

The Six Core Strengths _by Bruce D. Perry, MD, Ph.D.

Violence infects our children. This infection is virulent in some and barely noticeable in others. Why do some children re-enact the violence they see on television while others do not? Why do some chronically teased children cope by developing a sense of humor, while others become self-loathing and yet others plot to shoot their taunting peers? Why do some children who make these murderous plans actually act on them?

It's almost impossible to answer these questions. We rarely know what makes a given child violent. But we do know that children with core strengths rarely become violent. Healthy development is an antidote to the violence they're exposed to.

These core strengths build upon each other to contribute to a child's emotional development. Together, they provide a strong foundation for future health, happiness, and productivity. Attachment, self-regulation, affiliation, awareness, tolerance, and respect will each be explored in depth in later issues of Early Childhood Today. Here is an overview of the six core strengths and why each is essential to healthy development.

1. ATTACHMENT: Being a Friend

Attachment is the capacity to form and maintain healthy emotional bonds with another person. It is first acquired in infancy, as a child interacts with loving, responsive, and attentive parents and caregivers.

Why it's important: This core strength is the cornerstone of all the others. An infant's interactions with a parent or primary caregiver create his or her first relationship. Healthy attachments allow a child to love, to become a good friend, and to have a positive and useful model for future relationships. As a child grows, other consistent and nurturing adults such as teachers, family friends, and relatives will shape his ability to develop attachments. The attached child will be a better friend, student, and classmate-which promotes all forms of learning.

Signs of struggle: A child who has difficulty with this strength has a hard time making friends and trusting adults. She may show little empathy for others and act in what seems to be a remorseless way. Children unable to attach lack the emotional anchors needed to buffer the violence they see. They may isolate themselves, act out, reject a peer's friendly overtures, or withdraw socially. With few friends, and apparently disconnected from her peers, this child is also at greater risk when exposed to violence.

2. SELF-REGULATION: Thinking Before You Act

Developing and maintaining the ability to notice and control primary urges such as hunger and sleep-as well as feelings of frustration, anger, and fear-is a lifelong process. Its roots begin with the external regulation provided by parents or significant caregivers, and its healthy growth depends on a child's experience and

the maturation of the brain.

Why it's important: Pausing a moment between an impulse and an action is a life tool. Developing this strength helps a child physiologically and emotionally. But it's a strength that must be learned-we are not born with it. As children grow, our expectations for them must be age appropriate. For instance, it's unreasonable to expect a 2-year-old to have complete bladder and bowel control before his body has matured. In social situations, the age-appropriate strength to self-regulate may spell a child's success and build his self-confidence.

Signs of struggle: When a child doesn't develop the capacity to self-regulate, he will have problems sustaining friendships, learning, and controlling his behavior. He may blurt out a thoughtless and hurtful remark and express hurt or anger with a shove or by damaging another child's work. Just seeing a violent act may set him off or deeply upset him. Children who struggle with self-regulation are more reactive, immature, and impressionable, and more easily overwhelmed by threats and violence.

3. AFFILIATION: Joining In

The capacity to join others and contribute to a group springs from our ability to form attachments. Affiliation is the glue for healthy human functioning: It allows us to form and maintain relationships with others-and to create something stronger, more adaptive, and more creative than the individual.

Why it's important: Human beings are social creatures. We are biologically designed to live, play, grow, and work in groups. A family is a child's first and most important group, glued together by the strong emotional bonds of attachment. But most other groups that children join-such as a preschool class, kids in the neighborhood, friends made while traveling-are based on circumstance or common interests. It's in these groups that children will have thousands of brief emotional, social, and cognitive experiences that can help shape their development. And it is in these situations that children make stronger connections with peers-their first friendships.

Signs of struggle: A child who is afraid or otherwise unable to affiliate may suffer a self-fulfilling prophecy: She is more likely to be excluded and may feel socially isolated. Healthy development of the core strengths of attachment and self-regulation make affiliation much easier. But a distant, disengaged or impulsive child won't be easily welcomed into a group. And in fact, she may act in ways that lead others to tease or actively avoid her. The excluded child can take this pain and turn it on herself, becoming sad or self-loathing. Or she can direct the pain outward, becoming aggressive and even violent. Later in life, without intervention, these children are more likely to seek out other marginalized children and affiliate with them. Unfortunately, the glue that holds these groups together can be beliefs and values that are self-destructive or hateful to those who have excluded them.

4. AWARENESS: Thinking of Others

Awareness is the ability to recognize the needs, interests, strengths, and values of

others. Infants begin life self-absorbed and slowly develop awareness-the ability to see beyond themselves and to sense and categorize the other people in their world. At first this process is simplistic: "I am a boy and she is a girl. Her skin is brown and mine is white." As children grow, their awareness of differences and similarities becomes more complex.

Why it's important: The ability to be attuned, to read and respond to the needs of theirs, is an essential element of human communication. An aware child learns about the needs and complexities of others by watching, listening, and forming relationships with a variety of children. He becomes part of a group (which the core strength of affiliation allows him to do) and sees ways in which we are all alike and different. With experience, a child can learn to reject labels used to categorize people, such as skin color or the language they speak. The aware child will also be much less likely to exclude others from a group, to tease, and to act in a violent way.

Signs of struggle: A child who lacks the ability to be aware of others' needs and values is at risk for developing prejudicial attitudes. Having formed ideas about others without knowing them, she may continue to make categorical, destructive, and stereotypical judgments: "She speaks English with an accent, so she must be stupid" or "He's fat, so he must be lazy." This immature kind of thinking feeds the hateful beliefs underlying many forms of verbal and physical violence.

5. TOLERANCE: Accepting Differences

Tolerance is the capacity to understand and accept how others are different from you. This core strength builds upon another-awareness (once aware, what do you do with the differences you observe?).

Why it's important: It's natural and human to be afraid of what's new and different. To become tolerant, a child must first face the fear of differences. This can be a challenge because children tend to affiliate based on similarities-in age, interests, families, or cultures. But they also learn to reach out and be more sensitive to others by watching how the adults in their lives relate to one another. With positive modeling, you can insure and build on children's tolerance. The tolerant child is more flexible and adaptive in many ways. Most important, when a child learns to accept difference in others, he becomes able to value the things that make each of us special and unique.

Signs of struggle: An intolerant child is likelier to lash out at others, tease, bully, and, if capable, will act out his intolerance in violent ways. 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.

6. RESPECT: Respecting yourself and others

Appreciating your own self-worth and the value of others grows from the foundation of the preceding five strengths. An aware, tolerant child with good affiliation, attachment, and self-regulation strengths gains respect naturally. The

development of respect is a lifelong process, yet its roots are in early childhood, as children learn these core strengths and integrate them into their behaviors and their worldview.

Why it's important: Children will belong to many groups, meet many kinds of people, and will need to be able to listen, negotiate, compromise, and cooperate. Having respect enables a child to accept others and to see the value in diversity. He can see that every group needs many styles and many strengths to succeed and he can value each person in the group for her talents. When children respect-and even celebrate-diversity, they find the world to be a more interesting, complex, and safer place. Just as understanding replaces ignorance, respect replaces fear.

Signs of struggle: A child who can't respect others is incapable of self-respect. She will be quick to find fault with others, but she can also be her own harshest critic. Too often the trait a child ridicules in others reflects something she hates in herself. The core of all violence is a lack of respect, for oneself and for others. When respect is missing, children will likely become violent-because they value nothing.

These core strengths provide a child with the framework for a life rich in family, friends, and personal growth. Our world changes daily and becomes increasingly diverse-and how much more complex that world will be when our children become parents! Teaching children these core strengths gives them a gift they will use throughout their lifetimes. They will learn to live and prosper together with people of all kinds-each bringing different strengths to create a greater whole.

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