

Positive Parenting Strengths (Sarah Gillen)

Chuck and Priscilla were at their wits' end. They are the parents of two teen-aged girls, and two younger boys. The eldest, Charlotte, is out-of-control. As each child approaches adolescence, they seem to become impossible. "We don't know what to do anymore!" Priscilla wails. "I do everything for them. Charlotte and Chuck fight constantly. He expects her to respect him, but she swears at him when he makes the slightest demand. Then he gets mad and starts yelling, and it's all over! She's a top student and athlete. Why won't she be more compliant at home? And now Gertie is starting to act out. She talks back something fierce! The boys never do anything around the house. Their grandparents think they are all out of control. I don't know how much more of this I can take!"

Parenting is not the same as it used to be. Fewer families include a stay-at-home parent. Economically, most families need both parents to be in the work force. More women are single parents. The kids who are teens now were in daycare or otherwise looked after by people other than their parents. They don't see us as the arbiters of their lives or as the holders of all the keys, because we aren't any longer.

On top of this, neighborhoods are not as safe as before. Gangs, drugs, and violence are not restricted to inner cities.

As well, TV and computers have made information easily accessible by children – information that, just a few years ago, was the domain of adults. The way we protected children in the past from overwhelming material such as sexual images, disasters, and pictures of war-torn bodies, was to keep it unavailable. Now that is almost impossible. Children are traumatized by the news, as well as feeling immense pressure to be involved in activities and interests that their peers and the media are trying to tell them they are ready for.

We are all racing – kids and parents alike. Society runs at a much faster pace. Music, TV shows, sentence structure and pacing in books, magazines, even symphonies, have sped up drastically. There is an overwhelming amount of information bombarding us and demanding that we respond to it instantly. There is more information in one Sunday issue of the New York Times than in all the books that existed in the 16th century. We work longer, vacation less (in the USA), and are expected to be available by phone, hand-held, and computer 24/7.

When parents come to me, often they want to reduce some unacceptable behavior in their child. Old parenting styles, that worked when we grew up, were based on behavior control. They worked moderately well then, because kids were more dependent on their parents. Today, the same methods often have loudly unsuccessful results. In a world in which force, lack of awareness, and laying down the law have more dire consequences than before, we cannot focus on behavior cessation, or our own comfort levels. There is nothing more silly and helpless than the feeling you get when you bellow, "You're not doing anything until you clean your room!" and have the kid shoot you that who-are-you-kidding expression and walk out of the house. Parents feel shell-shocked and confused, and the children feel disrespected, misunderstood, and hurt.

What we need now are the skills that will help our kids see us as their major support, helping them to take risks within a reasonable range, accepting mistakes within the safety of a family that knows the value of trial and error, and learning to think about situations, options and consequences.

It is difficult and scary to give up old patterns and to try new ones. The benefits are legion. As painful as the tumult often is in today's families, we can see it as an opportunity, if we approach the dynamics with a positive psychology framework. We have the chance to lay the foundation for continued connection and understanding with our young kids, to build real and lasting closeness with our adolescents, and in so doing, to work beyond some of the hurts we may still be carrying from our own childhoods, by learning to have more meaningful and warm relationships with our kids.

Priscilla and Chuck started by uncovering their assumptions about families, as well as the patterns they inherited from their upbringings. We looked at the effects of these patterns on the present. I helped them see what is going on inside their children that is causing them to act the way they are. This information includes normal developmental phases as well as how modern culture and environmental factors have accelerated kids' behavior. (It helps parents immeasurably to have more insight into their child's reality, rather than only seeing and reacting to the surface.)

Once the elements feeding into the tumult were uncovered, Priscilla and Chuck paused to remember why they wanted to have a family in the first place – the spiritual, loving, giving, connected, creative, nourishing reasons for generating and supporting life. Then they identified their signature strengths, as developed by Marty Seligman, and we brainstormed parenting applications. Parents feel empowered to acknowledge and utilize such strengths as curiosity, loving, perseverance, genuineness, open-mindedness, social intelligence, kindness, leadership. For example, Priscilla has Love of Learning as a strength. We talked about how she could use it, not only to support her children's love of learning, but by learning more about child development, new approaches to discipline, and to increase her enjoyment of her family, as well as her own well-being.

But the signature strengths are not the only characteristics that parents have or need! After struggling to upgrade my own parenting skills and helping many families, I have identified a list of Positive Parenting Strengths that are explicitly helpful in family life. People have many of the Positive Parenting Strengths in abundance but don't always recognize them as valuable. As parents attend mindfully to these as real strengths, and recognize the great gifts that they provide, they feel more assured in their parenting. Parents also tend to have more confidence in their communities and in their work lives. This list is meant to add to Seligman's VIA list, so I have not included many valuable parenting skills, such as authenticity, curiosity, love of learning. The two lists can be used together to focus parents' attention and efforts.

It is so easy, in the face of adolescent moodiness and behavior, to lose sight of the fact that we have wonderful skills. While they are acting as if they see us as clueless, ridiculous, and

maybe offensive, it is imperative that we maintain our own reality. The more we can maintain our own equanimity and center, the more they will acquire these same strengths, to help with the pressures that face them in years to come.

Here, then, is the list I propose as Positive Parenting Strengths. Try this: identify those which you believe are your top five, and then have confidence in them! See how you can use your strengths to enhance your patience, your empathy, and your optimism. Muse about them and come up with ways for them to help you be more effective, more relaxed, and to enjoy your parenthood more fully. You could also pick one that you want to become more proficient at and grow it into a strength. Focus on your positive strengths while with your children and see how they respond.

1) Staying Grounded

You are able to stop, breathe, and connect in with the lower half of your body, when you find yourself getting worked up. You settle, turn inward, and feel the energy moving in your abdomen, pelvis, thighs, knees, calves, ankles, and feet. You feel your energy joining with the energy of the earth, so that you feel connected, rather than like a helium balloon that someone forgot to knot off after blowing up. You stay internally present in difficult and emotional situations.

2) Centered

You have a strong sense of your true self, not your personality, but your Being, and you feel it as a place in which you reside in yourself. You are good at gathering yourself, not being distracted, or pulled into self-judgment. You remain self-aware, rather than scattering or hiding. You know that being centered connects you to life and to spirit.

3) Empathic

You are able to see the world through your children's eyes. You see their feelings and reactions as valid, given their experience and level of development. When they have a hard time, you make an effort to reflect back to them an understanding of what it must be like for them. You look beyond rude behavior to try to see what is going on inside. If there is a situation that repeatedly drives you crazy, you make sure you take the time to imagine, not only what this situation must be like for them, but what it must mean given their history. You imagine the entire scene as if you are in their body and mind, running it through from start to finish, imagining that you are they, and then asking what you/they perceive, what's important, and what the situation means for them. You become aware of some aspect of their experience that you haven't seen before, which gives you insight that will help you modify further situations. Doing so frees you from feeling so upset by their behavior and often lessens the obnoxious traits in further interactions.

4) Communicator

You recognize that good communication is a skill and is not automatic. You think carefully, and in advance, what you want to accomplish in communicating with your children. You plan and practice communication patterns that elicit thoughtful and relatively calm interactions. You are good at orchestrating conversations that enable children to learn life skills. You know that it is much more important to ask questions than it is to provide

answers. You help them, by asking questions, learn to think through situations, anticipate consequences, and consider alternatives.

You want them to learn how to work things out for themselves, so you work to control your emotional reactions to things that they might say, in order to reach the larger goals of open interaction, problem-solving, decision-making, self-confidence, and social skills.

Your strong points are paraphrasing what they've said, so as to make sure you heard correctly, asking questions about the topic and about their thoughts, feelings, responses and actions. "How did you feel then?", "What possibilities are there?" "What happened next?" "What do you want to do about it?" "Who could you talk to about that?" are your stock in trade. You love it when your kids surprise you by coming up with solutions that hadn't occurred to you.

5) Connector

You place a high value upon, staying emotionally connected with your children, even when they act badly or when the two of you are having an argument. You stay present, authentic, and aware of your own feelings, as well as those of your child. You work at finding ways to maintain energetic and emotional ties with your child and stay with it to work things out, rather than giving up. If you need to take a break, you call a time-out, so that everyone has a chance to cool off, without anyone feeling rejected or shut out. If they come home in a bad mood, you let them have their chance to cool off, yet you maintain the sense inside yourself that you are together and that you love each other.

6) Educator

You remember that the goal of parenthood is to educate over time. You are able to keep in mind that growing up is a process, and that you are engaged in is raising wonderful people, not robots. You can remember, even in the heat of the moment, that the present behavior is not as important as the lessons you want your children to learn, such as thoughtfulness, self-reflection, thinking for themselves, confidence, etc. You tailor your parenting to further the long-term goal and remember that education takes years and many steps, and that your children don't have to master the adult skills today, just work toward them gradually.

7) Process expert

You know that outcome is not the objective, nor is it where life is lived or savored. You are comfortable with the messiness and incompleteness of everyday life. You also relax and take time to be with your children while they are going through their processes, thus helping them to be comfortable with being in the moment. You focus well on what furthers the processes of family life – communication, being, allowing, working through, tolerating, etc.

8) Acceptor

You really see who your children are – their strengths, weaknesses, the direction they are going – rather than being locked in a view of who you pictured your children would be, or who you need them to be, or who you can tolerate them being. Much as you would like to raise a concert pianist, you appreciate and nurture your child's talent as a wrestler. You raise the child you have, in the way that they need, rather than only in the way you want to engage in parenting, even if that's uncomfortable or takes you into areas that are not what you consider your strengths. For example, if your child needs firm, clear boundaries, even if you

tend toward the gentle and talkative, you rally yourself to provide structure in the way he or she needs.

9) Optimistic about Teens

You hold in your heart, and therefore hold for your child, their potential, who they truly are, and who they can become. You remember that, if they are adolescent, they are brain- and hormone-challenged, yet they really are the kind, caring, loving, skillful, intelligent people we remember from before. You hold that image and keep reminding yourself of it, so that you don't think for too long that monsters have taken over their morphing bodies. You present a picture to them of their best selves. Inside all their behavior, they are very, very brittle, sensitive, unsure, confused, and scared of what is happening, of the new pressures, and of their own actions. You know that it matters to them, a lot, to see in your eyes the people they hope they are becoming.

10) Structure expert

You are clear about your own boundaries and the areas of life that are impacted by boundary issues. You are clear who you are, and what your bottom line is in different areas. You take care of yourself, have clear limits, balance various areas in the way that works best for you and your family. You also are able to be flexible, not rigidly adhering to rules when unforeseen factors make it valuable to take a different approach. You communicate your expectations clearly in a way that each child can hear.

11) Systemic thinker

You are able to see the forest, rather than focusing too hard on the tree in front of you. You are able to remember the totality of your child and not mistake a present transgression for who she/he really is. You're able to pull back from a situation and include context, history, and goals. You include other factors than the ones presenting themselves in the moment.

12) Equanimity

You remain contented and peaceful, even when those around you are having a hard time. You take a deep breath and maintain the feeling of calm that helps orient storm-tossed children and teens. You don't cut yourself off from them in order to feel happy. You are present and available, without being pulled into their angst. You remember that things mostly work out for the best, even if they don't look like it in the moment.

13) Autonomy

You see yourself as a unique individual, and you see your children and partner as individuals as well. You have recognized, come to terms with, your past experiences, so that when painful aspects are triggered in the present, you are not thrown into reactive behavior without being aware of it and catching yourself. You treat yourself compassionately regarding your shortcomings. You honor your history for the experience and wisdom you have gleaned from it. You know you are responsible for your experience. It is fine with you that other people as humans with strengths and weaknesses. You accept them as they are.

14) Sovereignty

You remember that kids are persons in their own right and that they have the right to be treated respectfully and with honor, even when they make mistakes and are still learning, or even when they screw up royally. You know that teens feel badly enough about themselves, and that their shame escalates very quickly when they feel treated as if they are despicable. You are committed to treating them considerately and you value seeing them respond by being calmer and also more considerate themselves.

15) Enthusiast

You love giving kids opportunities to enjoy life and to become aware of the many possibilities there are in life. You turn your kids on to sports, the arts, the sciences, bugs, stars, microscopes, cooking, crafts, square-dancing, tap, old movies, the colors in leaves. You sit on the porch and watch thunderstorms together. You ride your bikes on a path you've never tried before. You keep doing so, even when they roll their eyes and are too cool to go with you, because you know that later, it will be important to them to have seen their parents loving life. And anyway, it's your life that you're enjoying!

16) Fun-lover

You enjoy your children. You play with them when they are young, both introducing them to activities that you value, and joining them in play that they value. As they get older, you are willing to be silly, and to offer activities, and also to wait until they are ready to engage with you. You are flexible enough to alter the pursuits that you participate in with your kids, and in supporting your kids. You make watching their endless sports events fun for yourself and for parents around you.

17) Inspires creativity

Even if you are not great at something, you do it anyway, because you need to express yourself creatively. You gather leaves and make collages to decorate the table. You paint, dance, draw, play an instrument, try beading, or scrap-booking. You enjoy making your home comfortable and aesthetically pleasing. You approach your work creatively, and your kids see you enjoying what you do because of it. When funds are low, or you don't have something, you look for imaginative ways to meet your need, rather than buying something without thinking.

18) Financially responsible

You live within your means. You don't go into debt, unless it's absolutely necessary. If you do, you use credit wisely, and you have a plan to pay it off as soon as possible. You don't shop as a way of relieving feelings. You educate yourself about financial matters. You find creative ways to keep to your budget, and you save regularly. You help your children develop good saving, spending, and giving habits. You plan for a rainy day.

19) Emotional Savvy

You are really good at being with your emotions, when they are aroused. You don't hide from pain or discomfort, or self-medicate with food, cigarettes or other substances. (Chocolate is ok.) You take time to let feelings to run their course, when they need attention. You are emotionally responsible. You are able to see when your feelings are about past events, and you make every effort not to project them onto present situations. You address

the present by being aware of the people actually in front of you, rather than projecting onto them anticipated reactions from people in your past. If you find that you have reacted inappropriately, you explain to others that your mood is not about them, thereby showing your caring and empathic nature by being concerned about their feelings. You know that, if you allow your feelings time to process themselves, and if you reflect on your old beliefs, painful emotions will abate. You value staying connected with yourself, so you process your feelings, rather than trying to push them away.

You are comfortable with your child's feelings and see their outbursts as opportunities to empathize, educate, and be close, through soothing and teaching self-calming. You are comfortable with your child's expressions of feelings and respond respectfully. You understand that children don't have all the social skills yet, and it's okay with you that they still have things to learn when it comes to tolerating and expressing emotion.

20) Partner

You work hard to have a warm, loving, respectful relationship with your spouse. You do so mainly because it is what you want to have in your life. You also know that working on your relationship will model social skills for your children, as well as providing them with a loving parental team. You continue to develop relational skills, because, as you get older, you see that new issues come up that give you opportunities to continue maturing and expanding. You know that growing does not stop at 20, and that people learn and grow in relationship, not in isolation.

21) Influencer

You know that no one can control anyone other than themselves. You know that trying to control your children only leads to disconnection and bad feeling. You know that controlling kids means controlling their behavior only, and that no one can control another's feelings or outlook. You remind yourself that, as long as you stay connected with your children, you have more influence with them than anyone. You deal with your own feelings about their behavior and what they go through, as well as your feelings about not being able to control them. You recognize that it is a wise and mature person who tolerates her/his feeling helpless (which we do feel when we recognize that we can't control our kids, or anyone else). You help your children learn to center in themselves and tolerate their feelings, and to learn to give up on trying to control people, events, and their surroundings.

22) Self-Care

You know that you can't parent effectively if you don't take care of yourself. You model self-respect and self-confidence by paying attention to your own needs and limits. Rather than fly off the handle, you take times-out. You give yourself mini-vacations. You make sure you see friends and engage in activities that replenish you, because all of these activities improve your parenting and make parenthood enjoyable. You value your own boundaries and calmly set limits in order to ensure that others respect them also. You know the value of having the support of other parents, and even of laughing with them and letting off steam by telling benign stories of teen and toddler pranks, behind your kids' backs, of course.

23) Positive Outlook

And, most of all, you know that being a perfect parent would not be good for your children anyway. One of your jobs is to teach them to accept and value themselves as they are. You want them to feel positive about themselves, even though they mess up sometimes and are not great at everything. You want them to love life, even though life is difficult. You want them to feel confident in and about the world, even though the world is both awe-inspiring and terrible at times. You know that there are millions of ways to be a good parent, and so you celebrate your strengths and gather your children to you, to share your blessings and to help each other through the tough times. You remind yourself that trials build character. You breathe and laugh and center in yourself, for that is where the joy is – in your connection with yourself, with those you love, and with the natural world.