



Understanding a Strengths-Based Approach

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“The only real voyage of discovery exists, not in seeing new landscapes, but in having new eyes”

Marcel Proust

What is a Strengths-Based Approach?

- A strengths-based approach involves a shift from a deficit focus (which emphasizes problems) to a positive partnership with the child/youth, their family and their team.
- This approach acknowledges each child/youth's and their family's unique set of strengths and challenges and engages them as a crucial partner in developing and implementing an action plan.
- Highlight family strengths and protective factors on two levels:



Strength of the individual member

(Ex. going to school, good student, happy attitude, self-advocate, has good decision-making skills, able to communicate needs, asks for help, listens)

Strength of the family/ team as a whole

(Ex. parent-child good relationship, parent/CSW/attorney positive relationship, loyalty, commitment)

What's the Problem?



- Traditional practices focus on "what is wrong" with the child/youth, which leads to an approach that can be punitive and stigmatizing
- The emphasis on deficits or what a child/youth is lacking leads to a cycle of focusing only on what needs to be "repaired" followed by a reliance on prescribed resources or assumed solutions.
- If external resources and supports are not offered in the context of what is meaningful and building upon the person's existing strengths and resources, it can undermine the person's ability to learn and be self-determining.
 - It can send messages such as: "You have no strengths that are relevant" or "You cannot cope or change your life" or "You need our expertise".

Why Does Language Matter?

- A strength-based paradigm offers a different language to describe a person's difficulties and struggles by allowing us to see opportunities, hope and solutions.

Deficit Based	Strength Based
What's wrong?	What's working?
Immediate/Reactionary Solutions	Sustainable/Well-Planned Solutions
Intervene	Engage
Diagnose	Understand
Crisis	Opportunity
Control	Empower
Behavior Focused	Process Focused
Overcoming Weakness	Emphasizing Possibilities



Guiding Principles to a Strength Based Approach

See Potential

Meet
Children/Youth
Where They Are

Strengths vs. Labels

Collaborative
Change

Children/Youth Are
Experts of Their
Own Story

People Can Change

Problems Can Be
Blinding

Capacity Building

The Problem is the
Problem, Not the
Person

How Does This Translate to Your Advocacy?

Set Labels Aside

- Remember that language carries meaning.
- Make sure to use person first language

Resilience/Resourcefulness

- Look at the youth you are working with as someone that has remained strong through all they have been through.
- We need to empower and be optimistic on possibilities and promise
- Reducing negative bias: shifting the focus away from “what is wrong with this youth?” to “what has this youth experienced?”

An Optimistic Attitude

- Focus on assets.
- Recognize any successes the youth has accomplished.

Strengths

- A youth’s strength can be their talents, experience, skills, resources and support used to cope with stress.



Where Can This Apply in Your Advocacy?



CFT/Multidisciplinary Meetings

School Meetings

Team Transitions

Working with Service Providers

Court Report Writing

During Hearings

Identifying Strengths with your CASA Youth



- Ask them! 😊
- One of the biggest strengths can be vocalizing where they need support
- Motivational Interviewing
 - Open-ended questions
 - Reflective/active listening

Let's
Practice!



Lucy is a 15-year-old youth who has been living with her foster parent for 8 months now. Lucy grew up with two siblings and loves sports. Lucy feels stressed due to school curriculum getting harder. She recently asked her foster parents for assistance, but they were unable to understand the subject matter. Lucy feels pressure due to her soccer team counting on her for their games. However, if Lucy is unable to maintain her grades, she will not be allowed to play. To add to this, Lucy has been missing days from school due to having to assist her foster parent's doctor appointments.

What are the strengths you can pull out of this scenario?

Upon reviewing your recent court reports, you read about John. John was abandoned as a one-year-old infant by his parents. He has been in 6 placements and has a history of being sexually assaulted when he was 9 years old. John is now 16-years-old and has been living in his current placement for 3 years with Mr. and Mrs. Booker. John currently maintains a 3.0

GPA and is part of the leadership council at school. John has been on psychotropic medication for his depression for the last 4 years. John has dreams of becoming a biologist and his science teacher believes he would be great at it. John has been helping around his community by working on farms for the last few years and discovered his love for animals. On occasion John smokes cigarettes which he says help calm his nerves. John has a best friend named Susan. Susan has a reputation by students as being a negative influencer. According to his caretaker, she has noticed John has recently started displaying moody behaviors, he has been staying up late daily and has an incredible appetite.

What strengths can we gather from John's narrative?

Jody is a 13-year-old female who 5 months ago was released from her STRTP and since has been living with her new foster family. CSW reports that Jody has a history of low frustration tolerance, and aggressive behaviors. Jody shares that she has recently been facing a lot of bullying at school, as youth are making fun of her clothing. Jody is also failing all but one class. She has built a great relationship with the school counselor and loves science. Jody has recently said she has a goal to one day become a nurse, so that she may help others. At home, Jody helps around the house, and has recently found interest in fixing motorcycles with her caregiver. Jody really misses her half-sibling and has mentioned wanting to run away to go see her. Although she no longer smokes marijuana, she has a tendency to smoke cigarettes whenever she can get away with it.

What are Jody's Strengths?

Questions?



Essential History Program

- The Essential History Program aims to help social workers, attorneys and judges make trauma-informed decisions about the young people they serve.
- Through this program, a CASA volunteer reviews the entirety of a child/youth's case file and produces an objective and comprehensive report that highlights key historical events for the young person while in the system.

Program Goals

Direct Impact

- Improve outcomes for youth in the areas such as: permanency, mental health, education and social supports.
- Reduce time youth is in the child welfare system.

Programmatic Impact

- Ease changes/transitions for service providers.
- Reduce burnout and compassion fatigue for child welfare professionals.

Systems Impact

- Consolidate information to observe data trends in the child welfare system.
- Create systematic change towards healthier and equitable systems.

If you're interested in learning more about the Essential History Program, you can do the following:



1. Check out the Essential History webinar using your Litmos account at www.casala.litmos.com
 - If you've forgotten your login information, please email Lynne Gabriel (lgabriel@casala.org)
2. Reach out to your advocate supervisor if you are interested in taking on an Essential History case.