



# INTENTIONAL STRENGTHS

The National Institute for Permanent Family Connectedness (NIPFC) has produced a number of short articles that articulate essential elements of the Family Finding process. These include [What is Family Finding](#), [Defining Due Diligence](#), and [Quality Relative Internet Searches](#). Over the past two years, NIPFC has increased the emphasis and focus on training that improves the quality of engagement with young people and adults to build robust and energized networks for young people in care and their families. This in turn maximizes the effectiveness of the Family Finding intervention.

This article is authored by Mike Mertz<sup>1</sup>, who cites and invokes effective narrative practices to improve and deepen engagement. More specifically, Mike speaks to the identification and utilization of “Intentional Strengths” as a foundational piece of the engagement and relationship building process. This article speaks to the differentiation between the identification of internal strengths and intentional strengths, and identifies the additional benefits of determining the intentional aspects of strengths while providing guidance as to process of enriching strengths discussions.

Most Child Welfare practice requires the identification of strengths when developing service and treatment plans for the young people and families it serves, in order to create a balanced approach that attends to both the youth and families’ strengths as well as their challenges. The typical strengths discussion is often used as an opportunity to say a couple of nice things about a youth before getting to the real, more difficult issues. A variation of the same, familiar list is often generated: “she is good at basketball”, “he does well at math”, “they help with the younger kids”. These types of strengths are viewed as ‘who the person is’ characteristics and are provided in the abstract. In “Collaborative Helping”, Bill Madsen (2014) describes this type of strengths discussion as:

*When we begin with strengths in the abstract (Joanne is a good hockey player, John is a good cook), we can end up generating a list of strengths that may feel empty and hollow (e.g., Joanne is a good hockey player, but so what? What has that got to do with the problems that brought us here?). These sparse descriptions of strengths can contribute to a sense that strengths discovery is simply happy talk that romanticizes families and doesn’t deal with the tough realities of life. We believe that strengths-based work is too important to let it fall to these stereotypes. (p.126)*

Strengths have long been viewed as being internal in nature; part of a person’s essence. This understanding of strengths as internal can yield positive, though limited, benefits. When one is applauded or recognized for internally based strengths, one may feel good and their connection with those applauding could be enhanced. For these reasons, this type of recognition can still be useful. However, this internalized construction of strengths can also lead to unintended consequences.

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Michael White (2007) suggests that internal state understandings of strengths tend to:

- DIMINISH THE SENSE OF PERSONAL AGENCY - When strengths are understood as being “who” the person **is** we risk losing information about **how** and **why** the person **does** these things. It becomes easy to attribute these internal strengths as what they were born with instead of how they have decided to live their lives. This doesn’t allow for an acknowledgement of practices of living according to intentions, purposes, and commitments to life.
- BE ISOLATING - When strengths are viewed as internal to the person, then they are “owned” by that person, they reside within the individual. This is in contrast to intentional practices which are shaped through values and intentions that are shared with others. The “essence” of who someone is {internal language} is encapsulated within the individual while intentions are influenced by one’s community/culture.
- DISCOURAGE DIVERSITY - Strengths offered in the abstract and situated internally are typically connected to global norms around what is valued instead of local (personal and diverse) ideas about what is valued.

In contrast to these traditional internal state understandings, White and Madsen offer a way of understanding strengths from an intentional state. Intentional state understandings of strengths are connected to the **how** people are living into valued ideas for life. Madsen refers to this as understanding strengths as practices. This view denotes action instead of essence. According to White:

*In contrast to internal state conceptions, intentional state conceptions of identity are distinguished by the notion of “personal agency.” This notion casts people as active mediators and negotiators of life’s meanings and predicaments, both individually and in collaboration with others. (p 103).*

When viewing strengths as how people live out what they hold as important, the old and familiar strengths lists tend to come alive. Instead of merely generating a list of words, space is created to breathe life into what has been offered. For example, when one is asked to share a strength for a youth and they state “he is a caring person”, we would typically just write CARING up on the board and move on to the next strength. What we are interested in is how the person **does** CARING. We want to know if this CARING is something that can (or already does) assist the group in addressing the concerns that they are facing.

The way to bring these flat strengths to life is by asking questions. Borrowing from Vygotsky’s (1986) work, White (2007) proposed the idea of scaffolding conversations in the development of intentional state understandings of strengths. Madsen (2014) applied these ideas to community based/wraparound type practices. The questions we ask will allow you to move from the abstract strengths to intentions for life that has a past, present and future. This type of inquiry opens space to connect these intentions, hopes, values and practices to the lives of others. One is able to arrive at richly described strengths that position the youth as an active participant in moving toward their preferred life

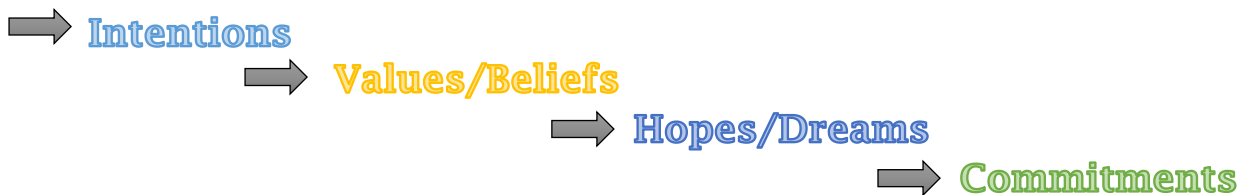
The following is an example of scaffolding a strengths conversation held with a group of social workers at a training. They were asked to identify strengths they had related to how they engage kids and families that they work for. The strength of “respect” was identified:

- When you are engaging with “respect” what is it that you are doing? How do you **do** “respect”? If I were to watch you talking with folks while connected to this “respect”, what would I notice? What are the **practices** that go into doing “respect”?
- Why is it that you choose to be connected to “respect-doing” when engaging with youth and families? What are your **intentions** in engaging from a position of “respect”?

- What **values or beliefs** are these intentions grounded in? Are these values and beliefs that you have held for a long time or are they a more recent discovery?
- What **hopes and dreams** for the families you work for and/or for yourself do these values and beliefs reflect? Are these values and beliefs connected to particular hopes and dreams that you have for the people you serve or for yourself?
- What might these intentions, values and beliefs, hopes and dreams indicate about what you are **committed** to or stand for in your work life? What might all of this tell me about what you are committed to when it comes to engaging families?

This conversation does not have to take more than a couple of minutes but allows us to land on functional strengths that are connected to a history of intentional behaviors. The questioning moves from the identification of:

## Practice



Sometimes strengths are not offered as adjectives in the abstract but are skills that don't seem applicable to the situation that needs to be addressed. How many times has "good basketball player", "excellent artist", or "he helps his brother with his homework" shown up on a strengths list? Although these are admirable and already stated as practices, they might not seem connected to helping a youth who is perhaps struggling with substance mis-use, truancy, or is stuck in the foster care system. We can apply the same kind of inquiry previously discussed but first we have to get an intentional understanding of these practices. Let's take the example of "she's good at basketball" as an identified strength. Questions designed to understand the practices, intentions and values associated with being good at basketball, which can yield a richer understanding and better utilization of the strength moving forward. Questions can include:

Q: What about basketball are you good at? (Could also be; what about basketball do you enjoy?)

A: I'm good at defense and I'm a pretty good shooter.

Q: What are the skills or knowledge that goes into being 'good at defense'?

A: It's all about hustle and effort. I learned that you have to stay between the person you're guarding and the basket.

Q: Are hustle and effort things that are important to you on the basketball court?

A: Yes. Without hustle and effort you can't be good at defense.

We now have identified some intentions (hustle and effort), some knowledge (staying between the person you are guarding and the basket) and some hopes or desires (to be good at defense is important to the youth). We have allowed the youth to name these things in words that fit for her instead of offering up some ideas that may seem distant to her experience.

Some additional questions to ask from here include:

- How do you do hustle and effort in basketball?
- When you are connected to hustle and effort what are you doing?
- If I were to watch you play basketball, how would I know when you were engaged in hustle and effort, what would I see you doing?
- What is it about being good at defense that is important to you?
- Where or from whom did you learn this value? Do they know that you learned this from them? What might it mean to them to know that they contributed to your life in this way?
- I wonder if your acknowledgement of their contribution might have an impact on them. If so, what impact might that be?

Sometimes it makes sense to engage the person who has offered a strength about someone else. For example, in a family team meeting someone might suggest about a youth that “he is caring”.

Following are some possible questions to ask of the person who offered up the strength:

- What have you noticed that tells you he is caring? How does he show this caring? Do you have a story of him doing this caring?
- When he is doing this caring, what do you believe his intentions are? Why do you suppose he lives a caring lifestyle?
- What might he hold as important or give value to when engaging in this caring? When you see him caring for others what does this tell you about his values?
- Where do you think he hopes this caring will take him in life? Do you think this caring is an indication of any hopes or dreams he might have for his future or the future of others?

Is there any more evidence of these hopes, values, or intentions that you can share with us? Do you know if there are others who wouldn't be surprised to hear you describe him as caring? What do they know about him or have seen him do that would lead them to see caring as an accurate description?

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In summary, the research has taught us that conducting Family Finding simply to find someone to place a young person with is not an effective strategy and may be a misuse of the intervention. Family Finding recognizes the moral and social obligation to involve healthy and caring family members in the lives of those who may or have entered the system, as well as the mounting evidence which declares that we recognize family as the experts who are best equipped to solve their problems.

Future articles will further detail engagement practices and tools to enhance the quality of the relationship building with those the system is designed to serve, along with an update about the reasonable efforts required by law for child welfare agency staff to consistently provide, especially in regards to engagement with relatives, fathers and also in establishing paternity.

For more information, resources and a list of trainings provided by NIPFC, please go to [www.familyfinding.org](http://www.familyfinding.org).

Madsen, W. & Gillespie, K. (2014). *Collaborative Helping: A Strengths Framework for Home-Based Services*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Vygotsky, L. (1986). *Thought and Language*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

White, M. (2007). *Maps of Narrative Practice*. New York, NY/London, England: W.W. Norton & Company.