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**Well-Being and Well-Doing:
Bringing mindfulness and character strengths to the early childhood classroom and home
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Abstract

The science of character strengths and mindfulness has increased voluminously in the last couple decades but the application of each in the classroom, especially character strengths, has been limited and shallow. We outline 4 distinct areas of learning around mindfulness and character strengths to enable teachers to bring forth an optimal impact on the strengths of children. Special attention is given to parents in this model as well. We argue that the zeitgeist of social-emotional learning in the classroom offers particular value around well-doing as children learn prescribed skill-sets and the building of positive relationships. What is missing from SEL, however, is a focus on well-being which speaks to the positive identity of each unique child. Research and practices from the new science of character serves as pathways for supporting and boosting child well-doing and well-being which leads to child flourishing. To this end, we adapt Niemiec's (2014) integration program (Mindfulness-Based Strengths Practice; MBSP) to an individualized coaching model. We share some of these adaptations and offer numerous concepts for teachers to use personally and with students (e.g., strengthsight, the autopilot mind), exercises to support teachers (e.g., "catch AP-ASAP," "the 10 second pause," the use of signature strengths), and offer new research (partial replication study) on the most common "emergent" character strengths in young children. We discuss a framework devised to boost strengths-based thinking and positive beliefs in children that flows from moment-making to meaning-making to memory-making, and on to mindset-making.

Introduction

This chapter focuses on what's best in young children and examines the attitudes and actions of teachers and parents that nurture the development of positive characteristics. The "best" in children are their inner strengths, happiness and goodness and the outer expression of corresponding traits and values. Parents' wishes for their children are grounded in these strengths, and those wishes are both universal and timeless. And while these parental hopes are timeless, the scientific study of the nature of character strengths, especially in young children, is relatively recent. The purpose of this chapter is to capture the crucial insights from this field and bring them to the classroom and the home.

In just fifteen years, positive psychology, the science of well-being, has developed a large and growing body of empirical evidence. Its backbone, the science of character strengths, has built an impressive array of findings linking character strengths to life satisfaction, health, achievement, and numerous other positive outcomes (Niemi, 2013). While the application of character strengths in the field of education has been a popular topic (e.g., Linkins et al., 2014; Proctor et al., 2011; Proyer et al., 2012; Quinlan et al., 2014; Seider et al., 2013; White & Waters, 2014), there remains a great deal yet to learn about the implications of this research for the optimal development of children. .

The application of character science in education (and early childhood education in particular) means identifying and promoting the unique constellation of emergent character strengths in each child. What character strengths are young children most likely to express? How can these strengths be identified by important adults in the child's life? How will these character strengths be optimally nurtured and reinforced by teachers and parents? Helping

children to be aware of their emergent strengths and to apply these strengths in the classroom not only reinforces the likely repetition of strength-driven prosocial “well-doing” but also the acquisition of positive “well-being” convictions about themselves and their place in the world.

So what are these character strengths so essential to our happiness and goodness? In what is arguably the largest and most wide reaching project in positive psychology to date, Chris Peterson, a researcher at the University of Michigan, and Martin Seligman, the father of positive psychology, led a group of fifty-five renowned scholars to review essential literature, catalogues, and texts over more than two millennia dealing with human virtues. This daunting three-year project yielded consensus on six major categories of core virtues that were consistent across many disparate traditions. These six virtue categories are: Wisdom, Courage, Humanity, Justice, Temperance, and Transcendence. These virtue classes were then organized around 24 subsidiary character strengths that met various scientific criteria and were comprehensively described in the pivotal book, *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification* (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Cross-cultural validation of this classification was also performed to confirm this as a universal classification of human strengths and not confined to any one culture or group (see Biswas-Diener, 2006; McGrath, 2014; Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2006). See Table 1 to review this VIA Classification which includes the 24 character strengths and 6 virtues.

Table 1: VIA Classification of Character Strengths and Virtues.

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WISDOM

Creativity

COURAGE

Bravery

HUMANITY

Love

Well-being and Well-doing

Curiosity
Judgment
Love of Learning
Perspective

Perseverance
Honesty
Zest

Kindness
Social Intelligence

JUSTICE

Teamwork
Fairness
Leadership

TEMPERANCE

Forgiveness
Humility
Prudence
Self-Regulation

TRANSCENDENCE

Appreciation of Beauty
Gratitude
Hope
Humor
Spirituality

As part of this project to assemble a “common language” of character strengths, the scientists also developed and tested assessment instruments to measure these character strengths in adults (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), and in youth (Park & Peterson, 2006). Access to the free VIA Survey and VIA Youth Survey, and their many translations, as well as a review of over 200 research studies on character strengths, and application resources are available at the website of the VIA Institute on Character - www.viacharacter.org.

One primary contribution of this classification system is that it provides researchers, teachers, and parents a common “lens and language” to examine and discuss character strengths in the lab, in the school and in the home. For *researchers*, it’s a framework for operationally defining, measuring and testing character strengths and interventions designed to promote them. For *teachers* it’s a way to focus efforts to spot and encourage emerging strengths. And similarly for *parents* it’s a way to identify and understand the unique constellation of strengths that represent the best that is within their child. Having this classification system enables new research, new educational concepts in social and emotional learning, and new insights for parents invested in nurturing the development of their child’s character.

Many character strengths emerge in early childhood (Dunn et al., 1981; Hoffman, 1975). However, they often emerge without the awareness of the significant adults in the lives of children. Parents and teachers recognize and support concrete prosocial behaviors, but they often are blind to their underlying character strengths and the child's core beliefs about themselves, other people, and the world in general. And even until recently, research in general, and positive psychology in particular, have been largely silent on character strengths in young children (Park & Peterson, 2006). If we are intentional about applying insights from the science of character strengths to a developmental frame in early childhood, we must create tools that help teachers and parents understand and facilitate this process in young children. Some of what good teachers and parents already do is consistent with the insights of character science so an important task is to first, make the invisible "visible" and second, make the visible "intentional."

In recent years, the link between social and emotional learning (SEL) and academic success has been well-established. SEL has become an accepted and celebrated component of educating the whole child. However, we suggest that "what" is being learned in SEL is artificially narrow. The SEL field is heavily concerned with the acquisition of prescribed prosocial skill sets at the expense of acquiring individual positive mindsets. Said another way, SEL focuses on behavioral "well-doing" and not sufficiently on experiential "well-being." Indeed, both are important for children and character strengths are equally crucial for positive identity development/who the child is (well-being) and acting-with-strength/healthy connecting (well-doing).

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In preschool, kindergarten and early primary grades, it is clear that the skills of turn-taking, cooperation, and perspective-taking are crucial to academic and life success. However, far less focus is given to the core beliefs the child is learning as strengths develop, and how these beliefs can be identified and nurtured by the adults in the child's life. Herein, important questions remain: How are core character strengths experienced and "owned" by the child? How do character strengths become a positive and enduring component of who the child is? How do character strengths define the narrative self for the child?

A child's belief systems are the "subjective" filters through which the "objective" world is perceived and understood. Yet in SEL pays little attention to how these belief systems develop. The field has not explained how EVENTS in the life of a child are sufficiently attended to so that they become meaningful EXPERIENCES that are connected to other events to become part of narrative MEMORIES that in turn ARE rehearsed through self-talk so that they become BELIEFS by which he or she understands his or her world? The fields of neuroscience and psychology describe the brain's negativity bias through which a child is more likely to attend to, process and remember negative events than positive events (Hanson, 2013; Rozin & Royzman, 2001). Educators would benefit from understanding how to help children attend to and process positive events into impactful experiences that are encoded in memory and nurtured to beliefs. Strategies of "moment-making," "meaning-making," "memory-making," and "mindset-making" should be acquired and applied by all SEL practitioners.

Nurturing Well-being and Well-doing in Early Childhood

Daniel Siegel (1999, 2010), a Harvard-trained neuroscientist, coined the term "mindsight" to describe an attentional focus that allows us to observe our own mental activity. He described mindsight as our *Interventions in Positive Psychology*

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“seventh sense” that allows us to see and reflect on our internal world. This concept, well-grounded in neuroscience, is confirmed in the growing literature on mindfulness. Siegel refers to several kinds of “mindsight maps” (me-maps and you-maps) that provide insight into ourselves and others. Mindsight, whether emerging from skilled parenting, attained through clinical interventions, or nurtured through contemplative practices, is essential to our sense of well-being.

We sought to amplify the benefits of mindsight derived from neuroscience with the development of “strengthsight” which emerges from the relatively new field of character science. Strengthsight refers to the attentional focus on our own character strengths and the character strengths of others. In the book *Mindfulness and Character Strengths* (2014), Niemiec brings together mindfulness practice and strengths practice, or “mindsight” + “strengthsight” to connect the “yin and yang” of well-being and well-doing. Niemiec uses the metaphor of two large entwined trees to represent the traditional separation of mindfulness and character strengths, in which each tree has its own deeply grounded historical and substantive root system and each with their own extensive, yet entwined branching to describe the integration of mindfulness and character strengths. As Niemiec states, “...mindfulness opens a door of awareness to who we are and character strengths are what is behind the door since character strengths are who we are at our core. Mindfulness opens the door to potential self-improvement and growth while character strengths use is the growth itself” (p.).

One of the results of this integration is mindfulness-based strengths practice (MBSP), which integrates the best practices of character strengths, mindful living, and mindfulness meditation. As described by a leading mindfulness scientist, Ruth Baer (2015), MBSP is the only intervention program specifically designed to cultivate both; in other words, MBSP takes a unique approach differentiating itself from other mindfulness-based programs as it uses mindfulness to target what is strong (e.g., character, well-being) rather than what is wrong (e.g., stress, chronic depression). It helps participants

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become stronger in their mindfulness practices, engage more deeply in mindful living, and boost their consciousness around strengths use (Niemic, 2012; Niemic, Rashid, & Spinella, 2012). Early research on MBSP is promising revealing substantial benefits to flourishing, happiness, engagement, and strengths use (Briscoe, 2014; Niemic, 2014) and unique benefits for positive relationships and problem management (Niemic & Lissing, 2015).

Recognizing the needs of parents and teachers and the power of mindfulness and character strengths therein, we adapted the MBSP program as an individualized coaching model for early childhood educators and parents. Our intent is for teachers to develop the skills to recognize their own strengths, spot strengths of co-workers and students, nurture these strengths, and help parents recognize and encourage the growth of strengths within their children. We discuss some of these adaptations on the following pages as well as weave in critical theoretical underpinnings that support the use of mindfulness and character strengths in the classroom.

We envision four distinct learning phases that are pivotal for bringing the science of mindfulness and character strengths to early childhood development:

1. Teachers learn mindfulness practice and strengthsight with their own character strengths.
2. Teachers use mindful awareness to “strength-spot” in children.
3. Teachers skillfully nurture emerging character strengths in children.
4. Teachers teach parents to spot and nurture strengths in their children.

For teachers, children, and parents, this effort combines implications of research in both mindfulness and character development. The goal is to promote both awareness of internal experiences and insight about both the cause and effect of internal experience on external expressions and behavior.

Phase 1: Teachers learn mindfulness practice and strengthsight with their own character strengths.

In phase one of this model (typically 6 to 8 sessions), teachers develop a mindfulness practice and become aware of their character strengths through exercises adapted from Niemic’s (2014) MBSP.

Catch AP-ASAP

Cultivating mindfulness is a prerequisite for teachers' greater awareness of their own strengths and their ability to spot emerging strengths in the classroom. The general concepts of mindfulness are taught through explanations and exercises. The operational definition of mindfulness from leading scientists in the field describes the essence of mindfulness as being captured in two-parts: 1.) the self-regulation of attention with 2.) an attitude of curiosity, openness, and acceptance (Bishop et al., 2004). Teachers are challenged to bring take greater control of their attention, and enhance awareness across three levels – their own autopilot tendencies, the here and now experience for their young learners, and the moment-to-moment interactions between them.

One way to further the teacher's ability to internalize the concept of mindfulness is building an awareness of autopilot. Autopilot is described as the human mind wandering off to thoughts and feelings (Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2002). The autopilot mind, or mind wandering is adaptive, the brain's way of simplifying daily living, and deliberate mind wandering has been associated with some positive outcomes such as creative problem-solving (e.g., Mooneyham & Schooler, 2013). However, this efficiency comes at a price. And that price, in addition to diminished well-being for many, is missed opportunities in life - opportunities to savor the small moments such as the beauty of a sunrise or the large moments of truly feeling ourselves or our loved ones in the flow of being the best version of ourselves. Therefore, in MBSP participants are encouraged to "catch AP-ASAP," to catch their autopilot minds as soon as possible so they can then determine the best course of action – creative mindlessness, a return to the here and now, or another course of action.

Mindfulness should not be a tool for teaching, but rather a tenet of teaching. Jennings (2015) suggests that mindfulness is "the heart of teaching." There is no more powerful pedagogy than the compassionate presence of a teacher attentive and attuned to a child's curiosity and a child's desire to

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learn. When teachers catch autopilot and become aware of the present moment, they are giving themselves a greater chance to explore opportunities and have deeper connections with children, parents and themselves. In Phase I of this MBSP coaching model, teachers explore activities in their day in which “autopilot” takes over. Cultivating mindfulness is illustrated through stories that are relatable to everyday life. Participants gain a better understanding of how autopilot affects their interactions with their students and in their personal life. Simple strategies such as choosing one activity a day to focus your attention on, taking a break from multi-tasking, and “catch AP-ASAP” are a few ways teachers learn to incorporate mindfulness practices into their daily routine.

When one teacher was asked to choose an area in her life where mindlessness has a negative impact, she chose the paper route her and her daughter do every Sunday. This was a time she described as an “autopilot” mode. Their paper route was filled with Amanda creating her to-do list in her head and making her schedule for the week. As she described, it was very difficult to be present to her daughter. Often times she would get caught in “reactive mode” because of the long list of “to-dos” on Sundays and would rush her daughter through the route causing stress and often ending in arguments. Amanda chose to be mindful during this time with her daughter and reduce her mind wandering. She rooted her attention in her breath and listened carefully to her daughter’s words, observed body language, and monitored her own thoughts and feelings; when her mind wandered, she returned her focus to her breath and the interaction with her daughter. She was elated about the connection she was able to make with her daughter. Amanda began to see the love her daughter had for nature and noticed how she stopped to smell the flowers (i.e., the character strength called “appreciation of beauty”). They talked about planting bulbs in the Fall to create their own garden filled with all the flowers they loved. This became a regular practice for Amanda and she described a deeper connection and understanding that was made between her and her daughter. This story demonstrates how when we are in autopilot we often don’t connect with others in our life on a level that can be achieved when

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we are able to get out of our head and into our heart. Awareness of autopilot had served as a catalyst for Amanda's character strengths use.

The 10-Second Pause

Autopilot is often described as a shift from a reactive to a responsive mode of experiencing (Hanson, 2010; Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2002). In a responsive mode, we feel calm, at ease, are able to express ourselves creatively, and are caring towards others. In a reactive mode our brain "overestimates threats and underestimates opportunities." In simple terms we "overreact or avoid." Our brains are built to perceive threats, this is how we are able to react in life-threatening situations. It is however the overreaction and habitual reaction to non-threatening situations that we seek to improve in the classroom. When we pause and take a breath we activate the parasympathetic nervous system allowing us to shift into responsive mode. This pause allows teachers to get out of "reactive" mode in the classroom and respond to situations in a calm way. This acquired skill helps teachers respond to the feelings behind the actions of the children in their classroom. Hanson describes a number of ways to increase "responsive mode," for example, teachers are asked and reminded to develop this mode by having self-compassion, and reliving the best moment of their day.

Creating a "pause" is a key concept for teachers throughout these sessions. In order for teachers to spot strengths in themselves, reflect on these strengths, and ultimately appreciate and recognize them in themselves and their students, it is imperative that teachers "take in the moment." We live in such a distracting and busy world that often times we can go throughout the day without stopping and "being in the moment." Without these moments, it is much more difficult to cultivate and practice your own strengths and nurture the strengths of young children.

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Teachers are asked to create a cuing strategy that reminds them to pause throughout the day for as little as 10 seconds. One teacher described what she found most useful in MBSP was creating this “pause” in her life. “I pause for at least 30 seconds several times a day now. It seems to clear away the traffic jam in my head and forces me to redirect my attention. I have found that pausing before speaking makes a difference in how I respond to my students and family.”

Mindfulness practices help to balance out the brain’s negativity bias. Such practices allow us to be more aware of and appreciative of positive events. And the positive emotions evoked by these events in turn help us to become more mindful. Fredrickson’s (2013) research on her “broaden and build theory” demonstrates that the experience of positive emotions actually enhances and broadens attention and awareness. This, in itself, can have significant effects on a teacher’s effectiveness in spotting and nurturing character strengths in young children.

Building a Common Language: Aware, Explore, Apply

The majority of the MBSP coaching model involves participants understanding and developing their mindfulness and character strengths. Since character strengths are capacities for thinking, feeling, and behaving, they can be built up. The teachers learn to deepen their understanding of mindfulness and strengths in order to boost their overall strengths capacity. The aware-explore-apply model (Niemiec, 2013; 2014) is a process for working with and developing character strengths and mindfulness supports each of the three phases.

The first step to helping teachers become aware of their strengths is to take the VIA Survey. The survey results act as a guide to understanding each participant’s signature strengths (i.e., those strengths highest in one’s character strengths profile that are most core and essential to identity). It is important for the coach to utilize his or her own strengths throughout the sessions to provide

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compassion to the teachers and be mindful while listening to how the teachers react to discovering their strengths. Deploying one's signature strengths at work is linked to greater work satisfaction, greater well-being, and higher meaning in life. Moreover, expressing 4 or more signature strengths at work is linked with more positive work experiences and meaningful work (Harzer & Ruch, 2012). To explore the use of signature strengths, teachers are asked to think of a time when they felt they were at their best professionally and personally. This exercise from MBSP is a way for the teachers to become more aware of when they are using their strengths and how they feel when their signature strengths are used. Talking positively about oneself can often feel foreign and at times uncomfortable. This consensual nomenclature, or "common language" of strengths give teachers a new way to see themselves and become aware of when and how they use their strengths.

Exploring strengths is central to every session. Teachers spend time reflecting on times they have used their signature strengths and savoring these moments. This savoring fills teachers "emotional bank accounts" counterbalancing the struggles they face with students, co-workers, and with themselves. This balance becomes an important reflection for teachers and how their relationship with themselves is connected to self-kindness and their relationship with others is connected to "other-oriented strengths (e.g., kindness, fairness, forgiveness) and connectedness with others. Loving kindness meditation and the character strengths breathing space (i.e., a three minutes meditation that targets the essence of mindfulness practice through the strengths of curiosity, self-regulation, and perspective) become part of the sessions and teachers are asked to cultivate these practices throughout the week. One teacher stated, "I am surprised how much I got into loving-kindness meditation. I am practicing it regularly before starting the day. When I start my day with this meditation I feel more positive and in tune with the children in my classroom. My connection to my students is deeper, and I am able to stay calmer. I bring to the forefront of my day two of my signature strengths, love and kindness." Teachers take these meditations and strengths exploration exercises to the next level by *Interventions in Positive Psychology*

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making a conscious effort to appreciate the strengths of the people around them. This is particularly powerful because most people are unaware of their strengths. Only one-third of people have a meaningful awareness of their strengths (Linley, 2008) and 100% of people have some types of strength blindness around their strengths (Niemi, 2014). Mindfulness has been shown to be a pathway to break through and improve upon blind spots in self-knowledge (Carlson, 2013).

In order to build the teacher's capacity to become aware of their strengths, explore them, and apply them in and out of the classroom, MBSP uses several exercises: 1) Strength interview; 2) Character Strengths 360; 3) Using signature strengths in a new way; and 4) Spotting strengths in movies, books and other people. A strength interview is an exercise in which the teacher interviews someone in their life about their strengths. This helps the teacher gain perspective on how people utilize strengths and gives them an opportunity to practice mindful listening. Next, teachers ask several people in their life to fill out the Character Strengths 360 in which informants note the character strengths that they see as most core to who the teacher is and offer one example for each strength spotted. Having another's perspective shows teachers what strengths they may underutilize and what strengths they might not see in themselves that others value.

The exercise called using signature strength in a new way is a rigorously studied intervention that has been shown in randomized, double-blind, placebo-controlled studies to boost happiness and decrease depression for as long as 6 months (Gander et al., 2012; Seligman et al., 2005). By intentionally using signature strengths in a new way teachers can deepen their awareness of signature strengths by discovering new ways to use them. One teacher surprised her co-workers by leaving short thank you notes on their desks expressing how grateful she is for each of their signature strengths. **Strengths-Spotting in All Activities**

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We teach teachers to use any interaction or life as experience as an opportunity for not only mindfulness but also for strengths-spotting. One exercise involves teachers practicing strengths-spotting in movies, books, and the people around them (Niemic & Wedding, 2014). Oftentimes it is easier to use a strengths “lens” when watching movies or reading books. We find that this personal work quickly transfer over to the classroom and becomes part of the teachers’ daily routine.

In addition to spotting children’s strengths use, teachers will also spot an “overuse” of strengths. For example, a perseverant child who is getting ready for outdoor play-time is holding up the line because they insist on a zipping their own coat or tying their shoe. Frustration may emerge for the child because he or she is determined to complete the task. Teachers can mentally connect the character strength of perseverance (even though it may be an overuse) with the task at hand. This exemplifies the importance of teachers recalibrating their “radar screen” to see the perseverance and change the way they view a “stubborn” child. These strengths are indeed visible and teachers can intentionally recognize and encourage these strength mindsets.

Phase 2: Teachers learn to spot emerging strengths in young children

Early manifestations of character strengths

As children begin to develop cognitively and emotionally, character strengths begin to emerge. Park and Peterson (2006) collected parents’ written descriptions of their children (ages 3-9) and then rated for character strengths. This is the first study that looks at the “early manifestations” of strengths and their association with happiness. The first two authors of this chapter partially replicated the Park and Peterson study coding free parent narratives for character strengths using the same instructional set as the first study. The raters independently coded the narrative descriptions for each of the 24 character strengths using a binary code of 1 (mention of strength) or 0 (no mention of strength). Using a

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test sample of twenty narratives, the independent raters demonstrated .95 inter-rater agreement calculated using the Fleiss Kappa statistic.

Our results mirrored those of Park and Peterson (2006) in several ways. First, we also found great variation in the length of free descriptive narratives, but that even the short narratives were useful because they often listed traits. Secondly, the prevalence of our traits was very similar to those of Park and Peterson.

Table 2. Comparison of prevalent character strengths in two studies

Parks & Peterson (2006)		Lottman & Zawaly (2014)	
Strength	Prevalence Rank	Strength	Prevalence Rank
LOVE	1	LOVE	1
KINDNESS	2	KINDNESS	2
CREATIVITY	3	CURIOSITY	3
HUMOR	4	HUMOR	4
CURIOSITY	5	PERSEVERENCE	5
LOVE OF LEARNING	6	CREATIVITY	6
PERSEVERENCE	7	LOVE OF LEARNING	7
SELF-REGULATION	8	SOCIAL INTELLIGENCE	8
SOCIAL INTELLIGENCE	9	BRAVERY	9

The second phase of the individualized MBSP coaching focuses on behaviors and expressions associated with these nine strengths. Examples of sections from parent narratives scored for each of the strengths in the Lottman and Zawaly (2014) study are presented in Table 2.

Table 3. Examples of narrative sections scored for each strength (Lottman & Zawaly 2014)

STRENGTH	PARENT NARRATIVE SECTION
LOVE	“Extremely loving, loves to be held.” “Very loving and caring.”
KINDNESS	“Likes to help others.” “Wants to comfort you when you are upset or feeling down.”
CURIOSITY	“Curious and loves to explore nature.” “Not afraid to try new things on her own.”

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HUMOR	"Loves to make her brother laugh." "Hilarious, silly, goofy."
PERSEVERENCE	"Knows what he wants and what's needed to get it." "Determined, very strong-willed."
CREATIVITY	"Always devising something remarkable to make out of found objects." "Making up stories, elaborate imaginative play."
LOVE OF LEARNING	"Regularly pulls out advanced math and alphabet books on her own." "Loves to hear how things go together and how they work."
SOCIAL INTELLIGENCE	"Good at reading others' feelings." "High levels of empathy for others."
BRAVERY	"Isn't afraid of anything." "Stands up for himself."

Strengths in young children emerge in a variety of settings. Through observations and teacher reporting one significant outlet for using strengths is play. Pretend play is an important developmental skill that encourages cognitive thinking and problem-solving skills. Observers can readily see children's character strengths such as teamwork, creativity, perseverance, and curiosity when the child pretends to open up an ice cream shop or pizza parlor. When role-playing children play "house" or "school" and become the mom, dad, teacher or sibling and an abundance of character strengths can be seen, if the teacher is mindful and present using their strengthsight. Teachers observe kindness and love when they observe a student care for a baby. When a teacher can point out those positive experiences by relating the child's action to a feeling the child can internalize the positive beliefs about themselves (all through pretend play). For example, "Jimmy, you are being so gentle with the baby. You are showing so much love to that baby just like your mommy loves you."

Teachers can see character strengths in almost all young learners such as when sharing a ball at recess to more complex skills like understanding others' feelings. Many teachers observe that the 2- and 3-year-olds they are teaching demonstrate social intelligence. Even at these ages children can understand how another is feeling and are able to know when a child with special needs in the room needs an extra hand. The older children may nurture young ones in the class while others make it their "job" to ensure that children with special needs are included. Teachers have also suggested that with

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social intelligence, humor often develops. Humor appears throughout the preschool day and the kids can make the teachers laugh through silly songs, telling a joke, and appreciating others' jokes. Creativity in art projects is easy to see as are the acts of kindness and love when children send home love notes to their mom and dad. When teachers take the time to appreciate these moments it is much easier to redirect negative behaviors and understand the feelings behind them.

Some children have been described in the classroom as having an unrelenting need for understanding how something might work - from a marble run to keeping a tower from crashing. Their curiosity and love of learning urges them to get the teacher involved to further their knowledge and understanding. One parent described her 4-year-old son's curiosity as the "fuel to his fire." When teachers focus on strengths as opposed to deficits, they discover a fuel that can ignite a spark in young children. When that spark is lit a child can "own" their strengths, have pride in what they do, and become a confident child inside and outside the classroom. This ownership becomes part of the child's identity that not only enables "well-doing" but also "well-being." We have observed that classrooms of young learners who hear positivity are more likely to have positive self-talk and develop a positive mindset.

The lack of research on emerging character strengths makes it all the more important that teachers become aware of and make an intentional effort to identify even subtle behaviors that signal emerging strengths in young children. In this phase, teachers are given an observation protocol that identifies relevant behaviors associated with each strength. In the next phase, teachers are given the tools to nurture these emerging strengths that will be part of the belief system of the child.

Phase 3: Teachers learn to nurture emerging character strengths

As discussed in Linkins, Niemiec, Gilham, and Mayerson (2014), Neal Mayerson, Chairman of the VIA Institute on Character, provides valuable insight on how teachers, parents, and researchers might think about promoting the development of character strengths in young children. He suggests that teachers especially, too often see themselves as “sculptors” attempting to “mold” children’s development of preferred strengths. Rather, teachers should see themselves as “gardeners” nurturing and optimizing the soil or environment in which the unique strengths of each child can grow and flourish.

Creating an early childhood environment for the flourishing of character strength development is an element of all good, developmentally appropriate practice. And one of the first tasks of a character strength coach is to help the teacher understand that much of which what good coaches are already doing is exactly what is needed to nurture character growth. The coach helps make the invisible visible. But beyond that, the coach seeks to help the teacher learn and apply new skills that will optimize the flourishing of these emerging strengths. The coach helps make the visible more intentional through the skill sets we call moment-making, meaning-making, memory-making and mindset-making. In other words, becoming intentional about orchestrating the number of positive events in the early childhood environment; helping to make those events meaningful experiences for the child; helping those events get coded as enduring memories; and rehearsing those memories so that they become core beliefs the child has about herself, others, and the world in general.

Prerequisites for orienting a classroom to the use and growth of character strengths include: 1) Introducing character strength language and examples, and 2) Making character

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strengths a part of daily classroom routine. For example, during story time children can note character strengths they relate to in the story and a teacher might prompt for this by saying something like, “The owl babies’ mommy was very brave to go out for food in the night. Does anybody ever feel brave?” or “Wow, this little bunny is really working hard! That bunny is perseverant! I see you all working hard throughout the day. Are you perseverant like the little bunny?” Just as MBSP uses characters from movies and books to facilitate “strengthsight” in adults, children can practice “strengthsight” from their own literature.

During the day, the teacher might say, “Who feels proud of themselves when they use lots of zest and energy to finish their work?” or “If you made someone laugh with your strength of humor today then line up over here.” Teachers might send home a note to parents saying, “Give me a hug today because I was very kind when I helped a friend” or “Give me a high five I because I was brave today on the playground when I tried out a new game.” Bridging the connection from school to home fosters further development of each child’s unique character strengths.

Moment-Making

There is no doubt that orchestrating positive experiences for the child in the preschool classroom is the foundation for a number of positive outcomes. Fredrickson (2004, 2013) proposed a broaden-and-build theory to explain these positive effects. Positive emotions expand the child’s thought-action pool of potential responses such that momentary joy triggers an urge to play, interest leads to the desire to explore, etc. Emotion begets experience and experience begets skills.

In positive moment-making, frequency and consistency trump intensity and complexity. Small, consistent events such as simple eye contact, a smile, and an encouraging word have greater impact than infrequent intense encounters. Creating positive events in the preschool classrooms often takes three forms. First, and most important, is the intentional personal engagement that the teacher orchestrates for each child. Being intentional about getting down to the level of the child, engaging in mutual gaze, and using a soft voice to recognize the child's accomplishments, are all essential to creating the critical mass of attention, attachment, and attunement necessary for the child to feel valued. The second form of positive moment-making is being intentional about creating opportunities for mutual, cooperative play and achievement. And finally, it involves being intentional about orchestrating situations in which the child is able to apply their own character strengths in the service of themselves and others. When a teacher is intentional about increasing the frequency of positive moments for each child, good things happen. However, this is easier said than done. Even for the best teacher, the preschool environment is not always harmonious. Teachers often find themselves intervening in negative events rather than creating positive events. It is often beneficial for the teacher to devise a cueing system to remind themselves to actively engage each child with positive moments. One way is the "penny transfer" technique (Cairone et al., 2007). For example, the teacher begins with five pennies in her left hand pocket. The jingling of the coins provides a good reminder to positively engage five children. Each time she connects with a child, she transfers one of the coins to her right pocket. When she has transferred all of the coins, she begins again with five new children. Soon the positive engagement becomes automatic and the cueing is unnecessary.

Creating positive events for young children is necessary but not sufficient in helping them engage in and benefit from strengths practice. Dreikurs and Soltz (1964) reminded us that young children are wonderful observers but rotten interpreters. It's not enough to make the moment, the teacher must also help make the meaning.

Meaning-Making

One prerequisite for a child's meaning-making is to develop what Tulving (2002) called a subjective perspective, the ability to attend to and make sense of mental states across time. Teachers and parents can nourish that ability by engaging consistently in mental state talk or mind-talk with the child. Referencing your own thoughts and feelings or wondering about the inner thoughts or feelings of a character in a book help the child orient their own inner life, their own mindfulness (Adrian, et al.,2004; Taumoepeau & Ruffman, 2008). Mental state talk promotes theory of mind, the awareness that others have thoughts, feelings and intentions that can be different from your own. And that can become a developmental skill chain (mind-talk promotes theory of mind which then leads to perspective taking which eventually enriches to empathy). A classroom or home enriched with mind-talk is an environment that helps a child make meaning of life events, both positive and negative.

One significant obstacle for a positive event to become a meaningful experience for the child is the brain's negativity bias. The fields of neuroscience and positive psychology describe this negativity bias through which a child is more likely to attend to, process and remember negative events than positive events (Hanson, 2013; Rozin & Royzman, 2001). Educators

benefit from understanding how to help children attend to and process positive events and turn them into impactful experiences that are encoded in memory and nurtured to beliefs.

First, the teacher or parent can create the *pensive pause* for the child. A touch, a gaze, a thoughtful comment that gives positive valence to the child's behavior is often all that it takes to help the child make meaning from the positive event. The teacher has helped the child to make an event an experience. "Jamal, I just wanted to tell you how happy I was to watch you help Chris put the blocks away. That's using your kindness."

Another meaning-making strategy by the teacher or parent is to connect the event in the child's external environment to consequent emotions in the internal world. "I'll bet you felt proud that you worked so long and hard in finishing that puzzle. Persevering with a hard job really makes you feel good." Young children do not automatically link external event to internal experiences and they benefit from the teacher's or parent's assistance to connect those dots.

And finally, the teacher can help the child link the current positive event and experience to other similar events or experiences in the past. "When you shared your grapes with Julia and she smiled, it reminded me of when you let Michael have the first turn on the computer yesterday. You're really good at kindness and fairness." This strategy involves 3 elements: 1) Labeling the strengths; 2) identifying the resulting positive impact on others; and 3) reinforcing the strength by linking it to a past example of strength use.

Memory-Making

As early as eighteen months of age children begin to talk about the past and by age 3 they can talk about the past in a relatively coherent style (Hudson, 1990). The work of Nelson (1986; Nelson & Gruendel, 1981) marked a fundamental shift in the understanding of children's *Interventions in Positive Psychology*

memory that has been continued with the work of the Family Narrative Lab at Emory University (Quas & Fivush, 2009). They collectively emphasize a functional perspective in which children as young as preschoolers use memory to guide motivated behavior to attain cognitive and social goals. Further, the way adults, especially mothers, reminisce with children impacts autobiographical memory and identity (McLean & Syed, 2014; Perfect & Lindsay, 2013). Our approach attempts to use the insights from a substantial body of research on reminiscing (Wareham & Salmon, 2006) to help young children begin to weave emerging character strengths as thematic elements of their personal narrative.

In her pivotal treatise on the development of autobiographical memory, Fivush (2011) details the layers of representation that move beyond simple episodic memory of “what happened” to the more personalized memory of “what happened *to me*.” First the child must have a sense of the subjective self that experienced the event that includes personal thoughts and feelings about the event. And it is not simply that “in that moment in the past I had thoughts and feelings,” but also that “they are *mine*. They are *owned by me*.” And finally, “I can connect those past thoughts and feeling that were mine to the thoughts and feelings I have now” in remembering the events and even to the future in the self that will plan for them and experience them. This conceptualization of episodic memory has generated a great deal of child development research in behavioral and neurological correlates of mental time travel (MTT) involved in recall the past and predicting the future (Shacter et al., 2007; Suddendorf & Busby, 2009).

Important recent research (Cleveland & Morris, 2014; Cleveland & Reese, 2005; 2007) has shed light on not only the importance of parent-child interactions about reminiscing in the *Interventions in Positive Psychology*

formation of autobiographical memory, but also how parents can be trained in strategies for enriching the reminiscing experience. Children want to feel both confident and competent, and that means feeling that they have both opportunities for choice as well as the skills to make good choices. While young children can make sense of the past, they tend to struggle with reminiscing. Cleveland and Reese (2014) demonstrated that parents' language in support of reminiscence can serve both functions of encouraging autonomy and scaffolding structure in the formation of autobiographical memory. We adapted the parent training in autonomy-support and elaborative structure techniques developed by Cleveland and Reese to help teachers connect character strength use memories as thematic threads in the formation of the narrative self. Examples of such techniques include:

Autonomy Support

- In talking about strength use, follow the child's lead in the conversation.
- Expand on the child's specific strength use topic.
- Listen carefully to the child's talk about strength use and encourage her to elaborate. This might mean using back-channel responses such as "I see" or "Uh-huh" to confirm interest.
- Do not change the topic of conversation as long as the child is talking about strength use.

Elaborative Structure

- Ask many *Wh*- questions (what, when, where, who, why) to scaffold the child's recall of a strength use memory.
- Include statements that provide the child with new information about the event. For example, "When you shared your blocks with Steven, he seemed very happy, and I bet you felt good. (Connects memory of behavior to positive feeling consequences for another child and to positive feeling consequences for herself.)
- Affirm the child's contributions to the reminiscence to help them "own" it as part of their narrative self.

We believe that teachers and parents can learn to scaffold narratives about past experiences of emerging character strength use for children such that they become organizing principles for the life narrative that shapes the child's retrospective understanding of their past

and their prospective understanding of their future. Teachers and parents are encouraged to: 1) identify emerging strengths, 2) call the child's attention to moments of strength use, and 3) scaffold the child's understanding of the connection between strength use and positive inner experiences as well as external outcomes. These will increase the likelihood that character strengths will help to generate the child's mindsets and beliefs about themselves, others and the world in general.

Mindset-Making

Dweck's (2006) pioneering work on growth versus fixed mindsets provides potential insights into how adult-child interactions can shape enduring beliefs about a child's essential character strengths. For example, the way parents talk to their children shapes their associations to effort and perseverance. When a parent consistently praises intelligence rather than effort ("Look how fast you did that puzzle.....you're so smart!") the more likely the child is to avoid tasks that don't come fast and easy and to associate effort with failure. Using the scaffolding strategies mentioned in the previous section, teachers and parents can reinforce children's emerging character strengths.

One area of developmental research specific to preschoolers is their use of private speech or "self-talk." Vygotsky (1986) first pointed out the benefits of private speech. Private speech helps the child connect words, thoughts and feelings in the service of critical thinking and self-regulation (Winsler, 2007). It is the forerunner of more complex executive functions and metacognition. We sought to develop unique ways of reinforcing a child's private speech about character strengths, namely through songs. While music may seem to be a peculiar pedagogical strategy, think about how you learned the alphabet. We have discovered that

music is a powerful teaching tool particularly around character strengths. Eight years ago, Children Inc. launched a venture, *Growing Sound*, (www.growing-sound.com) that develops and disseminates research-based children’s music designed to promote social and emotional development from preschool through elementary grades. Over the last several years, Growing Sound published seven “albums” of songs informed by the field of positive psychology: 1) *Feeling Positive*, songs of curiosity, kindness and gratitude; 2) *New Day*, songs of hope and optimism; 3) *Here, Now Know-how*, songs of mindfulness; 4) *Imagination Generation*, songs of creativity; 5) *Tuff Stuff*, songs of perseverance, bravery, and zest; 6) *Take Care*, songs of kindness, social intelligence and love; and 7) *Everyone Is Someone*, songs of teamwork, fairness, compassion.

Figure 1: Lyrics to a song about building perseverance (copyright Growing Sound).

I’M GONNA FIND A WAY

I keep on working till I figure it out
Figure it out, figure it out
I keep on working till I figure it out
I’m gonna find a way

I might have to do it again and again
5 6 7 8 9 10
I might have to do it again and again
But I’m gonna find a way

I keep on working till I figure it out
Figure it out, figure it out
I keep on working till I figure it out
I’m gonna find a way

I might have to turn things inside out
Inside out, inside out
I might have to turn things inside out
But I’m gonna find a way

I keep on working till I figure it out
Figure it out, figure it out
I keep on working till I figure it out
I’m gonna find a way

While much of the content is described earlier, we also differentiate songs by their type and intent. For example, “self-talk songs” help a child learn and internalize private speech about character strengths. “I Can Do It” and “I’m Gonna Find a Way” (see Figure 1) foster perseverance. “Experiential songs” like “Smell the Flower, Blow the Candle Out” allow the child to experience the strength of self-regulation and mindfulness practice. “Story songs” like

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“Miriam” and “What If Everyone Did It Too?” promote perspective taking and empathy.

“Concept songs” like “Living in My Own Skin” and “Everyone Is Someone” encourage children to connect to their own unique strengths.

With moment-making, meaning-making, memory-making and mindset-making we provide a menu of strategies for teachers and parents to nurture the well-doing and well-being that is the constellation of character strengths that define the unique positive core of each child.

Phase 4: Teachers support parents’ strength-spotting and nurturing

The last phase involves training teachers and directors to have the competence and confidence in strength-spotting and strength appreciation so they can transfer these skills to parents. One of the most effective strategies for transferring parenting information and skills is through peer-to-peer learning. We utilize the Parent-Café model which has been used extensively across the United States in the Strengthening Families Program. Parent-Cafes are conducted by teachers and directors and use videos to introduce concepts, build skills to grow strengths and to help their children acquire a positive mindset. The process is designed to generate meaningful conversations about examples of emerging character strengths in their children as well as their awareness of their own strengths and how they use them in their parenting practices.

The videos energize and motivate parents to take the first step in strengthsight which is completing the VIA Survey to gain insight into their own strengths. For parents, as well as teachers, this is often the first time they have thought about their child’s character strengths and the first time anyone has helped them discover and use their own strengths. Niemiec *Interventions in Positive Psychology*

(2014) discusses the phenomenon of “strength blindness” where individuals are unaware of the strengths that others see in them. This is particularly true of many parents who are experiencing significant stressors and are questioning their own capacity to cope. Additionally many parents experience schools as problem-focused when communicating about their children. The opportunity to gain and apply “strengthsight” in reflecting more about themselves and their child, is not only informational for parents, but also motivational. It gives them a new lens and language to engage each other about their children and parenting. Initially reluctant parents quickly warm up to and embrace the chance to talk about their child’s unique set of strengths, and their newly acquired awareness of their own strengths.

Conclusion

True social and emotional learning for children, parent and teachers is not a process of bringing something from the outside in, but rather bringing something from the inside out. It is not just learning prescribed social skill sets, but more importantly tapping into strength-based mindsets. And the new insights of character science and mindfulness provide tools for facilitating that process. The early childhood years are the incubator for character strengths, and until recently the important adults in the child’s life lacked the effective monitors to detect and promote those strengths. In this application of character science to early childhood, this deficit is remedied and the pathways open up for tuning into, exploring, and expressing the best qualities of oneself and others.

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