
A Focus on Strengths

Useful and Practical Tips



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Why Focus on Strengths

A person's skills, interests, talents and positive qualities provide a foundation for the creation of new possibilities.



Recognising strengths can counteract the damaging effects of allowing a person's weaknesses and problem behaviours to overshadow their positive attributes.

Unfortunately, failure, frustration, and a lack of self-confidence and poor self-esteem usually result from getting too caught up in a person's deficits or problem behaviours.

Once we recognise people's strengths we develop positive expectations about their ability to learn and make valued contributions. Positive expectations, in turn, lead to the provision of opportunities to take part and learn.

As a result the person becomes positively and meaningfully engaged and grows.

Temple Grandin (1995), an American woman with autism, eloquently wrote about how strengths can become the springboard for new learning and meaningful and valued pursuits:

“Many children with autism become fixated on various subjects. Some teachers make the mistake of trying to stamp out the. Instead, they should broaden it and channel it into constructive activities. For example, if a child becomes infatuated with boats, then use boats to motivate him to read and do math. Read books about boats and do arithmetic problems on calculating boat speed. Fixations provide great motivation. Leo Kanner stated that the path to success for some people with autism was to channel their fixation into a career. One of his most successful patients became a bank teller. He was raised by a farm family who found goals for his number fixation. To motivate him to work in the fields, they let him count the rows of corn while the corn was being harvested (Grandin, 1995).”

“Today, many people with autism become fascinated with computers and become very good at programming. An interest in computers can provide social contacts with other computer people. The Internet is wonderful for such people. Problems that autistic people have with eye contact and awkward gestures are not visible on the Internet, and

How to Start

Talking about a person's strengths and looking for ways that they can use them and build on them is a good first step in the Positive Behaviour Support process. It's also a positive way to build the person into the process from the start.

You can do this with the person, or a group of people who know the person can get together with them.

Start by simply exploring and talking about the person's talents, skills, positive qualities and interests.

Write these headings on a sheet of paper and summarise what is talked about.



Look for New Opportunities

Once you have summarised all the strengths that were discussed, it's time to come up with ideas about new opportunities for the person to use these, and build on them.



Be creative! The best technique for this is to brainstorm.

Here's some rules:

1. Set a time limit (5 minutes is usually ample).

2. Write down the ideas.

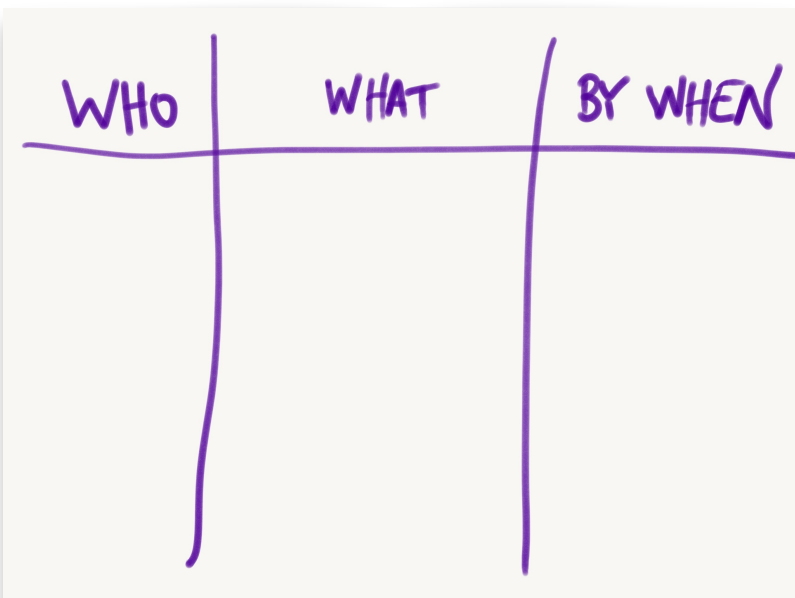
3. Do not censor yourself from stating what's on your mind for fear of it not being sensible. It's often the weird

and whacky ideas that are the winners. And even if they're not, laughter energises the creative process! Don't hold back.

4. Do not discuss the ideas. There'll be plenty of time for that in the next step.

This next step involves selecting the best ideas. Go through each in turn. The person who came up with the idea might need to explain it a bit, and you can then discuss the pros and cons. Often, all that's needed to zero in on the best ideas is to rate them all on a three-point scale as you go through them:

1. Not so good
2. Pretty good
3. Fantastic



Next, it's time for people to plan how to make the 3's happen. Who will do what, by when.