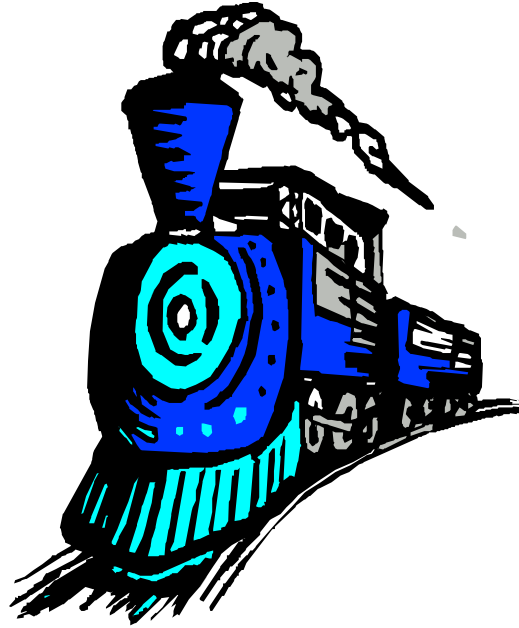


No Such Thing As a Bad Kid!



The Power of a Positive, Strength-Based Approach
In Reshaping the Lives of At-Risk Children, Youth & Families

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The Power of a Positive, Strength-Based Approach

What is it?: An emerging approach to guiding children, youth and family members that is exceptionally positive and inspiring. It begins with belief that all young people have or can develop strengths and utilize past successes to mitigate problem behavior and enhance functioning. It continues with practice methods that identify and marshal these strengths for necessary behavior change.

Strength-based practice is essentially about two words: Attitude & Actions

Professionals maximize the potential of the children and families they serve when they convey an attitude to each and every one that says: *I believe in all of you. I know you will succeed this year and beyond and I am absolutely thrilled to be part of your life.* And then, through their daily actions - show that they mean it.

Genuine believing helps kids to feel better about themselves, attacks self-doubt (self-doubt kills ability – Degas), and, most importantly, provides hope – which is humanity’s fuel.

Research has shown that a student entering high school with a history of committing aggressive acts is not likely to commit further acts of aggression (at his/her school) if the student believes there is at least one educator at the school that thinks “I’m terrific!”

- James Garbarino, Ph.D.

“I was successful because you believed in me.”

- Ulysses S. Grant in a letter to Abraham Lincoln

Strength-based practice is, to a great extent, about the power of positive relationships and cultures.

Three Universal Truths from Kids at Hope (KidsatHope.com), an evidence based, strategic-cultural model which reverses the youth at risk” paradigm by establishing a holistic methodology that engages an entire school, youth organization and/or community:

1. Children succeed when they are surrounded by adults who believe they can succeed no exceptions.
2. Children succeed when they have meaningful and sustainable relationships with caring adults.
3. Children succeed when they can articulate their future in four domains rather than one, which is generally Education and Career; Community and Service; Hobbies and Recreation.

“Countless studies have found that social relationships are the best guarantee of heightened well-being and lowered stress, both an antidote for depression and a prescription for high performance.”

- Shawn Achor, *The Happiness Advantage*, p.14

New research in psychology and neuroscience finds: “We become more successful *when* we are happier and more positive. Students primed to feel happy before taking math achievement tests far outperform their neutral peers. *It turns out our brains are literally hardwired to perform at their best not when they are negative or even neutral, but when they are positive.*”

- Shawn Achor, *The Happiness Advantage*, p. 15

According to Achor, what do all happy people have in common?

Meaningful Social Connections

Strong Social Support Networks

Excerpts from David Shenks’ *The Genius in All of Us*:

But the new science suggests that few of us know our true limits, that the vast majority of us have not even come close to tapping what scientists call our ‘unactualized potential.’

With humility, with hope, and with extreme determination, greatness is something to which any kid-of any age-can aspire.

Most underachievers are very likely not prisoners of their own DNA, but rather have been unable to tap into their true potential.

Happiness is not the belief that we don’t need to change; it is the realization that we can.

Achor, *The Happiness Advantage*, p.24

Twenty years from now, the youth you currently guide won’t remember much of what you said to them, but they’ll all recall how you made them feel.

A smile is the face’s way of giving an emotional hug.

Adolescents with post traumatic stress disorder – traumatized youth – have been neurologically rewired to shut down (i.e. become protective) when confronted by an adult who approaches too fast, too high, and/or with a stern or angry expression. Such approaches will prompt fear, flight, or fight reactions. Such youth are 24/7 hyper-vigilant to environmental cues.

Have you ever watched an actor in a bad mood? If you’re in a bad mood, it might be prudent to fake that you’re not. Actors entertain for a few hours; youth care professionals save lives.

Attitude is a choice.

A positive attitude sends the message: I want to be here. I care about you. I believe in you. And I know you will succeed. Which all leads to hope, happiness and success!

Hope is Humanity’s Fuel

The Brain & Resilience

All young persons have strengths and with positive support can change the course of their lives. They have resilient brains that can be “rewired” by positive learning experiences.

Resilience is the ability to thrive in spite of risk or adversity. The term comes from physics: a resilient object bends under stress but then springs back rather than breaks. A resilient child not only springs back from adversity but can become stronger in the process. The feeling of accomplishment that comes from solving life problems is the core of resilience.

Resilience is a natural trait in all humans. Human brains are specifically wired to cope with problems. However, humans cannot survive and thrive alone – they require support and encouragement from others.

Resilience is a combination of inner strengths and external supports. All youngsters need supportive families, peers, schools, and mentors to optimally sustain and develop their potential strengths.

Recent advances in resilience science find that the human brain is designed to be resilient. The brain is structured to overcome risk.

The brain is not like a computer, but more like a resilience library. It stores information bearing on survival and well-being and discards most other data. Problems can either be treated as occasions for punishment or opportunities for learning and growth.

Neuroplasticity refers to the reality that the brain is malleable and can therefore change throughout its existence. Positive, and frequently occurring experiences, can create new neural pathways that enhance functioning and produce growth.

Recent research shows that the *broadening effect* (how positive emotions broaden the amount of possibilities we process, making us more thoughtful, creative, and open to new ideas), is actually biological. Positive emotions flood our brains with dopamine and serotonin, chemicals that not only make us feel good, but dial up the learning centers of our brains to higher levels. Positive emotions help humans to organize new information, keep that information in the brain longer, and retrieve it faster later on. And they enable us to make and sustain more neural connections, which allows us to think more quickly and creatively, become more skilled at complex analysis and problem solving, and see and invent new ways of doing things.

“Brain change, once thought impossible, is now a well-known fact, one that is supported by some of the most rigorous and cutting-edge research in neuroscience.” (Achor, P. 29)

Conversely, negative emotional experiences like rejection activate pain centers in the brain just as physical stress does. Brain scans indicate that being excluded or rejected triggers feelings of distress and a burst of activity in the area of the brain that also reacts to physical pain. Destructive or defensive reactions (fight, flight, fright) can be triggered by such negative emotional states. Thus, being able to think about problems, talk them over with others, or even write about feelings or express them creatively can be helpful.

The brain has three major parts with different functions:

- **The Logical Brain** (prefrontal cortex) handles language, reasoning, and emotional control so Humans can intelligently solve problems and make meaning of life events. This area of the brain does not fully develop until adulthood.
- **The Emotional Brain** (limbic brain) triggers emotions that motivate behavior. The *amygdala* scans for stimuli for cues of danger or interest, triggers emotions, and stores important events in long term memory.
- **The Survival Brain** (brain stem) reacts to danger by triggering fight or flight mechanisms. These reflexive behaviors insured survival in the wild but are not geared to the threats faced by humans in modern life.

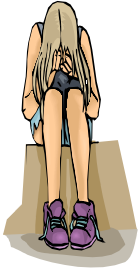
Psychiatrist Bruce Perry (2004) has found that children traumatized by neglect and abuse overuse more primitive brain systems. Their survival brains are chronically stimulated, and they are at high risk of engaging in behaviors which hurt themselves or others.

These destructive emotional impulses can only be regulated by mature capacity in the higher brain centers. But many of these youngsters have not had the nurturance and learning experiences to fully develop brain pathways for self –control. Thus their heightened impulsivity, frustration, and motor hyperactivity combine with an underdeveloped capacity to accurately perceive situations and problem solve. This unfortunate combination severely limits the child’s ability to maximize his or her potential.

As mentioned, Brendtro writes that the human brain is like a library. Individuals who have suffered trauma store all they have endured. It’s as if they have wings of pain, wings of shame, wings of humiliation in the lower regions of their brains. And they can’t afford to include any new books. A positive, safe, strength-based culture diminishes the fear that many traumatized individuals harbor. It replaces the wings of pain and shame with wings of accomplishment, safety and pride. Positive, safe environments allow these individuals to venture outside their circles of protection (survival brain) and venture into (utilize) the higher regions of their brains – enhancing decision making, success and happiness.



The (survival) brain of a traumatized individual



Gus on Pejorative Labeling



Look, I know some of us can be quite difficult. I was a hellion my first six months, considered quite obnoxious. But it was simply defensive posturing. (Can you say defense mechanism?) Kids aren't bad. They're just screwed up. The kid who's pushing you away the most is probably the one who needs you the most.

I think every residential center would be better off if they never used words as manipulative, lazy, un-invested, controlling, and obnoxious. They're pejorative adjectives. When you label one of us in such a way, you contaminate the waters and no one wants to swim with us any more.

"Manipulative kids aren't fun to work with."

"They're a pain in the ass."

"Boy, is that kid manipulative!"

Every time we get blasted for being "manipulative" (or any other such term), our self-concept suffers. We take on that word – we internalize a sense of badness. Yet the kid you call "manipulative" might have come to your facility with a history of manipulating his way out of getting beaten. So, maybe manipulating ain't so bad. Maybe it simply needs to be understood in the context of a child's situation. Maybe people don't need to use these words anymore.

P. 24 "I had been an excellent math student, but the day she told me I was "spacey" and unfocused was the day I stopped connecting to math."

Note: Throughout this handout will be references to the manuscript:
*Helping Traumatized Children Learn produced by Massachusetts Advocates
For Children www.massadvocates.org.*

Excerpt from *The Gus Chronicles*, Appelstein, 1994

Decoding Problem Behavior

Response to problem behavior: Understand > Reframe > Squeeze

Behavior is always a message

Pejorative Label	Positive, Hope-Based Reframe
Obnoxious	Good at pushing people away
Rude, arrogant	Good at affecting people
Resistant	Cautious
Lazy, un-invested	Good at preventing further hurts, failures
Manipulative	Good at getting needs met
Just looking for attention	Good at caring about and loving yourself
Close-mouthed	Loyal to family or friends
Different, odd	Under-appreciated
Stubborn & defiant	Good at standing up for yourself
Tantrum, fit, outburst	Big message
Learning disability	Roadblocks

Life isn't what you see, it's what you perceive!

When you change the way you look at a challenging youth ...the youth changes.

Pejorative labels lead to the creation of *stereotype myths* (entrenched , negative self-perceptions) – Gladwell, *Outliers*

Reframing

Seeing and praising the positive, self-protective value in “negative” behaviors

1. A youth who is always looking for attention:

R: I apologize to you for anyone who has ever put you down for looking for attention. I think it's great you look for attention – good or bad. It means you haven't quit on yourself. You probably haven't received enough attention in your life and you're looking for it now. Are there better ways to seek it? Sure, and we can talk about them. But I don't want you to spend another minute of your life thinking that there's something wrong with looking for attention!”

2. A youth who won't talk about his/her feelings:

R: You're a real loyal daughter. I think you hold everything in to protect your family and I think that's quite admirable. Your mom is very lucky to have a kid like you. But this isn't us against your family, we're on the same side (connecting statement –see page).

3. A youth who acts rudely:

R: You have an amazing ability to affect people! Or, “I think you're pretty good at giving to others what you've received.”

4. A youth who acts in an obnoxious manner:

R: You're good at pushing people away. And maybe that's kept you safe. But the problem is: You're a great kid and I'm a great staff member and if you keep pushing like this – choosing to act in what some people might call an “obnoxious” manner:...we'll never get to see how truly great you are, and you'll never learn that some of us are okay and can be trusted.

5. A youth who acts in a stubborn manner:

R: You're good at standing up for yourself and what you believe. Some of the greatest people in the world were quite stubborn about their causes: Martin Luther King, Mother Theresa. But the great ones all new when to give in a little.

6. A youth who seems unmotivated:

R: You're pretty good at protecting yourself. If you don't try you can't be embarrassed. But you're a bright kid and if you just take it step by step you'll probably have success.

7. A youth who frequently swears:

R: You're very expressive! You've got words I never heard before. Might use a few at the Cowboy's game. How about saving the expressive language for times your alone with one of us, not in front of the other students. Thanks.

8. A youth who's bossy with peers:

R: You've got great leadership skills. You're a natural.

Providing Hope & Possibility Through Metaphors & Positive Predicting

Poker



“Life is like a poker game. Even if you’re dealt a bad hand, you can still win the game. Prison is full of people who blame their upbringing for why they broke the law. But for every one person in prison who blames his/her family, there are 100 folks on the outside who were raised in similar circumstances but *chose* to be good citizens.

The Melting Snowball



“See your fears and worries about (pending issue/loss/transition) as a big snowball in the middle of your chest, and understand that as each day goes by, it’s going to melt a little. It may stay forever...but it will become so small that you can build a great life around it.”

The Roadblock

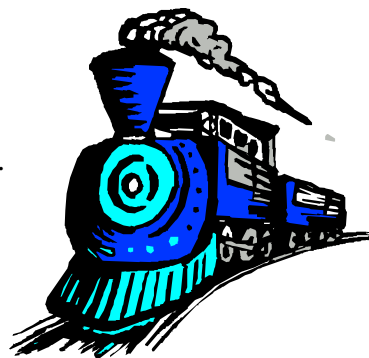


“It’s not a learning disability, bipolar, Asperger’s; it’s a roadblock. All big cities have them, but people get to work on time every day. Why? They find away around it. You can to. Many successful people have roadblocks similar to your.”



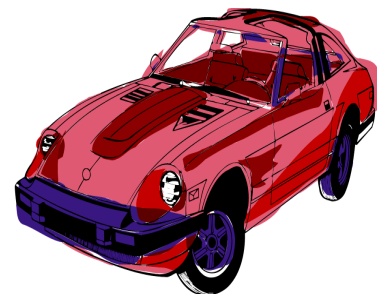
“Learning is my ticket to a great Life!”

The Train



“You’re big and powerful...but you’ve gotten off track. All great trains get off track. What can we do to get you back on the rails? You will get to a good place.”

The 2013 Edition



“Cars improve every year. People get better every day. You’re the 2013 Steven. You don’t over-heat as much as the 2012Steven...have a sleeker design, follow the road signs better. Don’t give me this bull: ‘Same old me.’ You get better every day...wiser, more experienced, more mature.. 9

Positive Predicting

When you talk about the future in positive terms, you make any desired outcome more possible. And when it’s more possible, it becomes more probable!

“How should we celebrate when...”
“When we recover the onside kick....”



Visualizing the Future

James Garbarino postulates that terminal thinking – the inability to articulate one’s future – may be the clue to why some children succeed while other’s fail.

Positive Predicting

When you talk about the future in positive terms, you make any desired outcome more possible. And when it’s more possible, it becomes more probable!

“How should we celebrate when you...”

“When we recover the onside kick....”



“One, two, three...ICE CREAM!!!!”

“Twenty years from now when you’re a very successful businessman and family guy, which staff member from the ____ School - who always believed in you and helped you turn the corner – do you need to find and pay back?”

Kids at Hope.com Third Universal Truth

3. Children succeed when they can articulate their future in four domains rather than one, which is generally Education and Career; Community and Service; Hobbies and Recreation.

Create questions that you can ask the kids you work with:

Strength-Based Practice: Principles

Seeing is Believing

Unconditional support
(Non-contingent reinforcement)

If you visit the home of family that has a toddler or two what do you see everywhere? Toys. Did the children need to earn them? No. They were offered unconditionally. This act of unconditional love and kindness strengthens bonds, facilitates object constancy (my parents are always there for me), and enhances self-image (“I’m someone of value!”)

vs.

Believing is Seeing

Standard behavior management
(If I do well, I am rewarded. If I don’t, I am not)

Seeing is believing produces **Optimism** – which feeds possibility, and motivates coping and adaptive behavior, even in the face of difficult odds

Seeing is Believing

“Butch, you D’a man! We’re excited that you’re here!”



NOT: *Believing is Seeing!*

“We’ll treat you nicely once you put that slingshot down, lose some weight, and get rid of that ridiculous hat!”

Seeing is believing examples:

Have lunch with a struggling youth; Do something fun with a group that is struggling; bring in a special snack; give the group extra recreation time even if they haven’t earned it. “You don’t always have to behave great for me to treat you great. I love working with you guys and I care about you –regardless of your behavior. Of course, I like good choices and fine acting – but I’m behind you either way.”

Strength-Based Practice

SB practice is powerful combination of the strength-building model and solution-focused therapy

Emphasis is on:

Strength-building rather than flaw-fixing
Doing rather than understanding
Believing in every youth unconditionally - See and believe!– Not “Believing is seeing” (positive responses are earned)

..which produces *Optimism* – which feeds possibility, and motivates coping and adaptive behavior, even in the face of difficult odds: *Hope is Humanity’s Fuel*

P. 57 “Lacking the words to communicate their pain, they may express feelings of vulnerability by becoming aggressive or feigning disinterest in academic success *because they believe they cannot succeed.*”

Continues with practice methods that identify and marshal these strengths for necessary behavior change.

The Goal:

Change rather than *insight* and *awareness*

The Work:

Problem-driven not problem-focused (solution-focused):

Devoted to helping kids *initiate actions* to dispense presenting problems

Primarily *short term*

Goal-oriented and focused on *resolving the identifying problem*

Assumptions (or lack thereof)....

Strength-based practice does not assume that ownership of guilt is somehow automatically curative....Does assume that change is inevitable, not uncertain

Strength-based practice does not assume **LARGE** problems require **LARGE** efforts for solutions....Does assume that **SMALL** changes can ripple out to bring resolution.

Strength-Based Tools Checklist

Unflinching Positive Attitude																		
Reframing Understand>Reframe>Squeeze																		
Inspirational Metaphors: Poker, Melting Snowball, Roadblock, Train, Car (“We get better every Day.”)																		
Solution-Focused Questions: Explorative Historical, Repeating w/Qualifiers, When & Will, Scaling Questions, Identifying In-Between Change, Amplifying Change Using Speculation, Exception Questions, Changing Perspective Questions																		
Provide Multiple Opportunities for Individual & Group Success & Trumpet Successes																		
Create a “User-Friendly” Environment for Cognitively Inflexible Young People. Use the A,B,C, baskets																		
Respect & Explore Cultural Diversity																		
The Millimeter Acknowledgement																		
Honoring Hellos & Goodbyes																		
Being Family Friendly																		
Using Seeing is Believing vs. Believing is Seeing (Standard Behavior Man.)																		

Using Seeing is Believing vs. Believing is Seeing (Standard Behavior Man.)																		
One-Line Raps																		
Repetitive Quizzing (The Stretch)																		
Externalizing & Naming Positive and Negative Behaviors																		
Humor (But Not Sarcasm)																		
Incentive Plans that Reward/Celebrate Improvement. Creative Use of the Medium of Exchange (e.g. Billy Dollar)																		
The Observing Ego (Respond instead of React): "It's an injury and it will heal." Lack of Support Leads to Punitive Actions																		
Affect Scale																		
Content/Message ("Please & Thank you. I, We vs. "You".																		
Non-Threatening Non-Verbal Interventions																		
Core Verbal Techniques: Support & Help, Repeating and/or Paraphrasing, Feelings Explor., Sandwich Approach, Praise & Encouragement, Humor, Apologizing, Reasoning, Explorative (Psychological, Historical, Reflective, Plan Mak.																		