



strengths & strategies:  
assessing what matters



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# strengths & strategies

assessing & sharing what matters

I once met with a team of teachers who worked with a student named Jim. While Jim did not have an identified disability, it was clear from conversations between his teachers that some of them struggled to connect with him. Two of the teachers complained about Jim's constant activity.

One sighed, "He is a jackhammer- he moves constantly". Another remarked, "He twists around so much that it distracts the other students". While most of the teachers nodded in agreement with these assessments, two of the educators at the table seemed confused. The physical education teacher claimed that she didn't have any problems with Jim and that, in fact, he was one of her strongest students. She saw him as an athletic student, a leader, and as an asset to her class. He participated in all activities and seemed to try hard to acquire new skills. The science teacher also described Jim as an active learner and called him "cooperative and inquisitive".

Perhaps a conversation between members of the aforementioned team could help all teachers see and inspire the strengths in Jim. Teachers who had success with Jim might be able to share useful strategies with those who were struggling. The physical education teacher, for instance, might share her ideas on how Jim learns best. The science teacher might tell or show others about some of Jim's best assignments or class contributions.

why we need more good news: a rationale for "strengths & strategies"

Jim's story illustrates the power of perception in teaching. In this case, Jim's teachers could have reframed and solved their problem simply by sharing their impressions of him and by listening to and learning from the ways in which other colleagues understood him. Jim's teacher may have impacted their practices.



## strengths & strategies: assessing & sharing what matters

This experience was similar to one I had on my first day of teaching. That first morning of my career, I was told I would be working with a student named Jay. Then I was given dozens of files to review. I marveled at the stacks of reports, evaluations, observations, clinical assessments, work samples, and test results. I couldn't believe a child so small could have so many "credentials". As I reviewed the files I moved from feeling stunned to overwhelmed to terrified. Jay's paperwork was filled with information about his inability to be a student or a learner. The documents detailed his challenging behaviors, skill deficits, and communication problems. I was devastated to read so much about this individual yet find so little about his abilities, gifts, and strengths.

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As these stories illustrate, if every meeting begins with a description of a student's struggles and if every report fails to include student strengths and gifts, it becomes hard to plan for and support that learner. The way that we talk, think, and write about our students impacts our practice. In addition, our perceptions of learners and the ways in which we communicate about them, can serve to strengthen or damage our relationships with families.

A parent of a fifth-grader once told me that she was in the education system for six years before any teacher said anything genuinely kind or positive about her daughter. When the teacher off-handedly shared that Rachel, her daughter, had "a beautiful smile and great energy" the mother burst into tears, startling the teacher. After learning of the reason for the mother's reaction, the teacher made it a point to keep sharing information about Rachel's abilities, gifts, skills, and accomplishments throughout the school year.

# strengths & strategies: assessing & sharing what matters

## what are strengths & strategies pages?

Strengths & Strategies Pages are lists that provide positive and useful information about a learner. One list contains a student's strengths, interests, gifts, and talents. The other list answers the question, "What works for this student?". This list should contain strategies for motivating, supporting, encouraging, teaching, and connecting with the learner.

## when do i use strengths & strategies pages?

Strengths & Strategies Pages can be used anytime for any purpose. I often use them to begin IEP meetings. They can also be used as an attachment to a behavior plan or as a communication tool for teams who are transitioning a student from teacher to teacher or from school to school.

## why use strengths & strategies pages?

While this tool is not complex and does not necessarily provide a team with new information, it can help teachers organize the information they have and understand it in a new way. The focus on positive language and abilities can prompt educators to think and talk about students in more proactive way. It can also help teachers make changes in planning and in their daily practice. Specifically, educators may be able to use forms to:

- plan curriculum and instruction;
- create curricular adaptations;
- develop student goals and objectives;
- design supports for challenging situations
- work more collaboratively with and elicit concrete ideas from families; and
- collaborate and communicate with each other

*See below for Strengths & Strategies pages that have been completed for a student in elementary school and for worksheets that can be used to create your own pages.*

# strengths & strategies profile

This form can be used as an attachment to a positive behavior plan or as a communication tool for teams who are transitioning a student from teacher to teacher or school to school. A student's team (e.g., teachers, family, therapists) should work together to fill in this form. Ideally, each list should contain NO LESS than fifty items.



## Here are Mischa's Strengths, Gifts, Interests, & Talents:

- likes to run around the playground
- likes to organize things by color /size
- plays with mega -bots and creates stories with the characters
- knows how to play 4 computer games on her own
- is knowledgeable about birds, especially hummingbirds
- loves to sing folk songs - especially "peter, paul, & mary"
- exceptional memory, knows all the birthdays of friends and staff members
- very polite & loving
- can count to 100
- is very neat and tidy
- can pour her own juice or milk
- keeps her desk area very tidy
- likes to have her back rubbed
- can solve simple addition problems
- knows how to add with a calculator
- likes to have jobs /responsibilities
- fascinated by watches - esp. those with big faces
- can get started on her morning routine without assistance
- likes to show family photos to friends
- improving in comprehension
- can independently operate cd player
- can read simple books to her little sister
- she can stay "on the job" for 10 minutes at a time
- can put on her shoes without support

# strengths & strategies profile

## What works for Mischa? Effective Strategies:

- genuine and gentle encouragement
- telling her when she is doing something right
- a calm and gentle approach
- whispering instead of using a firm voice
- giving her lots of choices
- pre-teaching difficult lesson content
- asking her opinion
- giving her responsibilities
- letting her use a pencil grip
- humor
- letting her work with friends
- letting her call her mother if she seems stressed out
- letting her use her red pens
- letting her sit on the floor when she asks to
- showing her instead of telling her
- let her take the spot at the end of the line
- explaining everything in detail
- she sometimes responds better to written "speech"
- using visual information (charts)
- giving her time to work on her own (don't over support)
- telling her something about yourself (she likes to hear about her teachers' children and dogs)
- asking her to "read" to other students - even if it is just showing them a picture book
- encouraging her to "do her positive self-talk" if she seems frustrated by a task
- letting her review her "recess choice" before going on the playground
- having her start the day by looking at her favorite farm magazine
- letting her "read" more than one book at a time, she spreads them out and reviews 2 at once
- allowing her to occasionally do her math problems on the chalk board (this is very motivating)
- letting her send e-mail to her friends (helps her work on her writing skills)
- ask her to help with organizing things in the classroom (e.g. straighten library books)
- challenge her with hard questions related to her areas of interest (farm animals, spongebob)
- give her opportunities to share her "all about me" book with friends
- she may need to circle the table before she takes a seat - allow her to do this
- sometimes likes to know exactly where her work space is (you can tape it off to show her)



# strengths & strategies profile



-----'s Strengths, Gifts, Interests, Talents

A series of horizontal blue lines providing space for writing the profile.



