



## The case for a strength-based early childhood program

**The topic of how to manage challenging behaviours in childcare services has been visited often during the past decade, because professionals have to deal, on a daily basis, with ever-escalating behaviour issues among children in their care.**

One reason for this is increasing depression in ever-younger children. According to material found on the World Health Organisation website (2001), an average of 10–20 per cent of children worldwide have one or more mental or behavioural problems and are 50–75 per cent more likely to become depressed if parents suffer from depression.

Depressed children find everything too hard to do, have low self-esteem and are usually lonely and without friends. Here are some symptoms of depression in children, which can be expressed in two distinct ways:

### 1 Withdrawal

- unusually short frustration level and attention span
- lack of appetite
- flat mood
- tiredness/poor sleep patterns
- anxiousness/fear/timidty
- sadness.

### 2 Acting-out

- unusually short frustration level
- defensiveness
- angry/violent/oppositional behaviour.

The causes of depression may include a genetic tendency, poor parenting, stress—including stress as an outcome of boredom brought about by having to endure an under-stimulating environment—and a variety of other reasons beyond the scope of this article. What is at least as important, however, is what causes a child to be happy.

### Finding happiness through focus on strengths

Psychologist Martin Seligman (2002) has researched what makes people happy and says it happens when people pursue enjoyable activities and use personal strengths in their everyday lives. What does this mean for children? Seligman thinks, until the age of seven, the main task is to raise positive emotions in children.

How can this be done in a childcare setting? I suggest three methods:

#### 1 Boosting social significance

It is of utmost importance that children experience their own positive significance via being valued by others. Childcare workers can:

- verbalise their appreciation of a child's presence
- be responsive to children's needs
- remember important personal 'little things'
- be familiar with children's family circumstances
- be informed about children's interests
- give children jobs based on their strengths
- provide a tailor-made program for each child
- encourage children to tell each other what they appreciate about one another.

#### 2 Providing safety and a welcoming environment

Children prefer childcare workers who are authentic, enthusiastic, flexible, personal and friendly. The following staff characteristics are also appreciated by children:

- self-confidence
- empathy and sensitivity to needs
- openness (e.g. admitting mistakes)
- ability to motivate, program for individuals and set goals for self and for children
- commitment and capacity to facilitate learning. (Whitlock & DuCette, 1989).

#### 3 Emphasising individual strengths

As children want to be valued, program provision can be based on:

- their current interests and strengths, which can be observed or obtained from a child or their family
- the child development areas identified by the NSW Curriculum Framework, including the:

- \* child's sense of self
- \* communicating child
- \* thinking child
- \* healthy, physically active child
- \* social child
- \* feeling child
- \* creative child
- \* spiritual and moral child.

• **the eight intelligences (Gardner, 1983/1993)**

Intelligence type	Characteristics of children
Linguistic	Enjoy listening to and telling stories, rhymes, riddles, word games, dramatic play.
Logical-mathematical	Interested in patterns, classification, categories and relationships. Drawn to counting, number and strategy games and experiments.
Bodily-kinesthetic	Process knowledge through bodily sensations. Often athletic, dancers or good at crafts. Tend to touch people and fidget a lot.
Spatial	Think in images and pictures. Fascinated with mazes or jigsaw puzzles, spend time drawing, building or daydreaming. Enjoy painting, making objects out of dough or clay.
Musical	Always singing or drumming to themselves. Usually aware of sounds others may miss. Often discriminating listeners.
Interpersonal	Leaders among peers: good at communicating, seem to understand others' feelings and motives. Possess charisma and ability to persuade others.
Intrapersonal	May be shy. Very aware of own feelings, self-motivated. May prefer their own company.
Naturalistic	Recognise, categorise and draw upon features of the environment. Interested in insects and plants.

A program based on children's strengths is bound to be interesting and exciting. Remember, however, to consider the impact of prior knowledge and current level of understanding on the provisions you can offer. Further, there will be at least one or two gifted children in your group who will need an individual education plan with a faster pace, deeper and wider involvement.

Sharne Rolfe's *Promoting resilience in children* is a guide to helping children develop self-assurance and autonomy through secure and caring relationships. It is available from Early Childhood Australia for \$14.95 (including postage and handling). To order, or to find out more, visit [www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/rip0202](http://www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/rip0202) or freecall 1800 356 900.



## Helping children to build resilience

A strength-based program should include ways to strengthen positive experiences. For example, childcare staff can make an extra effort to acknowledge positive emotions expressed by children. Also, a practical way to reinforce positive experiences is to ask children, in their daily small group time, to talk about two or three things they enjoyed during the day.

Children who tend to think of the worst (and permanent) outcomes and who believe they are always the causing agent should be gently and consistently coached toward positive thinking: e.g. 'right now Jack says he won't be your friend anymore, but remember he said that yesterday too and I saw you two play together this morning'.

You can also remind a child there are causes beyond his or her control which can make things happen: e.g. 'I think mums and dads just fight sometimes without it being anybody's fault. They probably fought sometimes before you were even born, just like you sometimes fight with Jack'.

## What about children with deficit needs?

Children who are depressed do not learn easily. They have short attention spans, poor memories and lack motivation. Biologically, they operate mainly from the emotional (limbic) area of their brain. It is far better to encourage a child and build on his or her strengths by providing an expansive learning environment, than to focus on a deficit need.

Self-confident children often overcome their own weaknesses either through a desire to do so, or through their motivation and interest in a project that requires a skill they are yet to master. If the deficit need is still not addressed after some time, however, you will be able to work far better with the child once he or she feels significant, welcome, engaged and has been coached to acquire an optimistic outlook on life.

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### References

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