

PARENTING STRONG

HOW CAN WE USE OUR STRENGTHS TO PARENT BETTER?

WORDS NATALIE RITCHIE

When I was a child, I studied classical ballet for nine years. I hated it, but I was good at it. So it was one of my strengths, right?

No, says Professor Lea Waters, Director of the Centre for Positive Psychology at the University of Melbourne and an expert on an empowering approach known as 'Strengths-Based Parenting' (SBP).

Lea explained that a strength has three elements:

- **Performance** – a child is good at it.
- **Energy** – it leaves them feeling energized and motivated.
- **Use** – a child will naturally choose to use that strength.

"We've been raised with the old-fashioned notion that a strength is something you're good at, but two decades of psychology show us it's more than that. It's also something you enjoy and choose to do. For example, my 13-year-old son is good at piano, but it's not a true strength because he never finishes his practice. The 'energy' and 'use' elements are missing," says Lea.

To know our children's strengths, Lea recommends 'strength-spotting'. To help parents do that, her website The Strengths Exchange, the-strengths-exchange.com.au, delineates 24 character strengths such as Zest, Fairness, Open-Mindedness and Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence, a list developed by the Values in Action Institute on Character, viacharacter.org. A free parent and youth (10 to 17 years) survey on the VIA website helps parents and kids identify their strengths.

"There are two broad kinds of strength – a talent, such as a verbal strength where you always win on the debating team, or a personality trait like compassion," said Lea. "Parents can look for five signals that a child is using their strengths: the child is highly engaged, can be so engrossed they lose track of time, show rapid learning curves, show a pattern of repeated success in that strength, and are performing at an above age-appropriate level."

In a study published in *Psychology* last year, bit.ly/2bdwgdy, Lea found that children of SBP parents had significantly lower levels of everyday stress, and better coping skills in stressful situations. A second study by her found that SBP significantly lifted teenagers' life satisfaction, bit.ly/2bPRLU4

5 STEPS TO STRENGTH BASED PARENTING

Lea suggests five concrete processes to draw out your child's strengths:

1. Label their strengths. "I call it the 'See It and Say It' approach. Let's say your child wants to share a toy. Instead of just saying 'Thank you for sharing', a strength-based parent will add a strength-based sentence like 'That's kind of you'. You're letting

your child know 'You have an inner strength called kindness'."

2. Provide experiences and the environment to foster that strength. "When you start to see a hint of a strength – chess, say, or a strong sense of social justice, or a love of nature – start to get your child involved in it. Buy them a chess set, help them fundraise for a cause they choose or enrol them in a community garden."
3. Give them the right equipment; it might sound simple but it's easily overlooked. Lea's nine-year-old daughter is very creative. "When Emily's watching TV, she always has a pencil in her hand drawing the cartoons. Her Creativity strength has the 'performance' element but also 'energy' and 'use'. I always keep the craft box full."
4. Practise. "Even though our strengths may be partly genetic, they need practice to develop them."
5. Role model. Connect your children with role models with the same strength, either in real life or through biographies in books, websites or YouTube. If they're too young to read, talk to them about figures instead, like Mother Teresa if your child's strength is Compassion. "Emily's grandmother and great-grandmother on her father's side were well-known artists. She paints with her grandmother in the shed," said Lea.

Lara Mossman used the VIA survey three years ago to spot the strengths of her children, Mia, 17, Lewis, 14 and Eva, 11.

Lewis trialled for a soccer skills acquisition program but didn't make it past the first round the first or second time. Lara discouraged him from entering a third time ("My instinct was to protect him from failure"), but he used his strength of Perseverance to get to the second round before missing out. The fourth time, he got in.

Mia put herself forward for a nine-week away-from-home leadership camp in Year 9. "She was not an obvious pick, but she told the teachers she would use her strengths of Zest (to draw on for long expeditions), Perseverance (to push through homesickness), Teamwork (for tough challenges), Hope (believing she could get accepted) and Humour (to cheer up other homesick kids). She impressed the teachers because she talked about how she would use her strengths to help others. She got selected and it was the best experience of her life," says Lara.

PARENTS HAVE STRENGTHS TOO

Being a strengths-based parent is about using your own strengths too. Lea suggests, "Ask yourself 'What are my strengths? What do I do well, get energy from and would choose to do, and how can I bring that to my parenting?' You might be the creative parent who signs up to design

the costumes for the school concert, or the prudent parent who helps a teenager craft a monthly budget, or the sporty parent who coaches the school team. It's a strength if these things are energizing for you."

In a study to be published shortly, Lea found that parents who completed a four-week SBP course reported significant increases in parenting confidence and in positive emotions like pride, curiosity and joy when thinking of their children, compared to a control group who did not do the course. "A lot of parents inadvertently focus on their child's weaknesses. When they switch their focus to strengths, parents find they are more energized and validated, and it's more fun."

Lela McGregor, mother to three children 18, 15 and 2, gives her children chores that play to their strengths. "My son's strength is Organisation, so I give him chores like mowing the lawn and cleaning up his baby sister's toys with her. My 15-year-old's strength is Creativity, so she's good at entertaining her two-year-old sister."

Lela also points out that you can help bring your partner's strengths to parenting. "My husband's strength is Humour, so I say to him "You're a funny dad" and it gives him confidence as a father. If you want more of a particular strength from your partner, encourage it and bring that strength to light. You can also ask yourselves, "What are our strengths as a couple?"

Lela's strongest strength is Perseverance. "I have called upon it many times when my child has gone through teething or was unsettled. Using this strength gives me a strong resolve that I can get through this, no matter how trying. It gives me confidence that I don't have to be the perfect parent – I just have to be me and that's more than enough. I'm being authentic by not trying to be perfect."

Find Out More

Lea Waters' book, *The Strength Switch: How the new science of strength-based parenting can help you and your child flourish* is due in early 2017 (Penguin). More at leawaters.com

Each copy of *Strengths Based Parenting: Developing Your Children's Innate Talents* by former teacher and educational psychologist Mary Reckmeyer (Simon & Schuster, \$32.99) contains an access code to the adult and child versions of the Clifton StrengthsFinder tool on the Gallup website, gallupstrengthscenter.com. The tool was developed by Dr Donald O. Clifton, the founder of strengths-based psychology. The book explores all 10 StrengthsFinder strengths for 10 to 14 year olds like Discoverer, Future Thinker and Caring, and guides parents to spot these strengths in younger children. It also explores all 34 adult strengths to help you spot your own.