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CHAPTER 3

A Perspective on Strengths

Before we look at just *how* children and youth develop personal resilience strengths, the developmental possibilities inherent in *all* young people, I want to provide a brief, four-point perspective on strengths that also serves as an interface to the chapters on environmental supports that follow.

A LANGUAGE OF STRENGTHS

First, because resilience and other strengths-based approaches hold that personal strengths result when people in family, school, and community settings create opportunities for youth to develop these strengths and capacities, we must have a *language* of strengths.

Having a language of strengths helps practitioners and parents begin to look for and find strengths in their young people and then to name and reflect back to youth the strengths they have witnessed. This is a critical component of strengths-based practice (Saleebey, 2001), which we will come back to in our discussion of environmental protective factors. This positive language helps teachers, parents, and other caregivers start to *reframe* how they see their young people, to begin their shift from seeing only risk to also seeing the incredible resilience of young people, especially those facing a whole range of challenges and adversity.

The previous chapter presented dozens of terms used for sometimes overlapping categories and sometimes hard-to-distinguish attributes. Even though the current language is not always definitive, the strengths exist and are being referred to in the terms reported. Researchers and practitioners must have a language for the human qualities that far too often remain invisible, unrecognized, unnamed, and unacknowledged.

In terms of the research community, having a nomenclature helps legitimate the study of strengths. The positive psychology movement, with leadership from the University of Pennsylvania, has undertaken a massive project, the *Values in Action (VIA) Classification of Strengths* (http://www.positivepsychology.org/taxonomy.htm), which is intended to be psychology's positive response to psychiatry's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM).* With tongue only partly in

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cheek, Peterson and Seligman refer to the VIA document as a "manual of the sanities" (Peterson & Seligman, 2003, p. 4).

They hope the VIA taxonomy will legitimate and facilitate the study of character and that it will also promote the "cultivation" of character. In service of such, a language of human strengths enables researchers to empirically measure developmental outcomes from prevention and education interventions, and to better understand what works and what does not (Peterson & Seligman, 2003, p. 4).

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THE DYNAMIC QUALITY OF STRENGTHS

Second is the importance of re-emphasizing that these strengths are *not* fixed personality traits. What a resilience perspective acknowledges is the dynamic, adaptational quality of resilience strengths, recognizing that they are not fixed personality characteristics that one either has or does not have, or even that the more one has the better. In fact, resilience theory, viewing resilience not as a fixed trait but as a dynamic and contextual process, recognizes that these internal "assets" can also be deficits if they are out of balance. For example, too much caring without the balance of autonomy can result in being "co-dependent." Too much autonomy without the balance of caring and connection can result in being self-centered and greedy.

Werner and Smith and others refer to healthy development as resulting in an "androgynous model of competence that includes being as well as doing, nurturance as well as risk-taking, for both sons and daughters" (1982, p. 162). Werner and Smith found that their resilient girls and women not only had high levels of social competence, a strength associated with being female, but also had high levels of autonomy and problem solving, strengths usually found in greater degree in males (1982, 1992). In contrast, their resilient boys and men not only had high levels of autonomy and problem solving, they also had high levels of social competence and relational skills. Similarly, these strengths vary in importance from culture to culture. For example, in cultures described as "individualist," (such as mainstream U.S. culture), autonomy is a highly valued personal strength, whereas "collectivist" cultures (such as many minority and immigrant cultures) place more value on social competence and connectedness skills and attitudes (Greenfield & Cocking, 1994).

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THE ROLE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL NEEDS AND INTRINSIC MOTIVATION

A third point reiterates the earlier discussion that, contrary to a common misunderstanding, these strengths are not special qualities that cause resilience. While the study of human strengths is a relatively recent phenomenon in psychology, research suggests instead that human beings are biologically prepared to develop these strengths and to use them for survival (Watson & Ecken, 2003). Because resilience strengths are available to all of us, Higgins asks that we "consider the resilient not as a unique subspecies but as fellow travelers, amplifying qualities, dynamics, and potentials inherent in us all" (1994, p. 66).

What appears to be driving this process of human development, resilience, and adaptation is an internal force, an amazing developmental wisdom often referred to as intrinsic motivation. Human beings are intrinsically motivated to meet basic psychological needs, including needs for belonging and affiliation, a sense of competence, feelings of autonomy, safety, and meaning. (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Deci, 1995; Hillman, 1996; Maslow, 1954; Richardson, 2002; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Sandler, 2000).

Because of our psychological need for belonging, we seek to relate to and connect with others, and thus develop our social competence strengths. Psychologists refer to this drive as our affiliation/belongingness adaptional system (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Our psychological need to feel competent drives us to develop our cognitive problem-solving skills (Pearce, 1977/1992). This need to feel competent, combined with the psychological need to feel autonomous, leads us to seek people and opportunities that allow us to experience a sense of our own power and accomplishment. Psychologists refer to this as our mastery motivational system (Bandura, 1997). Our safety motivational system includes the need to avoid pain and maintain physical survival — which drives us to develop not only problem solving but also social competence, autonomy, and even purpose. Our need to find meaning in our lives motivates us to seek people, places, and transformational experiences that make us feel we have a sense of purpose, future, and inter-connectedness with life (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Hillman, 1996).

How these needs are expressed and met varies, of course, not only within a person and over time but from person to person and from culture to culture. The bottom line belief for resilience and youth development

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theory and practice is that these psychological needs are a given. These needs are referred to by developmental psychologists as "fundamental protective human adaptational systems" (Masten & Reed, 2002, p. 82). All human beings are compelled to meet these needs throughout the lifespan. For young people, whether these needs are allowed expression in positive, prosocial ways depends to a great extent on the people, places, and experiences they encounter in their families, schools, and communities.

THE ROLE OF ENVIRONMENT

A fourth and last point in looking at resilience strengths is to understand that because these strengths are dynamic, contextual, and culturally expressed, and arise from our intrinsic motivation to meet basic psychological needs, they are not learned, for the most part or in a lasting way, through a social skills program or a life skills curriculum that attempts to directly teach them. A long history of prevention program evaluation (Kohn, 1997; Kreft & Brown, 1998) testifies to the short-lived effects of eight-week life skills programs. That this approach still predominates in both education and prevention speaks to the strong hold that behaviorism — in terms of focusing on concrete behavior change — and "kid-fixing" have over our culture and institutions.

From a developmental (as opposed to behavioral) perspective, resilience strengths are critical survival skills, intrinsically motivated or biologically driven, and culturally expressed — an apparently fail-safe adaptational system: Survival needs drive healthy development. Healthy development results in survival.

The catch, of course, is providing for these needs to be expressed in healthy, culturally valued, and prosocial ways. Were we to work with children and youth from a developmental perspective, we would understand that the deeper issue when a child doesn't express these critical skills — let's say for empathy — is not that the child has no drive to be empathic, it's that in the child's environment, expression of empathy is not valued and models of empathy are absent. If we truly want youth to develop their propensity to behave with empathy, then we must have people who model empathy and who create a climate in which empathy is the norm. If we want youth to have good problem-solving and decision-making skills, then we must provide them with the opportunities to actively engage in problem solving and to make real and valued decisions about things they care about. Alfie Kohn explains this process as follows: "It is widely understood that people

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In summary, resilience research continues to validate the model of human development identified over a decade ago in *Fostering Resiliency in Kids* — "a transactional-ecological model…in which the human personality is viewed as a self-righting mechanism that is engaged in active, ongoing adaptation to its environment" (Benard, 1991, p. 2; Bronfenbrenner, 1974; Pianta & Walsh, 1998; Werner & Smith, 2001). Developing and enhancing the resiliency strengths that can be engendered because of this "self-righting mechanism" are the natural tasks of youth development (Gibbs, 2001; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Sandler, 2001).

As research continues to shed light on this process, it continues to situate positive youth development in the context of family, school, and community — recognizing that "Human development is a cultural process; … that people develop as participants in cultural communities" (Rogoff, 2003, p. 39). Young people learn what is lived around them, for the most part through modeling, cultural practices, and direct experience. Positive youth development, then, depends on the *quality of the environment* — the available supports, messages, and opportunities young people find in the people, places, and experiences in their lives. This is the focus of our next chapters.