

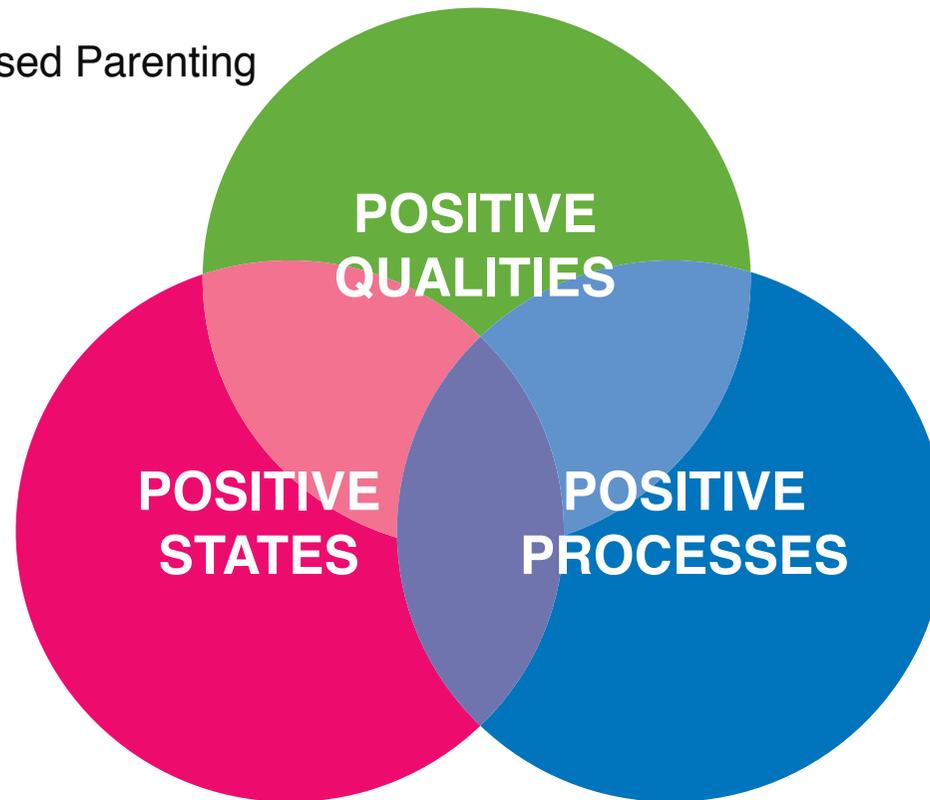
A family of four is walking a large, light-colored dog on a path in a forest. The path is covered in fallen autumn leaves. In the background, a man and a woman are walking. In the foreground, a young girl in a blue jacket and a young boy in a yellow jacket are walking the dog. A large pink circle is overlaid on the image, containing the text "CAN YOU PARENT IN WAYS THAT CULTIVATE MENTALLY HEALTHY KIDS?".

CAN YOU PARENT
IN WAYS THAT
CULTIVATE MENTALLY
HEALTHY KIDS?

Can You Help Your Children Flourish?

Researchers have found that parents can have a positive impact on their children's stress levels, and play an important role in helping to cultivate wellbeing and buffer against ill-being for their children (Middlebrooks & Audage, 2008). Strengths Based Parenting, is a style of parenting based on positive psychology and neuroscience, that seeks to identify and cultivate positive qualities, positive states and positive processes in ones children, teaching them the skills to navigate well through life's inevitable ups and downs. Some studies even suggest that these same strategies can also be used to inoculate children against depression, anxiety & suicide.

The 3 pillars of Strengths Based Parenting



Can You Be A Strengths Based Parent?



Researchers have found that parents can have a positive impact on their children’s stress levels, and play an important role in helping to cultivate wellbeing and buffer against ill-being for their children (Middlebrooks & Audage, 2008).

Stress is a set of physiological, psychological and behavioural reactions to stimuli (good or bad) that threaten a person’s wellbeing. It’s typically brought about by an imbalance in demands and resources, arising when a person perceives that **they** cannot adequately cope with the demands being placed upon **them**. In this way, stress is a phenomenon that is caused by a mismatch between demands and resources, rather than the demands of the environment itself. This understanding of stress is very important when considering the mental health of children, given that they are still going through key developmental milestones and have not yet fully developed the physical, psychological and social resources that enable them to cope with the demands that are placed upon them. Indeed, children regularly find themselves in situations where the demands and pressures of their environment exceed their resources and ability to cope, thus causing stress.

It is not surprising, then, that rates of childhood stress appear to be high. In a large-scale Australian study of more than 10,000 school students, 31% of students reported feeling “very stressed”, 40% said they worried too much and 40% reported that they had difficulties in staying calm.

Australian school children report being:

Very Stressed



Worried Too Much



Difficulties Staying Calm



Children can experience three different types of stress: 1) toxic stress, 2) tolerable stress, and 3) positive stress. While toxic stress has been shown to have negative effects on brain development, immune functioning, cognitive functioning and social functioning during childhood, studies suggest that positive stress is a normal part of the developmental process that helps children to develop the essential life skills of coping with and adapting to new situations.

Professor Lea Waters, has found that one approach to help children experience stress more positively is strength-based parenting. Drawing on the evidence-based practices of positive psychology – the science of human strengths - parents practising this approach try to deliberately identify and cultivate positive states, positive processes and positive qualities in one’s children.

Early research findings suggest strengths-based parenting connects children with their strengths so that they are more likely to cope with adversity, by drawing on their strengths rather than engaging in avoidance or aggressive coping responses. As a result, it appears parents can make a positive impact on their children’s stress levels and play an important role in cultivating wellbeing and buffering against ill-being for their children.

Source: Waters, Lea (2015) *The relationships between Strengths-Based Parenting with Children’s Stress Levels and Children’s Strengths Based Coping Approaches*. *Psychology*, 6, 689-699.1

Can You Build Positive Qualities?

“If you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will always believe it is stupid.”

-ALBERT EINSTEIN



The Science of Strengths

In its simplest form, a strength is something you're good at and enjoy doing. Natural capacities that we yearn to use, which enable authentic expression, and which energise us. They might comprise your talents, interests, resources and/or character.

When people use their strengths, they feel like the “real me” is coming through. They're things people look forward to doing, feel absorbed while doing them and invigorated and fulfilled afterward. They are where people's greatest successes are most likely to happen and where people tend to experience enormous growth.

Studies have found that subjective wellbeing is significantly predicted by the degree to which a person knows and uses their strengths. School-based strengths interventions, with students ranging from primary through to secondary school in the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia, have found that helping school students to identify their strengths increases hope, life satisfaction, school engagement, self-esteem and positive affect as well as reducing negative affect.

There are two major ways in which parents can become more aware of their children's strengths. The first way is through strength surveys. The Strengths Explorer (Gallup) Youth Development Specialists) and the Values in Action Youth Survey (<http://www.viacharacter.org>) can be completed from age 10 onwards and have been developed by teams of psychologists to ensure that the surveys are valid and reliable.

The second way for parents to become aware of their children's strengths is through the practice of strength spotting. Strength spotting is a process of observation that specifically looks to identify strengths in oneself and others. Professor Waters suggests parents can look for five signals that point to a child's strengths. When children are using their strengths they:

- Are energised and display high levels of engagement during and after using the strength.
- Can become so engrossed they lose track of time.
- Show very rapid learning curves in areas that are strengths.
- Have a repeated pattern of successful performance in the area.
- Are performing above age-appropriate level in that skill or trait.

These two approaches help to increase the child's own strength-based coping and reduce the child's stress.

Source: (Waters, 2015)

Getting Started – Positive Qualities



For younger kids, all you need to do is start looking for the times they 'light up' and try to name the strengths you see them exercising.

Build their knowledge and vocabulary of strengths, by encouraging them to look for strengths in themselves and others - even their favourite superhero, or book character. Play strengths based games like VIA INGO or Strengths and Ladders available by emailing marie@popsy.com.au



For kids 10+, the free VIA Youth Survey (www.viacharacter.org) is a great tool to discover their character strengths. Sit with them while they take the test -it's often very enlightening.

Visual cues are very useful, so help them to create a strengths poster, strengths cards, strengths cape, or write them a strengths letter, highlighting what they love to do and do best.

Check in with your child at the end of the day about strengths they've used when things went well, or they faced adversity. Help them to see that using their strengths, not only leads to success more quickly, but that their unique strengths are also their best defence when they're struggling.



For parents - Discover your own strengths at www.viacharacter.org. Your top 5 should feel like the "real you" - these are your Signature Strengths. Begin to notice how you are using these, when parenting at your best.

Create a daily habit to use your signature strengths more often, or, to build one of your lesser strengths, that you value.

Remember, strengths are able to be built at any time but you'll find success and wellbeing easiest, using those that come naturally for you.

To check your progress, take the test again each year, or at transition points in your life.



Getting the balance right - Before your family rushes off and simply starts trying to use your strengths more, it helps to be aware that you can have too little and too much of a good thing. Begin to notice when things are not going as well as expected and ask yourself –could it be a strength being used too much, or too little? e.g. too much humour being used at the wrong time, too much kindness to others and not to self? Try to help your family find the "just right" level of strengths usage for being at your best. Give feedback more positively, by suggesting that a strength needs to be "turned up/down."



Strengths Quest - Finding new ways for your family to collectively put their strengths to work, can be a great way to cultivate both strengths and relationships. Brainstorm novel ways to build the strengths you value and set strengths quests e.g. Best act of kindness costing less than \$5, funniest skit created, most creative lego construction, largest act of forgiveness.

What Are Your Children's Strengths?

Can you spot their strengths in action?

Can you describe a “high-point” moment - a time that is memorable and stands out - when your child was engaged, energised and enjoying life.

- What were they doing?
- How were they feeling?
- What was achieved?
- Which strengths were they using?



(Seligman & Peterson, 2004)

Can You Identify And Build Positive States?



The Science

Researchers have found that **our brains are** literally hardwired to perform at **their** best not when **they are** negative or even neutral, but when **they're** positive. It turns out **that** when your brain experiences positive emotions – like joy, gratitude, serenity, interest, hope, pride, amusement, inspiration, awe, and love – you see more possibilities, bounce back from setbacks, better connect with others, and are more likely to reach your potential.

Positive emotions broaden your mind. It turns out positivity doesn't just change the contents of your mind, trading bad thoughts for good ones; it also changes the scope or boundaries of your mind in the short term. More than a decade of research has found that when you experience more positive emotions you're likely to:

- **See more** - the research suggests you literally see more of what's going on around you. Your field of peripheral vision is expanded so you can take in about 75 percent of what's happening, versus 15 percent in a neutral or negative mood.

Think more quickly and creatively - as positivity expands your scope of visual attention it also expands the conceptual connections you can make. Positivity floods your brain with dopamine and serotonin and enables you to make and sustain more neural connections so you can organise new information, think more quickly and creatively, become more skilled at complex analysis and problem solving, and see and invent new ways of doing things.

- **Connect better with others** - positivity helps you to attune to others. Because your brain feels safe, it thinks more about “we” and how to collaborate with people around you, compared to when it's in survival mode and thinking only about “me”. Furthermore, positive emotions induced in the laboratory have been shown to increase trust between acquaintances, strengthen existing interpersonal relationships and are foundational in creating bonds and opportunities for interdependence.

- **Cope with adversity** - people who experience more positivity are able to be more open-minded when they face problems. Positivity appears to trigger an upward spiral that leads to growth and epitomises flourishing.

Positivity is an especially good investment when you need creative solutions fast. Indeed, students do better on standardised tests when they enter them having self-generated a positive emotion.

Source: (Fredrickson, 2009)

Getting Started – Positive States

To truly benefit from positivity you need to slow down, savor, stretch out the good stuff and connect in ways that are heartfelt.

To monitor and maintain those good feelings, you can start by:



Creating “jolts of joy”

Sprinkle some “jolts of joy” in your family - moments of heartfelt positive emotion. Inject a burst of love, awe, hope, pride, inspiration or just plain silliness! Perhaps a surprise ice cream, a family movie night, dancing crazily together to a favourite song, what ever works to create joy for your unique family. Perhaps even create a “joy jar” full of ideas, for when you need one fast.



Practising kindness

Kindness has been found to help our brain experience pleasure, build trust and social connections. It triggers the hormone oxytocin in our blood stream, which helps lower our levels of stress and improve our focus.

Help your children (and adolescents!) discover kindness as a super power by creating a ‘Kindness Challenge’ at home, awarding points for acts of kindness, and doing fun ‘kindness projects’. For ideas see <http://wakeupproject.com.au/kindness-cards/>



Asking What Went Well

Our brains are hard wired to focus more on what’s wrong, than what’s right. The bad seems to stick like velcro, while the good, slides off like our minds are teflon coated, reducing our ability to savour what’s good in our lives.

Raise your family's positivity by tuning into what’s gone well at the end of each day. Ask your children What Went Well in their day and why.



Nurturing Your Relationships

The importance of creating and nurturing good relationships is so strong and reliable that scientists have called it a necessary condition for flourishing. Prioritise connecting with others, in a heartfelt way. Notice what happens when you give your full attention to those you love.

For help with this try Loving Kindness Meditation. <http://www.positivityresonance.com/meditations.html>



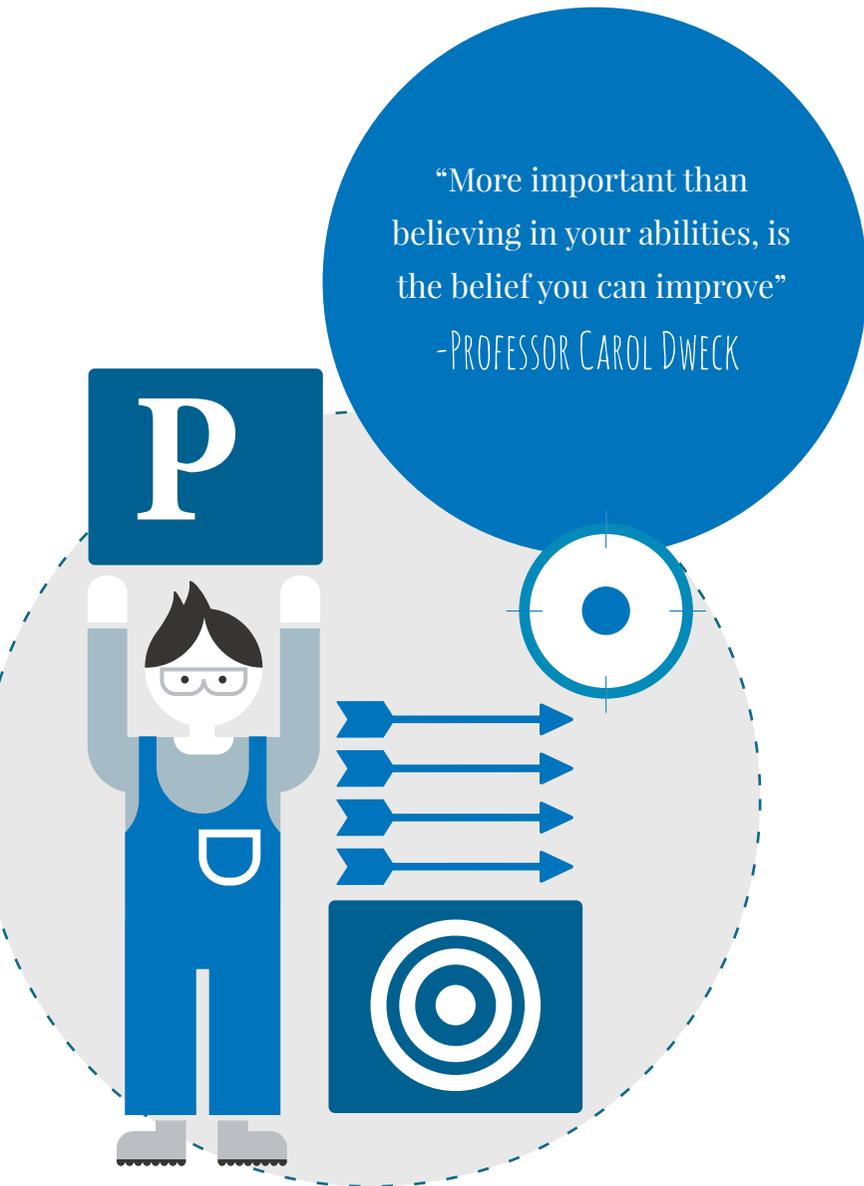
Take The Positivity Test

On a typical day, how much positivity does your family experience? Use this free two minute survey: www.positivityratio.com to measure your positivity ratio, at roughly the same time every evening for two weeks. Take note of where your ratio sits on your best days and think about how you can build more of these activities into your day and with your family.

Can You Cultivate Positive Processes?

“More important than believing in your abilities, is the belief you can improve”

-PROFESSOR CAROL DWECK



The Science

A mindset is a frame of mind, a recurring way of seeing things that reflects your deep beliefs and gives a particular view of yourself and the world. Mindsets are powerful because they dictate our efforts and actions, acting like a guideline we must behave by. For example, Stanford psychology professor Carol Dweck has found that some people have a:

‘Fixed mindset’ caused by our belief that we are born with certain abilities – like being clever or dumb, good at sport or clumsy – and there’s not much we can do to improve upon this. As a result we tend to judge ourselves and others by the outcomes we achieve. This can cause us to find challenges confronting for fear that we won’t be good enough to deliver the results. Negative feedback is painful to hear because we don’t believe we can really improve upon our abilities. Failure feels fatal so we’re more inclined to sweep our mistakes under the rug and hope nobody notices.

The problem Dweck has found is that the constant stress and anxiety of both success and failure causes people with a fixed mindset to eventually plateau and fall short of reaching their true potential. Why? Well, if you have a fixed mindset, you are less hopeful about the future. You have an upper limit, and there’s nothing you can do to change it, so why try?

You’re more likely to miss cues about where you need to make more effort or develop your strengths to move ahead. And when you strike obstacles, you’re more likely to give up - feeling helpless and hopeless that you simply don’t have the resources required.

‘Growth mindset’ caused by our belief that talent and intelligence can be built up with effort and practice to a point of mastery. As a result we’re driven by learning, because we believe effort is the measure of a person. We face **into** new challenges as growth opportunities. Negative feedback is how we learn to keep improving. Failure is a natural part of the improvement process. And to ensure our success we find the confidence to keep showing up and move beyond our present limitations.

A growth mindset helps you move beyond your present limitations by setting stretch goals and being willing to seek help enabling you to achieve ever-higher levels of success. It encourages risk, and it supports resilience when we fall.

Source: (Dweck, 2007)

Getting Started – Positive Processes



Challenging your mindsets

Check in on your own mindset first, before beginning the work of building positive processes for your kids. Tune into the stories you're telling yourself when faced with challenges, criticism or failure. When these beliefs don't serve you well ask: "Is this the only explanation of what might happen next?" Try to generate as many alternative explanations as possible and choose the story that allows you to feel and act in a growth mindset. Once you're ready, you can start introducing this to the rest of the family.

For more on mindsets visit www.mindsetonline.com



Catching Their Stories

When your child is struggling, try to hear the stories they're telling themselves. Teach them to "catch" their thoughts (for younger ones, you may even want to use the metaphor of a butterfly net, as the thought catcher). You could help them write or draw what's going on for them. Are there any other explanations for what's unfolding they might have missed? Add these to the page. How does this change the story and what do they want to do as a result? This works equally well for teens.

For help with this see <http://www.gostrengths.com/parentprogram/>



Praising Their Efforts

Studies suggest only praising children's intelligence and talent can harm their motivation and their performance. Instead try to praise their learning process - what they accomplished through practice, study, persistence, and good strategies. For example: "I can see you've been practising your drawing."



Mind The Mindset

When you hear your child sharing a fixed mindset story ask them: "Is that true? Is that the only explanation?". Help them find alternative growth mindset stories that improve their confidence and serve them better. For those in Grade 5 and over try <http://www.mindsetworks.com/brainology/>



Learn To Add NOT YET!

When you hear yourself or you child saying "I can't", "I'm not good at this", "I'm just not a maths person" etc, encourage adding "YET" to the end of the sentence. This reminds us, that we always have the capacity to build our abilities through focus and deliberate practice.

Recommended Reading



“Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding Of Happiness & Wellbeing” by *Martin Seligman*

“Brain Rules: 12 Principles For Surviving & Thriving At Work, Home & School” by *John Medina*

“The Whole Brain Child” by *Daniel Seigel*

“How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity & Hidden Power of Character” by *Paul Tough*

“Smart Strengths: Building Character, Resilience and Relationships in Youth” by *John Yeager, Sherri Fisher and Dave Shearon*

“Mindset: The New Psychology of Success” by *Carol Dweck*

“Making Hope Happen: Create The Future You Want For Yourself And Your Child” by *Shane Lopez*

Want to know more?

1. Check out our website for free resources
www.popsy.com.au
2. Contact **Marie McLeod** for more information on Strengths Based Parenting, private coaching or school support.

Who is Marie McLeod? Marie is The Positive Parent Coach. She has 3 kids, 2 with special needs and twins. She won't tell you she's a perfect parent – far from it, but she's worked at it, studied it and will support you in a no bulls##t, no judgement, transformational way that's grounded in the research from Positive Psychology and Neuroscience. When you're ready for resilience and thriving, we're here for you.



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