

# 2 Ways to Improve your Parenting

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Early research is showing strengths-based parenting is beneficial for both teens and younger kids. A strengths-based parenting approach with teens can lead to greater well-being, academic achievement, engagement, and greater strengths use. Additionally, strengths-based parenting with younger children can help parents feel less stressed and create greater coping skills.

You can become a more strengths-based parent by incorporating strengths-spotting into your relationship with your child. Strengths-spotting is about noticing your child using a character strength and giving it a label. When

you spot a strength of character, such as kindness, fairness, hope, or creativity, you are "seeing" your child. You are connecting to who they really are. Much of the time, you may miss these moments. You are distracted, maybe planning the next thing on your to-do list. The key is to catch yourself – to realize that you didn't "see" them, forgive yourself, and return to being there and seeing them for their strengths.



**WAYS TO IMPROVE YOUR PARENTING**

Learn to "SEA" your child:

- 1** Spot the character strength in action.
- 2** Explain what you saw.
- 3** Appreciate, reinforce, teach, cheerlead, or support them.

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To make all of this easy to remember, I frame this as "learning to SEA" your child, where SEA stands for:

1. Spot the character strength in action
2. Explain what you saw
3. Appreciate, reinforce, teach, cheerlead, or support them.

# 1.) Learn to “SEA” Strength Opportunities in Everyday Conversations:

Here’s an example of the “learning to SEA” approach in action with your child after a day at school:

Parent: How was school today?

Sammie: I learned about the stars and the moon in the sky. I asked lots of questions about what stars are made of and about the colors of the sky.

Parent: Wow, it sounds like you were using your strength of **curiosity**. Is that right? (SPOT)

Sammie: Yes, I was very curious about the sky.

Parent: Great, you were asking questions and trying hard to learn about a new topic. You were like an explorer! That was a good use of your curiosity in action (EXPLAIN)

Sammie: And, I learn asked about the sun and the planets too.

Parent: That's a good example of more curiosity use - you had more questions.

Sammie, I think it’s great that you were asking questions and exploring in that way. Curiosity is an important quality within you to understand the world and the people in it. (APPRECIATE) Were you curious about anything else today?

Here, the parent concludes by modeling that strength of curiosity and encouraging further use of the strength that has just been spotted, explained, and appreciated. When you learn to SEA our child in this way, you are being proactive in your parenting. You are looking for opportunities to engage with your child. Rather than feeling like strengths are “one more thing” you need to do, instead you are bringing strengths right into the interactions with your kids.

## **2.) Learn to “SEA” Strengths in Adversities**

Even when children aren't behaving in a way that you find appropriate, they are still using their character strengths. It might be interesting to explore whether the strengths use is imbalanced (overuse of a strength) or if it is being used at an inopportune time. Here is an example:

There was a young boy named Tyler who goofed off in class on most days. He joked with friends, would erupt in laughter outbursts, and even playfully tease other classmates. This sometimes caused the entire class to laugh and lose track of the lesson at hand. Teachers viewed Tyler as a distraction from the learning: The teachers would complain to the parents. Then, the parents would get upset and discipline Tyler. This was the cycle for much of Tyler's grade school and middle school.

One day, something changed. Tyler was doing some painting in art class and began to tell some jokes and get three or four classmates in on the fun. The teacher walked over to Tyler and had the following exchange with him:

Teacher: Tyler, I see that you are making jokes and getting others to laugh. Has anyone ever told you that you are high in a particular strength of character – the strength of humor?

Tyler: No, I don't think so.

Teacher: Well, you must be. You are able to get 5 classmates all laughing at the same time. That's not easy to do!

Tyler: Maybe that's true.

Teacher: I'm not saying your use of humor is always exactly fit for the situation. Sometimes, we need to be working quietly on our projects and it's best not to be telling jokes then. Or, if you tease and upset someone with your jokes, that's not good either. But, I have to say, I have seen you many times use your strength of humor in a fun and appropriate way.

Tyler: OK, thanks.

This dialogue came as a surprise for Tyler, who was a bit at a loss for words. He had never had someone directly and deliberately point out one of his core strengths with such clarity. I've always been struck by this story and I, as a parent, take it as wisdom I can use as a parent. The teacher – who could have taken the well-worn route of demanding Tyler “stop horsing around,” threatening him with a punishment, or embarrassing him with a reprimand in front of the class – decided to take the road less traveled. It was a reality-based road. She was pointing

out a truth about him. It was a truth right in front of every other teacher and parent, but had not ever been clearly articulated. It had not been “seen” as a strength. The teacher took the “learning to SEA” approach to the next level by offering Tyler some ideas on the limitations and boundaries for his humor strength (i.e., when it was likely “too much” humor).

But, the character strengths work did not end there. And, it shouldn't. The teacher continued to point out strengths that were being used by Tyler and his classmates. Later that week, the teacher had a similar discussion with Tyler about his strength of creativity as displayed in his drawings, and the next week pointed out his strengths of hope and perseverance when he talked about his future and how he might pursue some of his goals in college.

## **Final Thoughts to Consider**

Putting these two skills together means that you'll have a greater confidence and capacity to navigate the ups and downs of life – creating strengths opportunities and using strengths at times of struggle and adversity.

Want to build these skills? Remember this: Don't hold yourself to parenting perfectionism. No parent – regardless of how good their Facebook posts may indicate – knows exactly what they are doing. Everyone is doing the best they can, in the best way they know how, making mistakes, getting upset, feeling stressed, and doubting his/her parenting skills. This is normal. This is part of the parenting process.

## REFERENCES

Jach, H. K., Sun, J., Loton, D., Chin, T. C., & Waters, L. E. (2018). Strengths and subjective wellbeing in adolescence: Strength-based parenting and the moderating effect of mindset. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 19, 567-586. DOI: 10.1007/s10902-016-9841-y

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