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ARTICLES

Recognizing Strengths and Affinities

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Sometimes in our haste to help children and adolescents overcome their weaknesses, we neglect the careful detection and cultivation of their strengths. Yet, in the adult world what counts most is the strength of an individual's strengths. Therefore, any student's educational planning needs to include measures to mobilize and enhance individual assets of the mind. And every kid has these! They await discovery.

Different forms of strength can be found. A child may reveal certain highly developed neurodevelopmental functions. For example, she or he may be particularly effective with language, motor coordination, or certain aspects of memory. Other children show very advanced higher thinking, as revealed in their creativity, the way they form concepts, or the astute quality of their critical thinking. There are students who exhibit remarkable strengths in their social cognition; they are true "people persons," which will carry them far in any career they select as an adult.

It is up to teachers and parents to make sure that students with good language skills get plenty of opportunities to develop verbally through public speaking and writing. Kids with great spatial capacities need opportunities to advance their artistic or mechanical aptitudes. Highly creative children must never have their original thinking stifled in any way - to the contrary, they deserve many opportunities to pursue their uniqueness and dream up novel ideas. Finally students with great social skills need opportunities to become leaders.

Some children display strengths in specific skill areas, such as sports, music, writing, or mathematics. These individuals must be able to pursue advanced courses whenever possible. When a child has learning difficulties, the pursuit of a strength can go far to alleviate anxiety and prevent the onset of low self-esteem due to academic underachievement. In other words, your strengths can keep you afloat when you are struggling to overcome the effects of your weaknesses. Strengths also have implications for choosing careers, vocations, and even courses in secondary school.

Because of their critical importance and enormous potential for redeeming a child, strength delineation and management should be part of every educational plan for every student. Nothing is more tragic and wasteful than a strength that goes unrecognized and unutilized throughout childhood, especially if that child is having trouble succeeding in school.

A child's affinities are also vital. An affinity is an area of knowledge toward which a student feels a strong attachment. An affinity should be distinguished from a recreational interest (such as football or horseback riding). Examples might include prehistoric animals, politics, medieval history, space, or computers. It is important for every child to develop at least one area of intellectual passion and nearly obsessive interest. Ideally, such intense commitments should last for years (at least they shouldn't change weekly).

Affinities should evolve into domains of expertise. Every kid should be an expert at something. Depth in an area of knowledge can yield remarkable benefits. For example, it has been shown that the best way to learn how to read well is to read about something you know a lot about. Similarly, writing skills can grow if a student keeps writing within his domain of affinity and expertise.

Parents can help uncover and nurture a child's affinities. They can arrange for trips, magazine subscriptions, and home-based projects that focus on a child's affinity. They can share a child's interest and allow her to discuss it in the car and at the breakfast table. Most of all, they can display open pride in their child's expertise in the chosen area.

Schools should also encourage the acquisition and growth of affinities. All children should have delineated topics they can pursue in depth over time. Such pursuits can lead to term papers and projects. A child should experience the satisfaction of knowing that he quite possibly knows more about his topic than any member of the school's faculty! Such mastery does wonders for academic self-esteem while allowing children to experience the feeling and the intense satisfaction that comes with being a true scholar, a person who possesses knowledge in depth.

So it is that both strengths and affinities are crucial characteristics of an individual child. However, in so many cases they do not come forth and grow automatically. Instead, the adult world needs to conspire with children to help them find and exploit their assets. Then teachers, parents, peers, and the students themselves can celebrate and enjoy the remarkable diversity of all kinds of minds.

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