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How to Be a Strength-Based Parent

By focusing on our children’s strengths, we can help them flourish—and stop being so critical and worried.

BY LEA WATERS | OCTOBER 2, 2018

My stomach knotted as I came home after a long day at work to find my fifteen-year-old son Nick playing “Fortnite.” Again.

Just yesterday, I’d spoken with him (read: snapped at him) about screen time. Today, an argument began. Again.



He felt angry. I felt frustrated. We both felt misunderstood.

Why do we zoom in on the things about our children that concern us more than the things that delight us? Why do we find it so hard to resist the urge to criticize, nag, and worry?

Blame it on our brains. Our “negativity bias,” an ancient survival mechanism, hardwires us to spot problems in our environment more quickly than we spot the things that are going well. I call it the Dirty Window Syndrome: A clean window doesn’t attract your attention; you look straight through it. But a dirty window is something you notice. What’s more, your focus on one specific part of the window—the dirt—means you’ll often fail to see that the rest of the window is still clean and showing you a beautiful view.

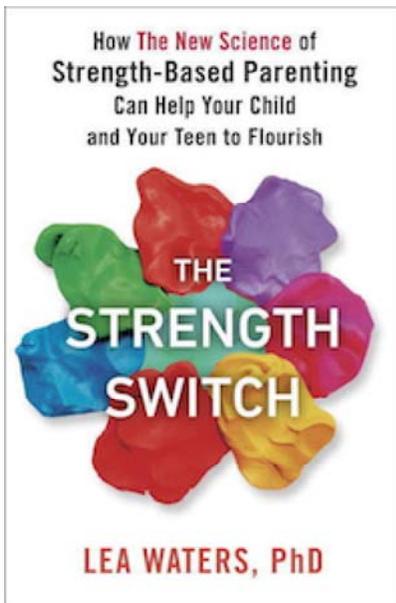
It's the same with our kids. When things are going well, we take it for granted; but when things are going badly, that spot of dirt on the window snaps our attention into sharp focus. The dirt, in my case Nick's gaming, grows from a small spot to a big stain. It gets magnified, overshadowing our kids' positive qualities, thus creating the perfect storm for conflict and for feeling anxious about their future. A useful evolutionary feature that keeps you and your kids safe from danger can be counterproductive to fostering a positive relationship.

The good news is that by learning how to shift your attention to your child's strengths (the clean part of the window), you can override the negativity bias, clean the dirt, and prevent the problems from getting blown out of proportion—all while building up resilience and optimism in your children.

The power of strength-based parenting

Psychologists have identified two broad categories of strengths: talents and character. Talents are performance-based and observable, including things like abilities in sports, music, art, IT, and problem solving. Character strengths are personality-based and internal, including things like grit, curiosity, courage, humor, and kindness.

Although we tend to focus on our kids' talents, the two categories of strengths work hand in hand. You'd be hard-pressed to find anyone who has made the most of their talent without also drawing on their character: Imagine the Beatles without creativity or Neil Armstrong without bravery. As parents, we can help our kids enormously by intentionally cultivating their character as much as their talents.



This essay is adapted from *The Strength Switch: How the New Science of Strength-Based Parenting Can Help Your Child and Your Teen to Flourish* by arrangement with Avery, an imprint of Penguin Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC. Copyright © 2017, Lea Waters.

In my own research, children and teenagers who have parents who help them to see and use their strengths enjoy a raft of well-being benefits, including experiencing more positive emotions and flow, being more persistent, feeling more confident, and being more satisfied with their lives. Kids and teens with strength-based parents are also less stressed, cope better with friendship issues, cope better at meeting homework deadlines, and get better grades.

These well-being benefits can also spill over into better behavior. In a 2010 study, after parents of pre-schoolers learned strength-based techniques in a 10-session program, the parents reported fewer behavior problems in their children.

Parents benefit, too. In one of my studies, published in the *International Journal of Applied Positive Psychology*, parents were split into two groups. One group took a course teaching them how to identify and cultivate their children's strengths,

while the second group had no training and continued to parent as usual. The results showed that the parents who went through the course felt happier with their children and more confident about their own parenting skills after the course compared with beforehand. Those who didn't go through the course showed no shift in happiness and confidence.

Of course, focusing on strengths isn't the be-all and end-all of parenting. My own findings have shown that strength-based parenting boosts many positive aspects of a child's mental health, but doesn't reduce anxiety (although it does lower stress and depression). In other words, connecting kids to their strengths helps make them feel good but may not necessarily make them feel *less bad*; the actions needed to reduce ill-being are different from those needed to produce well-being. But with so much focus on fixing children's problems these days, it's important to intentionally and independently seek to build well-being in our kids.

How to focus on your kids' strengths

Strength-based parenting is a style where we focus first on building up what is going right with our children before we focus on fixing what is going wrong. We help our kids to maximize and make the most of their talents and character, and we show them how to use these as leverage points to address weakness and problems.

So how to start?

Simply notice one strength in your child and comment on it: "You used good judgment today when you decided to pack your school bag ahead of time," or "Thanks for making me laugh—I really love how funny you are," or "I know your brother aggravates you, and I was so proud to see you rise above and show forgiveness." Repeat this *strengths spotting* approach as much as you can. Over time, your children will internalize their own strengths in their self-talk. Rather than using negative self-talk like "I'm stupid" or "I'll never get this" in difficult situations, they might say, "I know I'm persistent and can stick to the task," or "I'm curious and can learn new things."

Keep a *strengths diary* for the next two weeks and, at the end of each day, write down three strengths you saw your kids use in a diary or on your phone. If your child has a phone, you can send them a text the next day letting them know the strengths you saw them use. At the end of the two weeks, you can use your *strengths diary* to write a strengths letter to your child telling them about the strengths you see in them.

You can also *map the strengths of your family*. “We did a strengths profile of our family and put it on the fridge. Now we know our strengths, I create opportunities for the kids to use their strengths at home,” one parent said. “I ask Olivia and Jackson to use their zest to welcome guests, while Elijah’s judgment is used to rein in risk. The kids appreciate playing to each others’ strengths within the family.”

Finally, *incorporate strengths into the questions you ask your children*. When your child is nervous about a big project or event coming up, ask them, “What strengths do you have to help you with this?” If they have had a fight with a friend: “What strengths do you think were missing that may have led to the fight? What strengths will help you make up?”



Use Your Strengths

Tap into your positive traits and enjoy greater happiness

If you keep practicing these skills, you **will find** that you can more easily shift out of fix-it (or nag) mode and into strength focus. When challenges arise, choose a strength you’ve identified in your child through the techniques above and suggest

how they could use it to handle the situation. For example, I use my daughter's kindness to help her temper her impatience. A father I've worked with helped his athletic son channel his natural competitive spirit into a friendly contest to "win" at finishing homework, instead of having the same old battle about lack of discipline.

What strength-based parenting does (and does not) do

Strength-based parenting isn't about lavishing your kids with false and excessive praise. It's about real feedback based on your child's actual strengths. And since none of us is so perfect that we're showing our strengths all the time, there's no risk of creating a self-involved, narcissistic child who thinks she's the only special one in the world. If anything, strength-based parenting drives home the point that our strengths make us unique, but they don't make us special—because everyone has strengths.

Nor does focusing on strengths mean we ignore problems. Instead, it shows us how to use what we're good at to work on what we're not so good at. Knowing their strengths gives children a solid-enough identity to acknowledge and address the areas where they need to improve. Being strength-based allows parents to approach weaknesses from a larger context—seeing the whole window, not just the dirt.

In my case, I'm able to put Nick's gaming into perspective by reminding myself, "He's a good kid. He's creative and funny. He's social and loyal, and he likes to build good relationships (most of the time)." In the grand scheme of things, he's heading in the right direction. Despite my overactive worry button, he is actually doing OK. I can breathe a sigh of relief.

When I use a strength-based approach, two important things occur. First, I am able to see that there are strengths involved in gaming that Nick can use in the rest of his life. The self-regulation and problem-solving Nick uses to choose his moves, and the grit he uses to continue even when his points are low, are the

same strengths he can use to better monitor his screen time and balance this with his homework. When I comment on the humor and loyalty he uses to cheer up his friends when they die in the game, he sees how he can apply these to his relationships with his family.

Second, because I am calmer and able to engage more with Nick about the benefits of the game, he is more receptive to our conversations about balancing screen time with his homework, sports, and family time. When he sees that I am not demonizing technology and I am giving him a fair amount of time to play, he knows he also needs to be reasonable when we ask him to get off.

As a result, the negotiations about screen time are far more fruitful and less combative. This doesn't mean I have all the answers. The conversation about "Fortnite" is an ongoing one, and most days Nick tries to sneak in extra time. But the days I am strength-based are the days when he shuts the game off more quickly and more happily.

Our negativity bias helps us to survive, but our strengths help us to thrive. Showing our children how to harness their strengths is a key tool for their happiness, and a recipe for effective and enjoyable parenting. It's not a "cure-all" but is most definitely a win-win!

About the Author



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