

Inclusion Tools for After School Professionals

SPECIAL NEEDS INCLUSION PROJECT, SUPPORT FOR FAMILIES OF CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES, 1663 MISSION STREET, SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94103 282-7494

SNIPPET #7: STRENGTHS AND STRATEGIES: BUILDING ON CHILDREN'S STRENGTHS

A **strength-based approach** to working with children is a technique that concentrates on the abilities and strengths — rather than solely on the challenges — presented by the child. The strength-based approach starts with recognizing the interests, gifts, and talents of the child and emphasizes them to create an affirmative learning environment. By focusing on skills, competencies and positive characteristics rather than on problems and deficits, all adults, including after school program staff, help children gain a sense of personal achievement and self-efficacy.

WHY USE A STRENGTH-BASED APPROACH?

Research has discovered that adults who recognize a child's innate abilities and mirror them back to the child actually help the child appreciate their own strengths. When after school staff use these positive characteristics as the starting point for learning, they tap into the child's intrinsic motivation and existing innate drive for learning and achievement. Staff who focus on children's strengths can set high expectations, which can have a powerful influence on the child's ability to succeed. Strength

based approaches recognize that problems need to be addressed, but assumes that strengths and capacities are the building blocks for positive change and should receive primary emphasis.

WHAT ARE STRENGTH & STRATEGIES PROFILES?

Strengths and Strategies profiles are organizational tools, developed by well-known educator Paula Kluth, that help program staff organize the information they have about children in a more positive and constructive way. This approach focuses on the child's abilities rather than "problems" and can help staff make changes in their planning and daily practice which ultimately help them make deeper, more effective connections with children. Specifically, the profiles are designed to help staff:

1. Understand the whole child;
2. Plan curriculum and activities with appropriate adaptations that reflect the child's strengths;
3. Develop goals and objectives with specific strategies to support a child;
4. Work more collaboratively with families and other professionals to develop concrete solutions to specific concerns.

ELEMENTS OF STRENGTHS & STRATEGIES PROFILES

The profiles consist of two lists of positive information about a child. The first list details the child's strengths, interests, gifts and talents. According to Paula Kluth, the list should include no less than 50 items. The second list contains strategies for motivating, supporting, encouraging and connecting with the child. This list details specific strategies that have proven to be effective with the child in the past. As with the first list, this list will be most effective if it includes no less than 50 items.

EXAMPLE OF A STRENGTHS & STRATEGIES PROFILE

These examples of strengths and strategies are taken from a longer list developed collaboratively with Robert's mother, after school staff, and school day teachers.

Robert's Strengths, Gifts, Interests, & Talents

- he is very talented and makes amazing art projects
- he is a sight reader and is just learning to decode sounds.
- he is bright in practical (nonacademic) ways
- he likes sports and being physically active
- he likes to have jobs/responsibilities
- he likes to take care of younger children
- he wants to be seen as a "big boy"
- he can take care of self-care in bathroom but may need a buddy to go with him to make sure he can find his way to and from the bathroom
- he loves looking at pictures in books and magazines
- he loves water play
- he says hello to everyone on his street and greets people at school
- he has lots of energy especially in the afternoon
- he will independently help himself to supplies and objects to turn into art (paper, scissors, masking tape etc.).

What Works for Robert: Effective Strategies

- use visual supports to help with his comprehension and focus
- get his attention by gently touching his arm or shoulder
- use a calm, quiet voice, he does not respond well to yelling, chastising, mocking, or aggression.
- explain things simply and clearly and check for comprehension
- repeat instructions and request and give him several reminders

- use genuine and gentle encouragement and tell him when he is doing something right
- ask him to be a helper
- he is very tactile so keep his hands busy, give him something squishy to play with during whole-class work (koosh ball)
- water play and drinking water soothes him, he needs to drink a lot of water, let him have free access to drinking water.
- allowing him to take a break when he is tired or overwhelmed
- showing him instead of telling him
- let him show his art work to classmates
- give him time to respond (several seconds) to verbal questions or commands

Strengths & Strategies Profiles can be used as an attachment to a positive behavior plan or as a communication tool for teams who are transitioning a child to a new group or program. The profile should be completed in collaboration with family and other professionals familiar with the child. With its emphasis on positive language and abilities, the profiles can prompt program staff to think and talk about children in a more proactive way, with potentially transformative results for both staff and children.

For more information about *Strengths and Strategies* profiles visit Paula Kluth's website at <http://paulakluth.com/articles/strengthstrateg.html>

*Submitted by Alison Stewart, Training Coordinator
Special Needs Inclusion Project, Support for Families
1663 Mission Street, 7th Floor
San Francisco, CA 94103
astewart@snipsf.org*