**The Importance of Taking a Strength-Based Perspective**

Adapted from Mary Beth Hewitt

*Why are some people successful with students although others have given up on them? This author believes it is because they have a strength-based focus and an optimistic perspective. These educators move "out of the problem and into the solution" by exhibiting eight behaviors of strength-based teachers.*

Many times when I am doing a consultation, staff members can tell me everything that a child does wrong. “He NEVER sits still.” “She's ALWAYS talking.” “He NEVER does any work.” When I ask what the child does right, I am frequently met with blank stares. Along the same vein, adults can also tell me what the child does not like. He's not interested in reading, rewards, et cetera. However, when I inquire as to what he/she does like, the blank stares return. Do not get me wrong, I used to sit with consultants and expand on all the problem behaviors of my students, too. It was easy to talk about the problems the child created because they were so obvious. You have probably heard that the squeaky wheel gets the grease. Well, let's face it; you NOTICE when kids are misbehaving. You also know what the child does not like because he or she tells you, saying things like "I don't care" or "this is stupid."

Although in some ways it is helpful to know what the child cannot do and what he does not like, focusing on it does little to solve the problem. We have a choice. We can stay stuck in the problem or we can look for the solution. Talking about what the child cannot do or does not like brings us no closer to finding out what he can do or what he does like. Nothing is ever fixed by looking at it and bemoaning the fact that it is broken or worthless.

A strength-based approach is an optimistic way of looking at a situation. It all has to do with what you focus on. If you focus on the negative, the negative grows. If you focus on the positive, the positive grows. This is the critical difference between optimism and pessimism.

**Why Do We Need Optimism?**  
If you view something as broken, useless, and beyond repair, you generally throw it away. It's not worth your efforts to fix. However, if you view it as precious and valuable, you will go to great lengths to salvage it. We are talking about children here. Although I am writing about students with learning problems as well as behavioral disorders, I like this quote from Larry Brendtro and Arlin Ness, two leading experts in the field of strength-based interventions:

“Some might argue that optimism about antisocial youth is itself a thinking error, a Pollyanna illusion that nasty kids are really little cherubs. However, pessimism is seldom useful and often leads to feelings of powerlessness, frustration, and depression. In contrast, optimism feeds a sense of efficacy and motivates coping and adaptive behavior, even in the face of difficult odds.” (1995, p. 3)

We need to assume an optimistic view in order for us to feel like we can make a difference in the lives of all of our children. Furthermore, if we want our children to be resilient and optimistic, we need to model it.

**The Power of Labels**  
The way you label something will make a big difference in the way you approach it. To paraphrase Ross Greene (1990) in The Explosive Child, your interpretation will drive your intervention. This is particularly important when it comes to describing students' behaviors. Labels are evidence of our interpretation. Our interpretation of the behavior can lead us to either want to disconnect and discard or reconnect and nurture.

There is a great deal of research on the dehumanizing and debilitating effects of negative labeling. Likewise, I hear the pessimism of adults working with students with behavioral disorders in comments such as "The apple doesn't fall far from the tree," "What do you expect? His father is in jail," "He lives in a trailer park," "He's from a broken home." These comments are not information sharing; they are indictments. How do we expect kids to be hopeful and persistent, if the adults in their world are mired in feelings of hopelessness?

**Eight Behaviors of Strength-Based Teachers**  
Why are some people successful working with kids although others have given up on them? I believe it is because they take an optimistic view and engage in eight behaviors that go along with a strength-based focus. I truly believe that all teachers start out wanting to and believing they can make a positive difference in the lives of all of their students. However, years of being exposed to negative reports and focusing on a student's weaknesses and misbehaviors have taken their toll. You can recapture the feeling that you can make a positive difference in the lives of ALL your students by focusing on the positive.

**Directions:** Discuss these examples of behaviors and the flaw focus/response. Complete the chart (right side) by indicating a possible strengths-based focus/response. One has been done for you as an example:

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| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Number** | **Behavior** | **Flaw Focus/Response** | **Strength Focus/Response** |
| 1 | Focus on what the student CAN do. | He cannot attend to a task for more than 5 minutes. |  |
| 2 | Make realistic appraisals.  Avoid the use of overgeneralization. | He is always out of his seat.  She never follows directions. | He stayed in his seat for 28 out of 30 minutes.  She followed 8 out of 10 directions. |
| 3 | Look for and give credit for evidence of progress. Don’t minimize or discount the positive. | He must have been in a good mood because he worked longer today, but that won’t last. |  |
| 4 | Positively reframe behavior. | She is constantly interfering in issues that don’t concern her. |  |
| 5 | Look for the “silver lining” in a student’s behavior and start there. | He screams to get your attention when something is hard. |  |
| 6 | Work with the factors that you can control. | There aren’t enough aides to help him when he needs a scribe. |  |
| 7 | Look at the whole picture. It is as important to focus on factors that are present when the misbehavior does not occur as when it does. | When she is asked to read aloud in class she throws her books. |  |
| 8 | Be aware of the labels that you use and the projections that you make. | He is stubborn and hard-headed. He’ll end up in jail. What do you expect? He comes from a bad neighborhood.  He is a disruptive element in the classroom. He never takes anything seriously. |  |