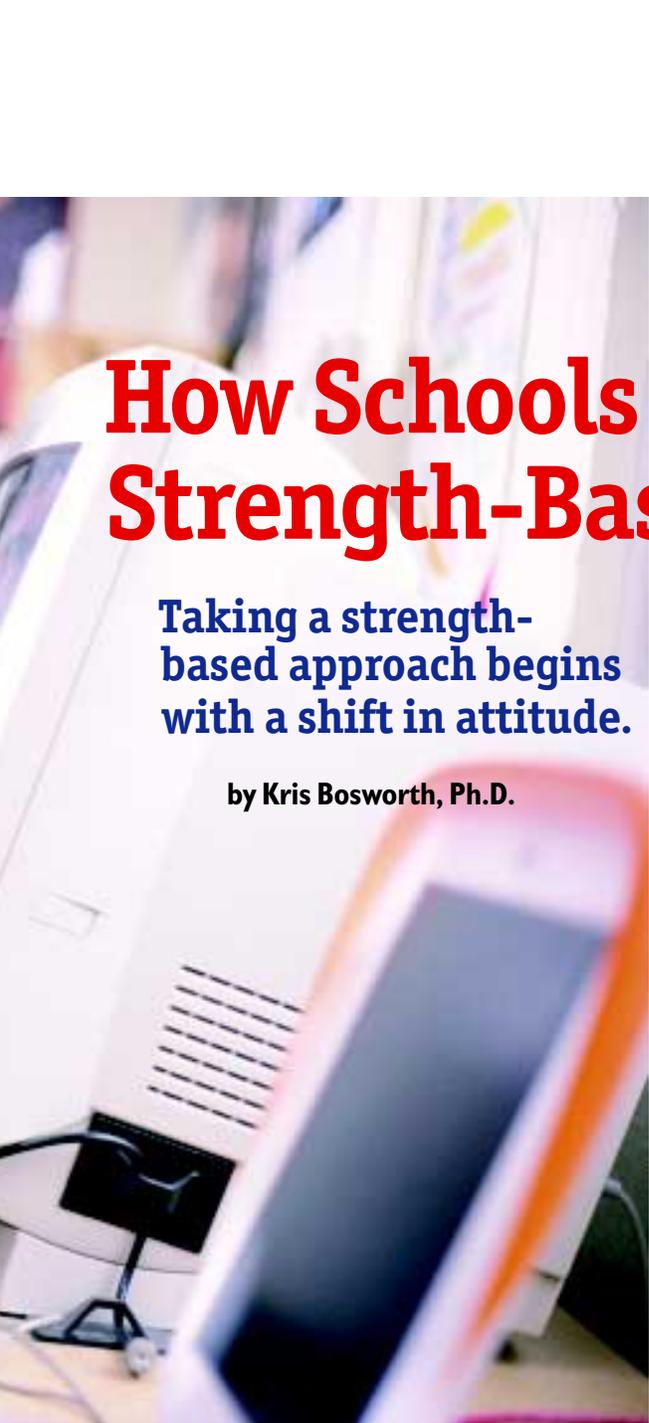




“CELEBRATE WHAT IS RIGHT WITH THE WORLD!” according to wildlife photographer Dewitt Jones, is the vision that the *National Geographic* magazine shares with the world. The *National Geographic* seeks to capture the beauty, strength and charm in nature and in humans and human creations as well. Focusing on what is right can provide the inspiration and strength to repair what is not. Emphasizing the negative can drain energy and lead to a sense of hopelessness.



# How Schools Can Adopt Strength-Based Practices

Taking a strength-based approach begins with a shift in attitude.

by Kris Bosworth, Ph.D.

In planning and problem solving, a strength-based approach can be the breath of fresh air needed to move parties out of a “stuck” position. The lessons learned from a strengths-based school program can help to support children’s resiliency, positive behavior and growth in any setting. Supporting these strengths is especially important for children who are faced with the difficulties of attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (AD/HD).

This strength-based approach provides teachers and school administrators with a new framework for dealing with a variety of situations. Most of us were raised and trained to look for the problem or the deficit and then to try to fix whatever was out of sync with the

situation. Let’s look at an example of how this deficit perspective can be turned around.

Suppose a student, Pat, was sent to the office four days out of five. In a traditional problem-based view, the focus would be placed on those days in which Pat had been sent to the office. A strength-based approach, in contrast, would explore what happened on the one day of the week that Pat was NOT sent to the office. Analyze a peaceful situation in the same way one would a negative incident.

- What was Pat doing on that day?
- What was the teacher doing on that day?
- What was happening in the environment?
- What about the environment reinforced positive behavior in Pat?

Once the situation has been analyzed, teachers and administrators can look at how to expand the conditions that lead to peaceful outcomes, not office visits. They can determine what to do more of, less of or differently to grow the positive or reinforcing aspects of the environment that have supported the positive behavior. They can celebrate what is “right” with Pat, with the teacher and with the environment. They can cultivate strengths and establish a foundation that lessens the need for discipline referrals.

A hallmark of this strength-based approach is looking at the structures and systems in the people involved and in the environment that provide support for prosocial behavior and positive growth and development. According to research on resiliency, an environment that provides the optimal opportunity for growth and development has three main characteristics:

1. Clear and consistent boundaries
2. High expectations
3. Caring and support

## How Schools Can Adopt Strength-Based Practices

**If students are explicitly taught expected behaviors and they are acknowledged when they meet those expectations, most students will exceed them.**

**Clear and consistent boundaries.** Students work better when boundaries are clear and defined and expectations for behavior have been agreed upon and are consistently reinforced and enforced. Structure is absolutely essential for a nurturing and protective environment. Policies and procedures need to be well communicated and consistently reinforced. Here are some strategies for establishing and maintaining such boundaries:

- Involve youth in establishing the rules and consequences.
- State rules in positive terms so that youth are focused on what to do, not on what not to do.
- Post rules and behavioral expectations in each unique environment on campus.
- Use innovative approaches for teaching appropriate behaviors, such as role-playing, drama, graphic arts, etc.
- Use praise for following the rules.
- Periodically review the rules and consequences.



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**High expectations.** A strength-based environment provides students with both high expectations and the support to reach those goals. It is essential to have high expectations for both academics and behavior. If students are explicitly taught expected behaviors and they are acknowledged when they meet those expectations, most students will exceed them.

In Positive Behavior Supports (PBS), the faculty agrees upon three to five positively stated rules such as “be safe, be respectable, be responsible,” or “respect yourself, respect others and respect property.” In the next step, the faculty decides what kind of behaviors they would like to see in each location of the school. When the students arrive at school on the first day, they are taught specifically the expected behaviors in each location such as the cafeteria, classroom, buses, library and hallways. These expected behaviors are reinforced by signage and other identifying characteristics such as “peace feet” on the hall floor indicating where people should walk. Students are acknowledged for practicing the appropriate behavior. Key elements of this program include 1) the entire faculty agrees upon the set of rules and 2) the rules are enforced and reinforced in all areas of school life. For more information, see [www.pbis.org](http://www.pbis.org).

In one school that implemented a PBS program, a visitor noticed that every time she came to a door, a student rushed to open it for her. Opening doors was not a behavior that was specifically emphasized. However, one of the rules for the school was “be respectful.” It became part of the culture that opening doors was a way of showing respect.

Some strategies that support a strength-based approach include:

- Working with a class or individual student to establish expectations for assignments and homework.
- Holding the student to those standards.
- Providing balanced, positive and corrective feedback on all work.
- Dividing tasks into manageable steps.
- Rewarding progress as well as the final product.

**Caring and support.** The third component of this strength-based environment is caring and support. Every human being needs to feel that there is at least one person in his or her world that provides unconditional love and support. This does not mean unconditional approval. It does mean that someone has confidence in the student’s ability to set goals and to reach them. Here are examples of what some middle school students considered caring:

- Helping or giving advice on how to complete a task.
- Having a relationship with the adult beyond completing tasks or learning activities.
- Demonstrating kindness, respect and faithfulness.
- Spending time with a person, listening to the stories of their lives and doing activities.

For those of us who have been trained and rewarded for looking for problems, revising the way we look at individual children, the culture in our environments and our goals for our work may take some practice. For example, one principal changed the school’s discipline referral form to help her staff adopt a more strength-based approach. Each staff member was asked to identify the strengths that the student had that would help the student solve the problem for which a referral was written. The principal returned the forms of any teacher who did not complete the questions on strengths. Faculty soon learned the strength-based expectation, and discipline problems decreased.

Taking a strength-based approach begins with a shift in attitude. It does not mean abandoning problem solving or not dealing with negative behaviors. Both the strengths and problems need to be considered when dealing with any situation. ■

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