

Six Core Personality Strengths

(in children and in adults)

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Attachment: The First Core Strength

The ability to form attachments is the first of six core strengths that are an essential part of healthy emotional development.

- "My teacher!" The 5-year-old child blurted out in the grocery as she ran, smiling, to hug her kindergarten teacher. It made both their days.

Throughout life, each of us will form thousands of relationships. These bonds take many forms. Some are enduring and intimate-our dearest friend-while others are transient and superficial-the chatty store clerk. Together, relationships in all forms create the glue of a family, community, and society. This capacity to form and maintain relationships is the most important trait of humankind, for without it none of us would survive, learn, work, or procreate.

The first and most important of all relationships are attachment bonds. Initially, these are created through interactions with our primary caregivers, usually parents. First relationships help define our capacity for attachment and set the tone for all of our future relationships.

What Is Attachment?

Attachment is the capacity to form and maintain healthy emotional relationships. An attachment bond has unique properties. The capacity to create these special relationships begins in early childhood.

Unique Features of an Attachment Bond:

- Enduring form of a bond with a "special" person
- Involves soothing, comfort, and pleasure
- Loss or threat of loss of the special person evokes intense distress
- There is security and safety in context of this relationship

At birth, a baby is essentially emotionally "unattached." Despite the obvious physical connection of the umbilical cord, the newborn does not yet have strong connections to another human. During infancy and early childhood, one form of attachment-socio-emotional-begins to replace the original physical attachment of the cord. As dependent as ever, a baby requires constant attention and care from another human being in order to survive. Calories and a "bath" of physical sensations-sight, sounds, smells, touch, and taste-help the infant survive and grow to meet her potential. This "somatosensory" bath from a loving caregiver-the rocking, hugs, coos, and smiles-is transformed by the infant's sensory systems into patterned neuronal activity that influences the development of the brain in positive ways. It is in this dependent relationship between the primary caregivers and the infant that the new form of attachment grows. This attachment-the emotional relationship-is not as easy to see or document, yet it is nonetheless as important for human development as the umbilical cord is *in utero*.

It is these experiences of infancy and early childhood that create the roots of attachment-the capacity to form and maintain healthy emotional relationships. Except in the most extreme cases we are all born with the genetic capability to form and maintain healthy emotional relationships. When the infant has attentive, responsive, and loving caregiving, this genetic potential is expressed. And as this infant becomes a toddler and more people-family, friends, peers-enter his life, he will continue to develop this capacity to have healthy and strong emotional relationships.

Attachment and Pleasure

Our brain is designed to promote relationships. Specific parts of the human brain respond to emotional cues (such as facial expressions, touch, scent) and, more important, allow us to get pleasure from positive human interactions. The systems in the brain that mediate pleasure appear to be closely connected to the systems that mediate emotional relationships. Indeed this inter-relationship-the capacity to get pleasure from other people-creates a major positive learning tool of infancy and childhood. Young children want to please their teachers. They model adults and children they admire.

When attachment capacity develops normally, the child gets pleasure from interacting with other people. The degree of pleasure is related to the degree of attachment-pleasing a parent brings more pleasure than pleasing a stranger. It is this very property that helps parents and teachers shape pro-social and social behaviors in a child. In the process of teaching children emotional, social, and cognitive tasks, the strongest rewards for a child are the attention, approval, and recognition of success that the parent or teacher can give. Conversely, when a child feels he have displeased a parent or teacher, he can be devastated.

Attachment Capacity Matures

In order to be capable of forming the wide array of healthy relationships required throughout life, a young child's attachment capacities must mature. While the roots of attachment are related to the primary care-giving experiences in early childhood, full expression of attachment potential requires social and emotional interactions with non-caregivers. As children become older, they spend less time with parents and more time with peers and other adults. This time with peers and other adults provides many opportunities for continued emotional growth. In early childhood, the relationships with peers start first as acquaintances. With more time together, however, young children create friendships and the opportunity for strong emotional bonds can develop. In a similar fashion, a young child may form a strong connection with an attentive and nurturing teacher. The acquaintance, the friend, and the teacher all provide different and complementing social and emotional opportunities that help a child's attachment capabilities mature.

When Attachment Goes Wrong

If a child has few positive relationships in early childhood or has had a bad start due to problems with the primary-care-giving experiences of infancy, this child is at risk for a host of problems. In a very real sense, the glue of normal human interactions is gone. A child with poor attachment capacity is much harder to "shape" and teach. This child will feel little pleasure from the teacher's smile or approving words. And he does not feel bad disappointing, angering, or upsetting a parent or teacher. Without the capacity to use human interactions to "reward" and "punish," the teacher and parent often are confused and frustrated in their attempts to promote appropriate social behavior. In extreme cases, the child with poor attachment capacity demonstrates no remorse when harming others and risk developing further anti-social or even aggressive and violent behaviors. This child needs help. Research and clinical experience show that attachment capacity is easiest to shape if early identification and intervention takes place.

What you can do to promote the development of healthy attachment:

- Smile and look children in the eyes as you greet them
- Spend time with the child. Quantity matters. During this time, get on the floor, listen and establish eye contact.
- Use touch to comfort-even as a pre-school teacher, it is appropriate to hug, gently touch a shoulder, or hold hands.
- Help children learn appropriate social-emotional language (how close to stand, how to use eye contact, when to touch, how to touch).
- Remember that there are many styles of forming and maintaining relationships-a shy child is not an unattached child. If you sense a child is having a hard time engaging others, help facilitate this by actively including her or pairing her with another child who has a matching temperament.

Self-Regulation: The Second Core Strength

The ability to self-regulate is the second of six core strengths that are an essential part of healthy emotional development.

- "Mine! Mine!" The 4-year-old yelled, stamped his feet, grabbed at the toy, pushed his classmate, and finally collapsed to the floor sobbing and inconsolable. This was his third "tantrum" in the last two days.

A just-fed newborn, rocking in the arms of her loving parent, is warm, full, calm, and safe. Her needs are met-for now. But soon, her body will use all of the food, her mother will put her down, and a loud bang will startle her. When this happens, her body tells her-*I'm hungry, alone, and in danger*. She feels distress and also feels unable to regulate herself. So dependent, her only response is to cry out, hoping that a responsive adult will come to protect and feed her.

Again and again, attentive teachers respond to the needs of the dependent child. When infants

and children are incapable of meeting their own needs, they depend upon the external regulation that comes from attentive, caring adults. It is in the context of this loving attention that a special bond grows between the dependent child and the teacher-attachment bonds. A responsive teacher provides the stimulation that helps the child's brain develop the capacity for creating and maintaining healthy emotional relationships.

At the same time, in these same interactions, other crucial areas of the infant's brain are being shaped-the stress-response systems.

Responding to Stress

The brain is continually sensing and responding to the needs of the body. Specialized "thermostats" monitor our internal (for instance, levels of oxygen and sugar in the blood) and external worlds. When they sense something is wrong (that the body is "stressed"), they activate the brain's alarm systems. These stress-response systems then act to help the body get what it needs.

Much of this regulation takes place automatically-beyond our awareness. But as we mature, our brain requires that we actively participate in our own regulation. When the internal world needs food or water or the external world is overwhelming, or threatening, our body "tells" us. If we thirst, we seek water; when afraid, we prepare to fight or flee. In short, we "self-regulate." We act in response to the sensations and feelings that arise from our brain's alarm systems.

When these systems develop normally, we are able to deal with complex and challenging situations with age-appropriate solutions. By adulthood, these should be thoughtful and creative. When a child's capacity for self-regulation does not develop normally, he will be at risk for many problems-from persistent tantrums to impulsive behaviors to difficulty regulating sleep and diet.

What helps the stress-response systems develop in an optimal way is repetitive exposure to controllable "challenges." Every time a child is introduced to something new, a low-level alarm response is activated. But with repetition comes mastery, and what the brain once interpreted as a potential threat is now familiar and tolerable. It is not bad for the child to experience low levels of "anxiety" or distress when he is in a safe and responsive setting. Indeed, when the child gets a little hungry, there is no need to cry because he now knows that that feeling will go away soon ("We have snack time after free play"). Moderate, predictable stress in this responsive, controllable environment leads to resilience. Children become capable of tolerating significant distress. In turn, unpredictable or severe stress can lead to a hyper-reactive stress-response system and a host of problems.

Central to the process of healthy development of stress-response capability is that children learn to read their bodies' signals.

Understanding Body Signals

Many of the sensations we feel when we are "out of regulation" are clear-thirst, for example. But the body tends to use a common set of "alarm" sensations for many different kinds of potential threats. The alarm response and the resulting feelings caused by frustration are very similar to those caused by fear. A fearful child may act sullen and "angry," unaware that they are actually anxious about starting in a new classroom. A hungry child may act distracted, irritable, and noncompliant, again unaware that the internal distress they feel is hunger. We all have had times when we have mislabeled these feelings. Sleep deprivation, illness, physical exhaustion, and family distress are among the things that can activate the alarm response and result in a set of behaviors that are misunderstood by teachers and by the children themselves.

Sometimes, we just can't get what we need right away. We must endure the discomfort related to exhaustion, hunger, thirst, or fear. Learning to tolerate this distress, to correctly label the uncomfortable sensations, and to develop appropriate, mature ways to respond to these signals is central to healthy development. (When you are hungry or tired, you really aren't mad at someone-so you need not act mad. Just remember to eat something between lunch and a late dinner.)

How Self-Regulation Matures

The capacity for self-regulation matures as we grow. Infants are born with an undeveloped capacity to self-regulate. The dehydrated infant can not use words to ask for water nor can he get water. The infant feels thirst, distress and then cries, dependent upon an attuned adult to meet her needs. The transition from external regulation to self-regulation is one of the most important tasks of growing up.

Healthy self-regulation is related to the capacity to tolerate the sensations of distress that accompany an unmet need. The first time the infant felt hunger, she felt discomfort, then distress and then she cried. An attuned adult responded. And after thousands of cycles of hunger, discomfort, distress, response, and satisfaction, the child has learned that this feeling of discomfort, even distress, will soon pass. An adult will come. The attuned, responsive teacher helps the child build in the capacity to put a moment between the impulse and the action.

As young children learn to read and respond appropriately to these inner cues, they become much more capable of tolerating the early signs of discomfort and distress that are related to stress, hunger, fatigue, and frustration. When a child learns to tolerate some anxiety, he will be much less reactive and impulsive. This allows the child to feel more comfortable and act more "mature" when faced with the inevitable emotional, social, and cognitive challenges of development.

With the capacity to put a moment between a feeling and an action, the child can take time to think, plan, and usually come up with an appropriate response to the current challenge. For example, if you want another turn, wait in line and learn to tolerate the frustration of not getting exactly *what* you want exactly *when* you want it.

When to Worry

Many children have difficulty with self-regulation. Their stress-response systems are poorly organized and hyper-reactive. This could be related to many factors, including genetic predisposition, developmental insults (such as lack of oxygen *in utero*), or exposure to chaos, threats, and violence. (Indeed, due to recent events, many children will exhibit difficulties with self-regulation-at least over this next six months). Children with poor self-regulation disrupt an entire classroom. They are often impulsive, hypersensitive to transitions, and tend to overreact to minor challenges or stressors. They may be inattentive or physically hyperactive. These children benefit from the structure, predictability, and enrichment that schools provide. Unfortunately this may not be enough. The degree of attention and nurturing that these children need is often beyond the capacity of a pre-school or kindergarten setting. If these problems are extreme and persistent, or if the behaviors disrupt the class, the child should be referred for further evaluation.

Helping Children Self-Regulate:

- Model self-control and self-regulation in your words and actions when you are frustrated with a situation.
- Provide structure and predictability. Children with self-regulation problems are internally "unstructured." The more freedom and flexibility they have, the more likely they are to demonstrate uncontrolled behaviors.
- Anticipate transitions and announce changes in classroom schedules.
- When you can, reward children with good self-regulation capabilities with freedom and flexibility that will offer them opportunities for spontaneous, creative play and learning.
- Try to identify the most "reactive" and impulsive children and keep them apart from each other. Pairing children who face these challenges can escalate the problem.
- Remember that impulsive and aggressive children can create an atmosphere of chaos and fear that inhibit the capacity of other children to learn. Don't be afraid to immediately re-direct inappropriate words and actions. Your actions will make the rest of the children feel safer.
- Seek help. Don't be afraid to point out a child's self-regulation problems with parents or other school personnel. Early identification and intervention can save the child and family years of failure and pain.

Affiliation: The Third Core Strength

Belonging to the Group: Help students feel included, connected and valued

Human beings are born dependent. In order for a baby to survive and thrive, it needs the constant support of other humans. Yet, as we grow, we do not gradually become independent of others; rather, we become interdependent. In the course of our lives we form many give-and-take relationships, building a healthy interdependence with family, community, and culture. Humans are so adept at this because we are biologically designed to live, play, grow, and work in groups. We are, at our cores, social creatures. Affiliation is the strength that allows us to join with others to create something stronger, more adaptive, and more creative than any individual: the group.

It Starts With the Family

A family is a child's first and most important group, held together by strong emotional bonds. Yet infants are indirectly connected to other groups; they are born as a part of a larger culture and community. As they grow, children will encounter and take part in many groups outside the immediate family-during school, at a neighbor's house, on a sports team, and so on. As a part of these groups, a child will have thousands of brief emotional, social, and cognitive encounters that help define his or her development. The capacity to join in, contribute to, and benefit from these various groups is essential to healthy development.

However inclined they are to group activities and behavior, humans must learn how to interact successfully within a group. We must learn how to communicate, listen, negotiate, compromise, and share with many diverse people in many situations. These social skills are not always easy to master.

The Rules of Play

From the primary relationships with adults-parents and caregivers-the child learns basic rules of social interaction. Group relationships, however, are more complex and dynamic than one-on-one relationships. For one, the first social rules a child learns are influenced by the child's dependence on the adult, and the adult's inherent size, strength, and power. None of these factors are present when a young child first starts to interact with other young children. In fact, young children are often more adept at affiliating with adults than with peers.

As children play together, they begin to learn and formulate their own social rules. Children with siblings have a head start in this process, as do children who have been involved in day care or play groups before beginning school. Children learn to join in with other children gradually. First, they observe what other children are doing. They often play in parallel, working side by side with others. Children then begin to explore dyadic, or one-on-one, interactions. They play together, pooling their strengths to build a tower out of blocks, for instance, or share imaginary characters and stories. Finally, children negotiate the transition to more complex, multi-peer groups.

Best Friends and Enemies

Learning and mastering the rules of groups are very important yet difficult processes for many children. "Best friends" emerge. Temporary alliances form and may exclude one child and then later incorporate him or her. Being "in" or "out" can shift from hour to hour and day to day.

Some children manage this process well. Others do not; these tend to be children with immature attachment or self-regulation skills. A child's acceptance into a group depends heavily on his or her capacity to regulate anxiety, impulsive behavior, and frustration. Without these prerequisite strengths, a child will have difficulty forming and regulating the relationships with others that are necessary to develop affiliation skills. Group members will likely reject a child who is impulsive or disengaged. Unfortunately, this creates a negative cycle, having fewer opportunities to socialize leads to slower social learning. These children become more isolated from their peers. They perform poorly with group interactions, and avoid opportunities to be with others.

Over time, the excluded child can take this pain and turn it inward, becoming sad or self-loathing. Or the pain can be directed outward, leading to aggression or even violence. Later, without intervention, these individuals are more likely to seek out other marginalized individuals and affiliate with them. Unfortunately, the glue that holds these groups together can be self-destructive or hateful beliefs.

Teachers Can Help

Teachers can intervene to stop this cycle from progressing. Structured and regulated group interactions, such as those found in school, give children essential practice in experiences that they might avoid if left to their own devices. Picking a partner for paired-reading sessions, playing a two-person computer game, or creating a group-science project provide opportunities to wait, share, take turns, cooperate, and communicate with others. The games and tasks can increase in complexity as the child grows and builds skills.

A teacher can help a socially isolated child by building on the prerequisite skills he or she will need to succeed in a group. First, observe the child to discover if he or she seems to do better in smaller groups or in one-on-one situations. If the child seems to have trouble being part of a group, try initially pairing the child with a reliable peer in a safe setting to build self-confidence and trust. Once the child has experienced success in a one-on-one setting, he or she will be more inclined toward group interaction-especially if the supportive peer is still by his or her side. The teacher can work to introduce the child into increasingly larger groups, making sure to give the

child a group role in which he or she can prevail. For example, if a child is particularly good at math, make the child the "banker" in a group project to raise money for school supplies; if a child has artistic talent, give him or her opportunities to share and display artwork. Once other children observe the strengths this child can offer a group, they might be more likely to seek out him or her.

Of course, there is only so much an adult can do to promote friendships among children. Urging the class to make friends with a reticent child may backfire, making the child you are trying to help feel singled out. It's better to simply provide frequent opportunities for the child to work with other children without drawing attention to your goals. One thing you can do, however, is to step in immediately to prevent bullying, exclusionary behavior, and cruelty. If you work to provide all your students with a safe environment, they will be more likely to thrive in group settings.

COOPERATIVE PLAY:

- *Affiliation skills develop in a sequential fashion.* Once a child has mastered parallel play, he or she is ready for interactive play with a peer. Once pairs have proved an ability to share, introduce games for three children.
- *Partner, partner, partner!* Children develop skills through lots of one-on-one practice.
- *Stop and redirect any exclusionary behaviors you see.* Often, children exclude others because too many participants in a group overwhelms their social skills. Remind the child that it's unacceptable to say "You can't play with us." Instead, teach the child to say, "Why don't you ask Tommy to play? You can sit here next to us."
- *Use tasks that require two or three children to accomplish.* These activities will help children see the value in cooperating and team building.

Awareness: The fourth core strength

We're all Different (We're all the Same)

Teach children to embrace diversity, and give them a gift they can use throughout their lives.

- "I am a boy and she is a girl. She has brown skin and I have white skin. We both like to swing on the tire." -A four-year-old tells his teacher about his new friend.

From the moment we are born, we are swept into a never-ending stream of sensory information: sights, sounds, scents, and more. The brain is constantly processing, sorting, categorizing, and storing these incoming signals, allowing us to find order in the world. The most complex sensory signals come from those we are surrounded by in daily life—other human beings.

As the young boy demonstrates by the quote above, children make sense of these complex signals by categorizing people in simple terms that they can understand. On a very basic level, the boy is aware that differences and similarities exist between himself and his new friend. The information that he gleans from this relationship will affect his future interactions, as he builds experience with each new relationship.

The ability to be attuned to others is an essential element of human communication and of successful school interactions. As a child grows, his or her understanding of the differences between genders, races, and cultures grows. The child forms friendships, participates in groups, and interacts with a variety of diverse human beings, consequently developing a sophisticated awareness of the ways in which he or she is like others and ways in which he or she is unique. Such ideal awareness builds the knowledge that a child needs to survive and thrive.

The Brain Stores Experiences

In this process of negotiating our infinitely complex variety of human relationships, the brain uses a set of rules. These rules of association and generalization are allowed by the brain's amazing capacity to store experience and create memories.

As an example: If you take a ticking wristwatch and put it next to an infant's ear, his or her memory will store an association between the watch and the ticking. If you then show the infant a picture of a wristwatch, the infant will put his ear to the photograph—automatically listening for the sound associated with a wristwatch. This child's brain has "generalized," applying one experience to another. With a little experience, however, he or she will be able to distinguish between the actual watch and the image of the watch. The important point here is that it takes experience to transform a simple association into a more complex, complete, and accurate impression.

And so it is with people. If a child has limited experience with someone of another ethnicity, body

type, skin color, religion, or culture, he or she can be much more vulnerable to forming categorical, simplistic, and inaccurate impressions. Invite diverse groups of people with different cultures, languages, and religions to visit your classroom and talk about their professions.

Even if your school lacks obvious racial diversity, differences can still abound in the way children act, dress, and think; in the rituals they observe with their families; and in their personal experiences. Seek to highlight each child's unique personality by capitalizing on strengths, encouraging personal memoirs that are shared whenever appropriate, and pairing children who have different learning styles and behavior. Remind students that there are many types of diversity. Everyone is unique, and everyone has his or her own particular way of seeing the world. At the same time, we all share joys and fears, strengths and weaknesses—we are all human. Children can learn that just as they are similar to and different from their peers in many ways, so are they similar to and different from students elsewhere.

In your teaching, seek to avoid stereotypical aspects of a culture. Go beyond surface learning. For example, if studying Native Americans, avoid merely making construction-paper headdresses in arts and crafts; rather, commit to an in-depth study of tribal customs, languages, religions, and history. Invite a Native American speaker to your class to speak about his or her culture and profession.

Ideally, every child should have the opportunity to learn about and interact with others who are different: in ethnicity, religion, language, learning styles, family background, and more. The more you do to build an awareness of diversity, the more solid a foundation a child will have as he or she grows into a mature, accepting individual—one who shares his or her strengths with the world and values the strengths others have to offer.

Struggling With Awareness

Occasionally, a child will struggle with awareness issues. Here are some warning signs to watch out for. When a child is struggling with awareness, he or she may:

- Tease other children about a very sensitive issue such as their weight, ethnicity, religion, or handicap. Some teasing is expected and normal in young children—it is one form of verbal play—but it is important to listen and make sure it does not cross certain boundaries.
- Tend to see things as absolute: e.g., "Fat people are lazy."
- Form negative ideas about others based on stereotypes.
- Encourage peers to adopt their negative stereotypical views about others.
- Have a tendency to attack others who threaten their own insecurities (e.g., if a boy's parents are fighting a lot, he may tease another boy in the class who has no father in his life).

Tolerance: The Fifth Core Strength

The ability to tolerate differences is the fifth of six core strengths that are an essential part of healthy emotional development.

"At first no one would play with him because he was scary. But now we know he's nice. His face just got burned." — A 5-year-old boy telling his mother about a classmate with severe facial burns.

In this ever-changing world, our children will face more change, see more places, learn more things, and be exposed to more people and cultures than any other generation in history. Advances in communication, transportation, technology, and economics will provide more opportunities — and more challenges — for our children. To succeed in this complex and diverse world, they will need to develop the fifth core strength — tolerance.

Tolerance is the capacity to accept differences in others. Tolerance emerges when a child has the security arising from the healthy development of the four previous strengths (attachment, self-regulation, affiliation, and awareness). The attached child can form and maintain healthy intimate relationships and feels secure in them. Self-regulating children can better control their reactivity, anxiety, and fear when exposed to new people and situations. The affiliated child feels connected and secure in her peer groups. The aware child can see the strengths, needs, and interests of others. When these four strengths emerge, the child feels safe, special, and secure. Tolerance can follow.

Security: The Root of Tolerance

There are two components to this unique kind of safety. The first is the powerful and empowering feeling that comes when a young child feels special, valued, and accepted. This belief and feeling grows in a child when the important adults in his life tell him, and show him repeatedly, how important and loved he is. When the child feels this unqualified acceptance, it is so much easier for him to accept others.

The second key element of this security is related to how easily a child feels threatened by someone or something new. Our brain has dozens of neural systems involved in reading and responding to potential threats and will categorize new experiences as negative and potentially threatening until proven otherwise. New situations or novel stimuli, good or bad, activate the stress-regulating neural systems in the brain.

A child who feels safe and is introduced to a new culture and new ideas will be stimulated and excited. But a child who feels anxious will perceive these new experiences as threatening.

All Children Can Learn

The development of tolerance requires active learning. We have a neurobiological tendency to form small groups with people who are similar to us and a tendency to be wary of, and even hostile to, people who are different. Becoming tolerant is not a passive product of development: It requires active modeling by adults and repeated exposure of children to different ways of living in our world.

Fortunately, children can learn to accept and understand different views, cultures, and values. Once a child learns that differences make other people interesting, stimulating, and capable, she becomes more comfortable with the world. If a child is fearful of new things, including the diversity of people, she will be left behind. The more tolerant our children become, the easier it will be for them to enjoy all that the world has to offer.

Struggling With Tolerance

An intolerant child will be judgmental of others. She may tease, berate, and attack others who are different. Sometimes this can be overtly hostile and aggressive. Children who struggle with this strength help create an atmosphere of exclusion and intimidation for those people and groups they fear. This atmosphere promotes and facilitates violence and can be the first step in bullying. The intolerant child is, essentially, insecure-insecure about her status, skills, beliefs, and values.

What You Can Do?

- Make children feel special and safe through words of praise and encouragement. Valued children learn to value others.
- Model tolerance. Children will learn to reach out and be sensitive to others by watching how comfortable you are as you discuss and relate to other people.
- Create opportunities for children to learn about new places, people, and cultures. Children feel safe with you, so explore new ideas and cultures together.
- Introduce new cultures and "different ways" by cooking ethnic dishes together.
- Have class celebrations for Cinco de Mayo, Chinese New Year, Carnivale, and other days and events that honor the traditions of different cultures.
- Invite children's families (and others from the community) to come to class and share the dress, language, traditions, and customs of their ancestors. Children can talk with your guest about how different things were "in the old days" and how different families still keep certain traditions.
- Intervene immediately when you hear or see intolerant behaviors or words in children. Don't be punitive. Try to understand and help children learn healthier ways of interacting with others.

Respect: The Sixth Core Strength

The ability to respect oneself and others is the last of the six core strengths that are an essential part of healthy emotional development.

- "My grandma is so old she knows everything." — a 5-year-old whispering in awe to her teacher

Respect — the ability to see and celebrate the value in ourselves and others — is the sixth core strength. This is the most complex of the core strengths. It requires the emotional, social, and cognitive maturity that comes from developing the five previous strengths (attachment, self-regulation, affiliation, awareness, and tolerance).

Developing the capacity for respect is a lifelong challenge. Our sense of self tends to be fragile. It rises and falls as we face life's challenges with varying degrees of success. The development of self-respect, or, in essence, self-esteem, is guided by how we see ourselves. The people in our lives act as a mirror in this process. When people who are important to us give us attention and encouragement, we see positive images of ourselves. At other times, our interactions with others may make us feel unattractive, incompetent, or even invisible. As with adults, young children build their sense of self-respect from their interactions with others. When they are made to feel special and valued, children grow to respect themselves. A positive sense of one's self allows the maturing child to respect others.

Self-respect is at the heart of respecting others. When you can identify and appreciate your strengths and accept your vulnerabilities, it's easier to truly respect the value in others.

Valuing Others

We respect people who have traits we admire. Young children begin to respect things they see in the adults who are present in their lives—both good and bad. What a child respects, in other words, is determined in large part by what the child is exposed to. Young children raised in antisocial homes may actually respect and admire antisocial acts. They aspire to be just like Mom or Dad! Young children who watch hours of television and have few adult role models may begin to value persons in the media—with all of their distorted values and unrealistic traits. This becomes a trap for young children. They will never be able to be as athletic, beautiful, powerful, and popular as the false images they see on television. And, unable to meet these ideals, they will feel inadequate and unattractive.

Hopefully, through many quality experiences with attentive adults, the child begins to see more realistic qualities to admire. Consistency, predictability, grace under pressure, humor, and kindness are among the qualities that caring and competent adults model for young children. In the classroom, children see how respected adults—their teachers—solve problems and cope with challenges. If their teachers handle conflicts by listening, thinking, staying calm, and reaching thoughtful solutions, the child comes to respect these behaviors.

Struggling With Respect

There are two ways in which children struggle with respect. One is overt noncompliance and defiance. In this case, there is a lack of respect for classmates and for you and your authority as a teacher. This is almost always associated with a poor sense of self, despite the fact that these children will often brag and distort their strengths and capabilities. This bragging is merely a protective shell over a very fragile sense of self. Often these children have not had much attention or structure when they are away from school.

The other way in which a child struggles with respect is when he begins to say, "I'm bad," "I can't do that," "I'm stupid," "He's better than I am." Children with this type of poor sense of self start to limit their opportunities. They don't try as hard, and as a result, they may end up creating self-fulfilling prophecies. Because they don't try new things, they don't learn as fast. They fall behind. This negative cycle can be very destructive for young children.

What You Can Do

Children will come to respect the traits and values of the adults in their lives. Let children see how you show respect for all people, including the elderly, authority figures such as police officers, and people who are different from you in terms of ethnicity or religion.

- Strive to live what you teach. Be patient, consistent, caring, honest, and attentive.
- When a child is struggling, give him opportunities to succeed. Match his social and learning challenges with his stage of development. Slowly help him master new, but not overwhelming, challenges.
- Use positive comments and rewards to shape and reinforce behaviors. Remember the intense power of negative comments. Intervene and stop negative comments that are being used by any of the children against other children.