed?

Other ideas:

- Design some super-person t-shirt logos, like 'Superman'. Create the design on your computer and use special t-shirt printing paper. Iron your super-logos onto plain white t-shirts.
- When you need one of your special superheroes, you could say, 'I think we need our Super-Peacemaker!' Or think of other fun ways of inviting your super-heroes to come to the rescue, like humming your group's super-hero theme tune!