



Building on Strengths

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Parents of children with disabilities spend a lot of time describing and explaining our children – to doctors, school staff, therapists, family members, even to the public. The natural impulse is to talk about our children’s disabilities—that’s what needs fixing, that’s what needs explaining, that’s what reveals how to fix their deficits. It’s our job!

But what happens when we shift the perspective to our children’s strengths, talents, gifts? I had the joy of attending a 5-day seminar in Vancouver 12 years ago hosted by PLAN, a parent organization started in the 1980’s. This seminar truly changed the way I talked about—even felt about—my son Will. At the seminar, we were never asked to state our children’s disabilities or describe them in negative terms; rather we talked about them positively. Up to then, I always talked about what Will needed and what was wrong with him. After it, I started to think much harder about his gifts and how to always talk about what he gives to us. And from there I began to think less about fixing Will and more about regarding him as a complete, unique human being with all the strengths and foibles that we all have. I didn’t stop therapies and advocacy, but I made a conscious effort to start every conversation with what he’s good at. That perspective changed my focus and eventually even my interactions with Will.

In preparing for life after graduation, you can start to make this shift from “how do I fix this person?” to “who is this person and how can we build a life based on his or her strengths and talents, interests and passions?” This shift in perspective can start at school. I have discovered a wealth of ideas by googling “IEP goals based on strengths.” For example, in answering the question, why are students often left out of IEP meetings, the writer says, “because these meetings, much like the IEPs themselves, are deficit-focused. In the first 5 minutes, someone will share a “Strengths and Weaknesses” narrative which leads to several smiles and sighs at the “strengths” noted. Check the box, we are done with strengths.” No one wants the student to stay and hear all about their disabilities and deficits. The model is to build IEP goals “that focus on growing signature strengths.” (<http://www.viacharacter.org/blog/using-strengths-to-set-goals-on-ieps/>)

Under IDEA **Transition services** means “a coordinated set of activities for a child with a disability that...Is based on the individual child’s needs, taking into account the child’s strengths, preferences, and interests” (<http://www.parentcenterhub.org/repository/transitionadult/>), so the law actually

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encourages this perspective. Your job as a parent is to ask school staff to learn about your child's strengths, preferences and interests, through student interest assessments, parent and student interviews, and looking for trends in the data schools have accumulated about your child. Have a planning session with school staff focused on exploring your child's strengths, preferences, and interests and then write IEP goals that begin here, with the positive.

Beyond school, you'll need a way to continue working for a life for your child based on his or her strengths, preferences, and interests. The key for our planning for Will's adulthood has been to build environments where he could use his strengths and interests. We have tried to find people to work with him that honor and respect his ways of communicating and activities that use his talents. Instead of trying to change him, we have tried to structure environments where he can be himself. This approach doesn't mean we quit—we still continue to encourage learning new skills and developing new interests, but it does mean being aware of imposing MY ideas on what avenues to pursue and look instead at what he has taught us about the essential Will, the place to start!

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