

FOCUSING ON STRENGTHS AND HOPE AT SCHOOL AND HOME

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Introduction

My main goal in writing this paper is to encourage the reader to recognize the importance of focusing on *the positive* when interacting with young people in the home and the school. I also want to suggest some practices that will help the reader focus on the positive when interacting with those young people.

While my emphasis is on interacting with young people in the school and the home, I want to extend the same rationale and practices so that they apply to people of all ages in most settings, including work, churches, recreational settings, and other places where people interact. The value of focusing on the positive is so clear-cut that everyone should know about it and act accordingly. My reason for focusing on young people in the home and school flows from the knowledge that the value of such efforts will be greatest when directed towards young people, because their developmental patterns are most affected if the positive interventions can start early.

My primary message boils down to the following: If you are a person who is interested in helping young people develop in an optimal way, you can do that most effectively by focusing on positive aspects of their experiences. I believe that the most important principle of psychology is that people are most effectively motivated by positive, strengths-based approaches rather than fear-based, negative approaches. Even though this is the most important principle of psychology, it is not well known by the typical person in the United States or other parts of the world. Fortunately, there are signs that this lack of knowledge is beginning to be recognized and addressed in the public media and the institutions of higher learning. I have written this paper in hopes of contributing to the movement that is causing people to focus on their strengths and their most positive experiences.

The Positive Psychology Movement

In the field of psychology, there is a movement known as *positive psychology*, led by a respected researcher and leader, Martin Seligman. Professor Seligman has activated an energetic group of psychologists and social service practitioners, who are starting to have an impact in America (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). For example, the January 17, 2005 issue of *Time Magazine* was mostly devoted to what they called “The Science of Happiness.” Seligman, who was President of the American Psychological Association in 1998, has initiated numerous conferences and summits on positive psychology. During the four-year period following his APA presidency, he influenced the publication of seven scholarly books that described research studies, theories, and practices related to positive psychology (Snyder, 2000; Chang, 2001; Seligman, 2002; Snyder & Lopez, 2002; Aspinwall & Staudinger, 2003; Linley & Joseph, 2004; Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

Selected studies supporting positive approaches

The research supporting the value of focusing on the positive is extensive and compelling. More than ten years ago, Seligman (1995) summarized studies he had done by writing:

I have studied pessimism for the last twenty years, and in more than one thousand studies, involving more than half a million children and adults, pessimistic people do worse than optimistic people in three ways: First, they get depressed much more often. Second, they achieve less at school, on the job, and on the playing field than their talents augur. Third, their physical health is worse than that of optimists. So holding a pessimistic theory of the world may be the mark of sophistication, but it is a costly one. It is particularly damaging for a child, and if your child has already acquired pessimism, he is at risk for doing less well in school. He is at risk of greater problems of depression and anxiety. He may be at risk for worse physical health than he would have if he were an optimist. And worse, pessimism in a child can become a lifelong, self-fulfilling template for looking at setbacks and losses. The good news is that he can, with your help, learn optimism. (pp. 51-52)

In the ten years since Seligman wrote those words, a large number of studies have been completed that elaborate on the solid evidence supporting positive approaches. Three of the themes in these studies have been *optimism* (Carver & Scheier, 2002), *hope* (Snyder, Rand & Sigmon, 2002), and *positive emotions* (Fredrickson, 2002).

Optimism. A person's optimism is characterized by the extent that person focuses on positive experiences and expectations. Carver & Scheier (1990) elaborate on this definition when they write: "Optimists, by definition, are people with favorable expectations about the future. Such expectations should make success on a given problem seem more likely and should thereby promote continued problem-solving efforts, resulting in better outcomes."

Scheier, Carver and Bridges, 2001, tell us about the 'optimistic advantage' which is due to differences in the manner in which optimists and pessimists cope with the difficulties they confront. That is, optimists seem intent on facing problems head-on, taking active and constructive steps to solve their problems; pessimists are more likely to abandon their effort to attain their goals. (p. 210)

Hope. Snyder, et al. (2001) point out, "...furthermore, individuals with higher levels of hope would be expected to have an enhanced sense of self-esteem both because of past successes and because of their beliefs that workable routes to future goal pursuits are likely." Snyder and his co-authors go on to show how hope is correlated with psychological adjustment, achievement, problem solving, and coping with health-related concerns. A more complete description of the theory and research on *hope* can be found in Snyder's (2000) *Handbook of hope: theory, measures, & applications*.

Positive Emotions. A closely related branch of theory and research explores the value of *positive emotions*. Fredrickson (2000, 1998) describes what she calls her *broaden-and-build*

model of positive emotions. Fredrickson explains the important differences between *positive emotions* (such as joy, interest, and contentment) and *negative emotions* (such as fear, anger, and sadness), as well as the effects of both emotions on a person's thoughts and actions. Fredrickson (2000) writes:

Negative emotions narrow a person's momentary thought-action repertoire. They do so by calling to mind and body the time-tested, ancestrally adaptive actions represented by specific actions tendencies. This effect is clearly adaptive in life-threatening situations that require quick action to survive. Because positive emotions are not linked to threats requiring quick action, an alternative model seems warranted: I have proposed that positive emotions broaden a person's momentary thought-action repertoire. (p. 4)

In this same award-winning article, Fredrickson goes on to show how positive emotions can loosen the hold that destructive negative emotions have on the mind and body. She writes: "Indeed, empirical studies have shown that contentment and joy speed recovery from the cardiovascular aftereffects of negative emotions. (p.1)" As the title of her article implies, Fredrickson (2000) recommends the cultivation of positive emotions to optimize health and well-being. She documents her implications by referring to a wide range of empirical evidence that supports specific predictions flowing from her broaden-and-build model. She states that "positive emotions and related positive states have been linked to broadened scopes of attention, cognition and action and enhanced physical, intellectual and social resources (for a review, see Fredrickson, 1989, p.6)" Fredrickson also highlights work of Alice Isen and her colleagues, who have demonstrated that positive emotions produce creativity, flexibility, and other outcomes that "enlarges the cognitive context."

Other Research. The research evidence supporting the beneficial effects of being positive continues to accumulate. The health benefits are showing up in a large number of studies. For example, Levy, et al, (2002) found increased life expectancy for those who hold a positive view of aging. Danner, Snowdon, & Friesen (2001) foretold longevity from expressions of happiness in essays written by the study's subjects when they were young adults. Even marital satisfaction can be predicted from signs of positive dispositions. Harker & Keltner (2001) analyzed the smiles of people in their college yearbooks, and used that information to successfully predict if they would be satisfied with their marriages later in life. Earlier, Gottman (1998) had found that happy couples are characterized by the surplus of positive sentiments they have accumulated when they think about their partners, This accumulation of positive sentiments becomes crucial when conflict inevitably arises, because it serves as a social resource that helps them deal with the conflict in more satisfying and productive ways.

Focusing on strengths is a powerful way of being positive

A key concept in the enterprise of focusing on the positive is summarized by the word *strengths*. When the focus of your attention is directed to your own strengths or the strengths of another person, you are almost sure to be positive in your approach. Focusing on strengths requires that you pay attention to the person's most positive attributes. For this reason, a good vocabulary for identifying strengths is crucial for seeing yourself and others in positive ways. The leaders of the positive psychology movement recognized this early and devoted energy and

resources to developing a handbook for classifying strengths. Peterson and Seligman (2004) authored the book *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification*, and they have created assessment instruments to help people identify their strengths. This classification and the related instruments should advance the science of positive psychology a good deal in the future.

It should be noted that the importance of strengths has been recognized in the psychology literature for many decades. For example, Allport (1961) articulated the idea of *signature strengths* when he developed a classification of personal traits. He identified signature strengths as ones that a person owns, celebrates, and frequently exercises. Allport proposed that a process of articulating these strengths can enable a person to identify between three and seven of these signature strengths. Peterson and Seligman (2004) suggest the following criteria for a *signature strength*:

- A sense of ownership and authenticity (“this is the real me”) vis-à-vis the strength
- A feeling of excitement while displaying it, particularly at first
- A rapid learning curve as themes are attached to the strength and practiced
- Continuous learning of new ways to enact the strength
- A sense of yearning to act in accordance with the strength
- A feeling of inevitability in using the strength, as if one cannot be stopped or dissuaded from its display
- The discovery of the strength as owned in an epiphany
- Invigoration rather than exhaustion when using the strength
- The creation and pursuit of fundamental projects that revolve around the strength
- Intrinsic motivation to use the strength

(p.18)

Haldane (1984, 1996) coined the phrase Dependable Strengths and described elaborate methods for helping participants identify those Dependable Strengths® (Forster, 2003). Haldane’s idea of Dependable Strengths was quite similar to Allport’s idea of signature strengths. Since I had the good fortune of working with Bernard Haldane for twenty years, I am very familiar with his approach to identifying Dependable Strengths. I will say more about the approach later in this paper.

Other books about the identification of strengths have been published in the 21st Century, including one titled *Now, Discover Your Strengths* (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001). Buckingham and Clifton describe the Internet-based StrengthsFinder® Profile, the product of a 25-year, multimillion-dollar effort to identify the most prevalent human strengths. This program introduces 34 dominant “themes” with thousands of possible combinations. This program is designed to help users translate their knowledge of these themes into personal and career success.

Since the concept of strengths is so important for focusing attention on positive aspects of a person, it is obvious that people who want to facilitate the optimal development of young people will benefit greatly from more knowledge about methods of articulating strengths. For this reason, I have already wrote about the importance being aware of the great value associated with being positive, hopeful and knowledgeable about strengths articulation. In the next portion of this paper, I will suggest some methods or practices that can help parents and school personnel focus on being positive and skilled in articulating strengths.

Ways you can help young people focus on strengths and hope

As Fredrickson (2002) demonstrated, positive emotions are important when people try to focus their attention on strengths and hope. Positive emotions can be encouraged in many ways, but one of the easiest ways is to initiate the recall of positive memories. In order to recall memories that stimulate the identification of strengths, the memories should involve activities and events accompanied by feelings of pride and accomplishment. If these past events really did evoke positive emotions, it is useful to recognize some of the personal qualities that contributed to the creation of those past events. It is also useful to recognize some of the conditions that existed so that those personal qualities could be exercised. In other words, awareness of strengths is being articulated so that future events of a similar type can be encouraged. Hopefully, the person who is articulating his or her strengths is learning how to create future activities where those strengths can be used. If this can be done, more positive emotions will result and more opportunities will be available for satisfying experiences accompanied by even more positive emotions. If a person seeks opportunities to use his or her strengths and is successful in doing so, that person will be expecting good things to happen, the hallmark of an optimistic person.

Let me suggest more specific guidelines for facilitating the articulation of strengths using positive emotions as indicators that positive experiences have been recalled. Think of yourself as a facilitator who going about the process of helping a child identify some of her strengths. Your initial focus should be directed to the process of becoming sensitive to the child's positive emotions. When you focus in on the stories that are accompanied by positive emotions, you can often identify the conditions existing when those emotions were experienced. You should be especially sensitive to what the child may have been doing to create or influence the event that was accompanied by positive emotions. Often there is a sense of mastery occurring when these events are happening. You should pay special attention to those mastery activities and try to create more opportunities for additional experiences where these mastery skills can be demonstrated. Help the child name the skill or ability she is demonstrating and encourage her to seek more opportunities for activities similar to those previously accompanied by positive feelings. Keeping the focus on the activities that are accompanied by positive emotions should be encouraged. The facilitator needs to guard against suggesting or "pushing" activities considered valuable by the facilitator, when the child has shown no inclination to initiate those activities on her own. When the facilitator pushes the child to try mastery activities not yet in the child's repertoire, such situations are often accompanied by negative emotions, and the motivation for engaging in the activity is lost.

Sensitivity to the child's emotional state is of utmost importance in the practice of focusing on the positive. The facilitator also needs to be aware of the negative/positive flavor of his responses when interacting with a child. If the response to a child's action is negative in flavor, there is a need for self-reflection and reconsideration. Motivation for change and positive development are seldom facilitated by negative reactions. During the era of behaviorism and the resulting emphasis on reinforcement, it was clearly taught that negative reinforcement did not work as well as positive reinforcement. That important principle should not be ignored, even though the language and methods used today are less likely to focus on the type of reinforcement we are using. Human motivation works best when positive flavors characterize interactions between people, regardless of the age of the participants. It is for this reason, parents and school personnel who want to encourage the optimal development of the young people in their lives need to be aware of the pattern of their interactions with other people, especially with children. If

their pattern tends towards negativity, they need to recognize that pattern and to seek additional assistance in changing that pattern.

Resources and guidelines for articulating strengths

Effective methods (Forster, 1991) useful for facilitating the articulation of strengths have been developed by Bernard Haldane (1984; 1989). You can learn more about his methods by reading a special issue of a journal that describes the influence of Bernard Haldane (Duttro, 2003). A website developed by the Center for Dependable Strengths provides additional information and resources regarding the methods developed by Bernard Haldane. The address of the website is: www.dependablestrengths.org. Information can also be obtained by calling the toll-free number, 866-398-9474, or emailing inquiries to ds@highline.edu.

One resource listed on that website, a book by Huggins (1994) is especially useful for helping elementary school children identify their strengths. Also listed on that website is a chapter (Forster, 2004) from a resource book for educators. This chapter, "Your Best Plans Should Use Your Best Strengths," is particularly useful for helping high school student articulate their strengths. Another helpful resource for working with high school students is a manual written by Boivin-Brown (1990).

Other books describing instruments for articulating strengths include the book by Peterson & Seligman (2004) and the book by Buckingham & Clifton (2001). It might be noted that the methods used in these two books are similar to those used by many psychological inventories that provide profiles showing your scores on several predetermined scales. In contrast, the methods developed by Bernard Haldane, guide the person through a process whereby the participant articulates his or her own descriptions of Dependable Strengths®, after considering several Good Experiences®. Good Experiences are recalled memories selected by the criteria that the recalled experiences were characterized by feelings of pride and enjoyment. The Haldane methods are more likely to result in the identification of strengths, which are anchored in the personal experiences of the person participating in the articulation process. In the methods described in the two books mentioned above, the strengths that are identified may or may not have meanings that can be directly anchored to personal experiences because the strengths labels that are provided were created and named by people other than the person articulating his strengths. The Dependable Strengths articulated by the Haldane approach are more likely to elicit words that can be tied to easily identified personal experiences.

Other resources for using positive approaches with children

There are many books and curricula that encourage parents and school personnel to use practices that focus attention on the positive. The practitioners of Adlerian psychology are well known for their emphasis on the positive (Nelsen, et al, 2000; Joslin, 1994; Lathrop, 1994). As mentioned earlier, Seligman (1995) wrote *The optimistic child: A revolutionary program that safeguards children against depression & builds lifelong resilience*. The methods in this book were adapted from tactics that cognitive therapists use to treat depression. The adaptations take into consideration that the children involved in these activities were probably not depressed in a clinical sense. Four basic skills were taught: (1) learn to recognize the thoughts that flit across your mind when you feel worst. (2) evaluate these automatic thoughts and look for things you say that are inaccurate. (3) generate more accurate explanations of the bad things that happen. (4) Reflect on the times that went wrong and decatastrophize them.

In addition to the basic skills mentioned above, children were also taught to change their *explanatory style*. In other words, explanations for bad experiences were adjusted so that the cause was regarded as changeable or transient. The cause was also regarded as specific and likely to affect only a few future situations. And third, the cause was attributed to something related to other people or circumstances, rather than the child who experienced the bad situation. The causes of good experiences were regarded as more likely to persist, likely to affect many situations in the future, and were attributed to the action of person who experienced the good situation.

A summary of methods and some qualifiers on recommended methods

The methods that I have recommended suggest that parents and educational practitioners focus on children's experiences that have been accompanied by positive emotions. When possible, the adults are encouraged to help the children articulate the strengths they used when engaged in positive experiences. When situations arise that suggest different behaviors or actions are required of the children, the adult encourages the child to focus on strengths that will lead to new behaviors. This process often changes the attention of the child from negative experiences to more positive experiences. In many cases, the child is distracted from activities that are likely to lead to conflicts and bad feelings among the participants. Positive motivation is emphasized whenever possible.

It is probably apparent that this focus on the positive will require great creativity on the part of the adult, and a smooth process of transforming negative situations to positive situations. These demands will present a real challenge. No adult can be expected to carry out this approach without many small failures and temporary setbacks. However, the adult facilitator of *positive focusing* is urged to be constantly aware of the desirability of being positive as much as possible when dealing with children. The research on the value of optimism, hope and positive emotions is so convincing that a focus on the positive is clearly called for. The question is, how can positive focusing be implemented in the face of numerous pressures forcing adults to correct bad behavior before it leads to further problems. The challenge is great, but the consequences are serious if a positive focus cannot be encouraged. It seems obvious that more attention needs to be given to the methods that allow parents and school personnel to focus on the positive when interacting with children in the home and the school.

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