

See the Good – How to Reinforce Your Child’s Character Strengths (by Niina Melanen)



Finland. The morning will be spent with eight first-graders who participate in special education. Smiling, Vuorinen says, "Our students all have challenges in controlling themselves. There's an array of restlessness, lack of restraint, and unpredictability here."

To help Vuorinen out, a resource teacher and classroom assistant arrive at the classroom. The Kaisa Vuorinen is organizing the desks in her classroom, located in the town of Espoo, bell rings, and the clomping sounds of many feet begin to be heard from the hallway. Soon, little boys out of breath from playing outside flow into the classroom. The students shake hands with their teacher and classroom assistants and say, "good morning," to them.

Without further ado, two boys fall into Vuorinen's arms and hug her tightly. " There are these huggers, but many of these children have by this age received so much negative feedback that now we should change direction and support what is positive in them, even if it's still at an early stage." Kaisa Vuorinen says that earlier on she studied to become a solution-centered coach, and that she has used solution-focused methods in her work as a special education teacher. However, she felt like it was not enough. "I saw in my students so much psychological stress, which I just couldn't reach."

Vuorinen says she found the missing piece when she was once on sick leave and picked up a book entitled *Lost at School: 'Why Our Kids with Behavioral Problems are Falling Through the Cracks and How We Can Help Them'* written by Ross W Greene (2014). Her attitude towards 'troublemakers' and other 'misfits' changed in one fell swoop.

Children act correctly when they have the sufficient skills to do so.

"It's easy for us to think that children act correctly and behave well if they just want to; that acting correctly and behaving well only depend on the desire to do so. However, that's not the case; children act correctly when they have the sufficient skills to do so."

Inspired by this revelation, Vuorinen attended positive psychology courses and became aware of an instrument that, as a teacher, she had been lacking. Using a teaching method focusing on strengths, she received this new tool, a vocabulary which a teacher can use to draw out positive qualities and guide students away from problems." It's actually a question of very old ideas, character education and virtues, which have been updated for our times," she explains.

Vuorinen employs a list of 24 character strengths as a basis when conferencing with parents. The parents select five core strengths from the list to assess just how their child is at home, when s/he is relaxed and at his/her best. She tells me that for many parents and to herself, the moment is magical, because in a way, it is an opportunity to see the child in a new light. "It often feels like I am getting a new pair of glasses."

Kaisa Vuorinen discusses how a parent can, for instance, choose "enthusiasm " from the list as one of his/her child's strengths, whereas in class, this same enthusiasm exhibits itself as disruptive behavior. "The student doesn't know how to wait, stay still or stop talking, but underlying all this is that very enthusiasm. In the end, enthusiasm is this child's greatest strength, the character trait that will help him or her succeed later in life."

Another parent names "prudence" as their child's strength, which to the teacher may appear in classroom situations as aloofness or passivity. There may be a great deal of thinking and pondering going on behind the scenes, which just does not manifest itself. The enthusiastic child who botches things up simply needs self-regulating skills, and the wary and cautious child just needs more courage to advance his/her ideas in group situations.

Vuorinen's mission is to recognize the strengths of her students and to guide the students in using and regulating their strengths in a constructive manner.

In the boys' education classroom, the day begins with the practising of self-regulation skills. "Self-regulation, or self-control, is a challenge for all children, so of course it's also difficult for those in need of extra support." To be sure, before getting down to business, Kaisa Vuorinen and the teacher assistants are fully occupied for ten minutes directing the boys, who are talking, tussling, and wandering around, to their desks. A few swear words can be heard. One student goes out to the hall with an assistant to calm down. A string runs through the classroom, and paper tags are attached with clothes pins all along it. Inspiring words such as courage, perseverance, kindness, and love are written on the tags.

The thought occurs to me that at least the teacher very much needs these strengths. In spite of the slight chaos, Vuorinen radiates peace and energy. She points out that a creation of a positive class atmosphere is one of the most important matters that a teacher attends to in the classroom. The student who had gone out to the hallway to calm down returns to the classroom with the assistant, and right away Vuorinen encourages him to join the group.

Once in a while, Vuorinen captures the attention of the most restless pupil - especially when she passes out cookies, putting one at the edge of each student's desk. Similarly to the classic marshmallow experiment, Vuorinen instructs the students that if they can hold off eating the cookie for half an hour, they'll get two cookies then. The cookie can also be eaten immediately, but in that case, there will not be a second one.

These boys have only been Vuorinen's students for a month, but they catch on at once. Their self-control muscles are palpably tense. One of them pushes his nose against the cookie and sniffs it loudly. Another one puts his pencil case on top of the temptation, lest he crack. The teacher's encouraging words clearly calm down the students. Vuorinen seizes upon even the slightest of progress. Every now and then she glances at the tags hanging from the string and seamlessly uses the words connoting the strengths during the lesson.

The creation of a positive class atmosphere is one of the most important matters that a teacher attends to in the classroom.

"Good, Henri, I noticed how you loaned your pencil to your neighbor - you used your kindness strength just then." Another boy receives praise for raising his hand. "It's good that you had the patience to raise your hand—you used self-regulation there!" Vuorinen tells me that she has noticed the crucial role that language plays in the creation of reality and formation of thinking.

The teacher is the developer of meanings in the classroom. She describes the children's activities using the vocabulary of the strengths. "The vocabulary related to strengths is always visible. When I see persistence or courage, I bring it up. And I don't say, 'You did well at this task.' Instead, I support the strength exhibited, 'You are persistent since you completed the task.' Nor do I praise a student for giving a presentation, but rather I praise the strength, 'You were brave to come forward in front of the class.'"

I don't say, 'You did well at this task;' instead, I support the strength exhibited.

After half an hour of concentration and the cookies, it is time for an exercise break. As the dance beat pulls the boys along, I lose myself in thought. Images of my own situations at home begin to surface. In the twists and turns of daily life at home, I could also make changes in line with the perspective presented by Kaisa Vuorinen. Instead of correcting my child's mistakes, I could praise him for his persistence after he has worked through the difficulties of a homework assignment and completed it. What kind of parent am I really? And should a mother be some kind of robot, only spouting positive sentiments?

"This is no touchy-feely sugar coating of things!" renounces Vuorinen. "I have challenging large groups, and by no means is every day a success." She is, however, convinced that more joy, kindness, interaction, empathy, and love are needed at school. The word love frequently appears in Kaisa Vuorinen's vocabulary. She defines it broadly as "positive interaction between people. "We already know that learning occurs on a whole other level in an environment absent of stress and shame." Results from pilot testing of teaching using character strengths are remarkable. Findings include that student self-confidence improves, perceived safety in the classroom increases, mutual respect rises, and love of learning presents itself.

We already know that learning occurs on a whole other level in an environment absent of stress and shame.

In the same way in daily life at home, recognizing character strengths and praising them when used helps a child to gain self-confidence and experience success. Naming and recognizing strengths is important, but Vuorinen wants to stress that the child's use of these strengths will not become more frequent if they are not supported or rewarded. Once again, this requires a conscious and consistent focus on what is already working and intact in the child.

Kaisa Vuorinen reports being gratified to notice that co-operation with parents has improved. "I'm moved when, on the verge of tears, parents tell me about how nothing positive had ever been said about their child, and how wonderful it is to hear these kinds of things about their own child."

"It is a fact that negative moments leave a powerful imprint on a person's mind, whereas positive 'micro-moments,' which are small and quiet, do not necessarily even register. Those small, positive moments must be made visible; that's the core of this teaching style," Vuorinen states. She tells me about one student who was particularly restless in the morning class. He was unable to focus and was disturbing the others. However, during recess, Vuorinen witnessed how the boy rushed over to console his friend, who had fallen down and hurt his knee. "It was a great expression of empathy and kindness. This is the kind of high spot that needs to be highlighted and made visible to the child."

The bell rings. the students leave for recess in a throng. In the commotion of the hallway, I think about whether I myself succeed as a parent in highlighting my child's high points, the small everyday occurrences that are easily taken for granted. One prominent advocate of character strengths is James J. Heckman who is also winner of the Nobel Prize in Economic Science. He speaks of character skills, emphasising the term skill. Inherited traits are not in question here, but rather character skills, which anyone can develop! If you feed it, it will grow. When you notice the good in someone, it proliferates. That is the way it is.

When you notice the good in someone, it proliferates.

With this piece of old wisdom in mind, I enter the Teachers' Room, redolent of cardamom rolls. "Last spring, it felt like miracles were happening in the classroom!" The cup of coffee I am holding grows cold as I listen to French and English teacher Elina Paatsila's enthusiastic account of the use of the strengths-based method in language study. Paatsila tells me about a new girl in the class who did not know any English.

During class, the girl would be doing anything at all at any given moment, doing her own thing or wandering about, but she would not take part in the lesson. Nevertheless, little by little, the girl's love of learning was drawn out.

Paatsila describes how this happened. "I seized upon all the least little things she did, in an encouraging way. 'Look, you know that! That, too!' I always came up with tasks for her that I felt she would succeed at." The student gradually curtailed her classroom wandering and began to do assignments by herself, but still was not participating in class group work.

It eventually took a few more months before the girl joined in with the class. "Best of all was when, at the end of the term, she wrote down 'hope' and 'love of learning' on the class strengths-board as her own strengths."

I am impressed by this teacher's tenacity in transforming a student's negative spiralling into positive learning. Critical and accusatory comments along the lines of, "Why can't you just concentrate?" or "You could do it if you just really tried!" often fall on deaf ears. According to Paatsila, a positive and respectful manner of speech works much better.

But what about when a student simply behaves badly? Is punishment incorporated into this teaching style at all? "If someone is behaving badly, I do bark at them," Paatsila admits. "I quickly cut off the bad behavior, I avoid using an accusatory style of speech, and I don't start to lecture. I look to see that the message has been understood, and I quickly move on to respectful interaction."

In emphasizing a solution-focused orientation, Paatsila does not want to pose why questions such as "Why did the situation get out of hand?", but instead wants to consider how to act the next time around, so that things would go differently.

In Elina Paatsila's classroom, the paper tags with character strengths written on them are also in plain sight, hanging on the wall. Paatsila declares that strengths can be highlighted in conjunction with ordinary English learning.

She has a certain way of starting up with a new class. "We usually start off by recognizing what strengths are in the group: is there enthusiasm, persistence, optimism, kindness, or maybe self-

control?" When the strengths have been identified at the group level, Paatsila tells the students to think about everything that those strengths have an impact on.

"Kindness brings with it a good atmosphere to the group, courage or persistence affects study skills, and so on. We can learn from each other, and each strength influences the learning results of the group as a whole," describes Paatsila.

In the same way at home, family members can each identify their own and each other's strengths, and think about what each member contributes to family life in terms of strengths. In the classroom, a shy student is not made to speak English in front of the class, but instead, his or her courage is drawn out little by little, and other already apparent strengths are reinforced in that same student.

The pedagogical premise is that anything can be learned, including courage skills." As a language teacher, it's been new to me that students can succeed in class in ways other than academic; that is, on an assignment, in learning vocabulary, or in studying grammar. Now they are able to succeed by being brave, perseverant, or enthusiastic."

The change in teaching style has also brought about a transformation in the group and in language learning. Teachers of other subjects who are teaching the same group of students have also reported that the atmosphere has improved and that concentration and learning are better now. At the end of the last term, Paatsila handed out language stipends on the basis of strengths.

"Everyone received public acknowledgement." For instance, now an immigrant student received a stipend for persistence, for struggling daily with several languages; a brave student received it for their courage, and a kind student received one for creating a good class atmosphere. Grades were not at all brought up during this awarding of stipends.

The pedagogical premise is that anything can be learned, including courage skills.

In strengths-based school teaching, character education is first and foremost about teaching skills. Patience, persistence, courage, and even humor are learnable skills. Economist James J. Heckman has often wondered why schools focus so little on skills such as motivation, persistence or perseverance in teaching, even though it is known that these qualities are fundamental to succeeding in life.

In addition, Finnish education researcher Pasi Sahlberg names the inability to direct children in finding their own passion as the largest problem of Finnish school education. "An inspiring school doesn't create competition or comparison, but rather happiness." Elina Paatsila wholeheartedly endorses this. On a personal level, too, a positive student-strength-centred teaching approach has given her balance and self-confidence as a teacher. As a bonus, strengths-based thinking has also made its way home with her. "That scolding voice has quieted down considerably - no more nagging. I don't look for flaws when the emphasis is on what is good in my daughters or husband."

An inspiring school doesn't create competition or comparison, but rather happiness.

Elina Paatsila says that she has often pondered how persistence and self-regulation skills can be taught, because those are the pivotal skills which are beneficial in most every aspect of life.

The Paatsilans' own first-grader was reputedly a quintessential daydreamer who had trouble concentrating.

Books slammed against the wall if the homework was not immediately going well. "I won't do it! And she was greatly annoyed when she would come up against a challenge. I remember sitting next to her and slipping her raisins if it looked like she was about to lose it, or we would take a short break and then continue the homework with new intensity." I am familiar with the situation and know that a parent's mood can also flare up in these circumstances.

Yet, from a learning perspective, we are dealing with an important phenomenon here. Any outburst or criticism is harmful in this situation. A parent should not go along with the child's mood. When criticizing, a parent will unintentionally reinforce the undesirable behavior.

Instead, a parent's calmness, sympathy, encouragement (and apparently raisins, too!) help an easily frustrated child to calm down and learn persistence, in the context of doing homework, for example. It is essential that the parent remain lovingly resolute and ensure that the task is completed, even if the book slams against the wall at some stage.

"The child must be supported through the difficult emotions and needs to have his/her own 'path of success' constructed; in other words, s/he needs to be offered learning experiences and tasks where s/he has an opportunity to experience success," Paatsila says. Elina Paatsila's daughter has subsequently become a tenacious and successful pupil.

Special education teacher Kaisa Vuorinen has also been pleased to notice how strengths-based thought has followed students home. Some homework assignments have helped with this, for instance those where the children can spot their family members' strengths or they look for situations where a family member has shown persistence or courage.

"Parents have reported back that since strengths have begun to be spoken about at home, there have been fewer quarrels and the atmosphere has improved." In addition, Vuorinen considers strengths-based thinking to be an excellent opportunity for teachers themselves to develop their own self-knowledge, which for its part increases empathy towards students. "What all could an extrovert similar to myself possibly learn from a diligent, perhaps socially intelligent student?" Kaisa Vuorinen questions.

By way of example, she tells me about some of the older children in a class who were thinking about sociability. A certain student, who quite easily talked over others and was an otherwise visible character in the class, said that he was social and brave. When the discussion progressed onwards to considering what social intelligence means, the student noticed that perhaps he was not socially intelligent, but more verbal. He had not learned how to regulate his strengths within the group.

On the other hand, in the same class there might be a quiet student whose strength is social intelligence. "This teaching style keeps one from just going forward on automatic pilot. It requires presence and sensitivity, but at the same time, it's extremely rewarding to the teacher." When student character is strengthened, the teacher's own character also develops and family life gets a shot in the arm. Vuorinen supplies the following tip: Attach a list of family members' top five strengths to the fridge. The results may surprise you!