

Focusing on Your Child's Strengths Leads to Success

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Punishment vs. Discipline

Many of us equate discipline with punishment: being made to suffer for our actions. But the Latin origin of the word is "to provide instruction or knowledge." We can use discipline to teach our children the values and attitudes of society, right and wrong, how to get along in life, and how to get along with others.³ Punishment breaks a child down. Discipline can help to build a child up.

Strength-based parents still need to discipline their children. The difference is that they approach misbehavior from a constructive, growth-oriented perspective that gives kids a clear idea of the strengths that can be used to change for the better.

Strength-based discipline is based on the premise that by nature we are motivated to self-develop. Negative patterns or behaviors signify a block in our drive toward strength-based growth. Strength-based discipline is about working with a child to discover what's blocking his progress and helping him get back on track.

	How do you commonly respond to your child's "misbehavior?"	Likely	Unlikely
1	Point out how your child's behavior makes others feel.		
2	Tell your child that you are surprised that she has acted like that; it's not like her.		
3	Punish her for what she has done.		
4	Give your child the cold shoulder.		
5	Ask your child to think about how he would feel if someone else had acted the way he did.		
6	Express your disappointment in your child's actions and remind him that he can do better.		
7	Withdraw a privilege or ground your child.		
8	Tell her you are ashamed of her.		
9	Ask her to put herself in someone else's shoes.		
10	Remind your child of times when he has behaved better.		
11	Yell at him.		
12	Make a point of ignoring them.		

Discipline Styles

Other-oriented induction (options 1, 5, 9) involves communicating with the child about the consequences of her behavior, teaching and reasoning with her, and helping her think about the impact of her behavior on others.

Expressing disappointment about expectations (options 2, 6, 10) involves expressing disappointment with your child's behavior (not with the child) because you know he's capable of better. It teaches your child about your expectations for good behavior and implies that you know he can make good choices, but that, in this instance, he has fallen short.

Power-assertive responses (options 3, 7, 11) involve controlling the child through physical size/power and control over material resources. This includes physical intimidation, physical punishment (e.g., spanking), yelling, the removal of privileges, grounding, or punishing the child through actions such as assigning extra chores.

Love withdrawal (options 4, 8, 12) involves punishing the child by removing emotional support; ignoring, isolating, turning one's back on, or refusing to speak to the child; explicitly expressing dislike for the child or telling her you're ashamed of her. These actions are intended to make the child feel so bad that she won't do the objectionable thing again.

Power-assertive responses and love withdrawal are forms of punishment. They're aimed at making the child suffer. They send messages of disapproval and rejection: "I have the power to cut you from the team."

Other-oriented induction and expressing disappointment about expectations are forms of discipline. They're aimed at helping a child learn. They send messages of responsibility and possibility: "We're in this together, and I'm going to help you learn the right thing to do." Punishment induces shame, which is destructive to a child's sense of self. Discipline engenders uncomfortable but constructive feelings of guilt that encourage prosocial behavior. Shame and guilt are often confused, but they are very different.

Seeing Behavioral Challenges from a Strengths Perspective

I think the moments when our children make poor choices and get into trouble provide opportunities to talk to them about where they forgot to use their strengths or what strengths they need to call forward. It can be an opportunity to build social intelligence.

I couldn't say it better than this parent. Whereas guilt-based discipline tells children what not to do, strength-based discipline goes a step further, letting our kids know what they can do—reminding them of strengths they possess to address the problem. We show them how to reach within to find the resources for change, rebound from setbacks, focus their attention on repairing the problem, and move in a more positive direction.

If this sounds like we're helping kids become mindful of their actions and building their ability to activate their nervous system's pause-and-plan mode, which can stand between them and their impulsiveness or lapses in judgment the next time around, you're absolutely right. That's the kind of discipline our children really need.

Five Questions for Diagnosing Strength Breakdowns

For all of the reasons above, I often talk with parents about reframing children's challenging behaviors as lapses in strength or as strength breakdowns. Rather than thinking, This kid is a problem, it's about thinking, for example, This challenging behavior is happening because she forgot to use her strengths of fairness and kindness. Rather than punishing your child, it's a time to teach her how to better use and fine-tune her strengths. Reframing in this way keeps you from shaming your child and makes both you and your child feel that this is something the child is capable of fixing. Here are five questions you can ask yourself to diagnose a child's strength breakdown:

- **Question #1: Is It Strength Overuse?**

Humor and playfulness are among my husband Matt's top strengths. When I met Matt in college, he had a way of lifting my heavy heart with his quick wit, big laugh, and ability to see the lighter side of life. To this day, he still lifts my heart and makes me laugh—big belly laughs—regularly. I'm not the only one who appreciates his humor and playfulness. He's regularly asked to be master of ceremonies at his friends' functions, and Nick is proud that his friends think he has a funny dad at school.

Everyone enjoys Matt's humor.

Well, almost everyone. He tells me that it used to get him in trouble with the teachers at school. What was an appropriate display of this strength in the schoolyard was not appropriate in the classroom. In one context, Matt's playfulness was appreciated; in another, it was viewed as disrespect. Understanding the social landscape is important in deciding when and exactly how much humor to let out to play. Many strengths are like that. Curiosity can be viewed as overstepping into nosiness; persistence can be seen as stubbornness; planning and forethought can show up as rigidity; kindness can become subservience.

We've all been guilty of misusing a strength and getting into trouble. When we look at behavior this way, it constructively changes how we respond.

A strength-based parent taking a child to task for overplaying humor could say, "You've got a great sense of humor, but when you overplay it, you get out of control and it's not a strength anymore. It leads to bad outcomes. What can you do to fix this situation and make sure your humor doesn't get out of control next time?"

Looking at misbehavior from this perspective teaches kids strengths flexibility: how to switch gears between strengths depending on the situation they're in and the people they're with. We tend to fall into the habit of over-relying on our core strengths. This doesn't sound so bad, but it can lead to negative consequences. Even virtuous qualities like forgiveness can be overplayed and lead to negative outcomes, as this mom explained:

I have a strained relationship with my own mom. She can say and do things that are extremely hurtful. It's always been like this, and my dad has always asked me to forgive my mom so we can mend things. I have a forgiving nature, so I'm the one who makes the peace. When my daughter was born, my mom continued to do hurtful things, but this time toward my daughter. My husband pointed out that the downside of my forgiveness was that I was not setting clear boundaries, which allowed my mom to keep being hurtful. Forgiveness only works if the other person is prepared to change their negative behavior. So I decided to work more through fairness and courage to let me be brave and stand up to my mom and let her know that it wasn't right for her to be so hurtful toward me or my daughter. Things will always be strained, but my new approach has helped to move things forward for us.

Is strength overuse causing problems for your child? This parent noticed that her son's overuse of persistence was leading to frustration:

Ben has always loved building with Lego—a process he approaches very methodically, always studying the pictures on the box, reading the instructions, and, as he says, “preparing his build area” before he starts. When he was about ten, I asked him why he thought he was such a good Lego builder. He said it was because he just stuck with things until he got them done. Ben used to try to complete his Lego building in one session and wouldn't take a break or stop until it was finished. Toward the end of a build, he often got tired and frustrated if he made a mistake. I saw this as an overuse of his perseverance. I began telling him that he knew he would always finish building because of his perseverance—but he needed to take a break to refresh himself. This seems to have developed into some effective study habits: He always completes his work, and he paces himself with short breaks.

In another situation, strength overuse affected a child's test performance:

Zoe's top strength is appreciation of beauty and excellence. She was struggling to complete math tests in the time frame allocated, until we figured out that she was handing in the neatest, most beautifully written test papers, but not the fastest. She was focusing too much on the “beauty” of her presentation, to the point of not meeting the time requirements. This was a great insight in helping her improve (although she still hates rushing her work!).

This parent's strength-based reframing helped her work with her teenage son to repair a situation with an angry teacher:

I was just about to leave for work when my son Alex's math teacher called me. She didn't sound happy. I asked how I could help her.

“Alex needs to learn a thing or two about manners and stop talking back to me in class,” she snapped.

I felt my indignation rise in defense of my son, but instead of retorting, I said I was just leaving for work and suggested we discuss the issue at a more appropriate time, and after I'd spoken to Alex.

That night, the teacher's words were still ringing in my ears as I asked Alex what happened. While he recounted the situation, I kept in mind that his top strength is fairness.

After listening to Alex's version of the story and seeing it through his lens of fairness and justice, what had transpired made a lot of sense to me. Speaking to his strengths, I told him I understood why he would have felt unjustly targeted. That gave both of us perspective on the situation. I then used his fairness to help him see the situation from his teacher's point of view. After all, it's only fair to see both sides of the story. Using fairness as the anchor for our conversation, we talked about a more constructive way for him to communicate his ideas to the teacher. The next day he was able to resolve the issue with her without rancor.

It was a parent-child conversation I was proud of. In the past, I might have simply started with his teacher's accusations, laced with my own disappointment. Coming at this difficult conversation from a strengths perspective made all the difference.

Question #2: Is It Strength Underuse?

Asking your child whether she might be underusing or underplaying a strength is a much more positive way to help her reflect on her behavior than fixating on what she did wrong. Consider these contrasts in parent-child conversation:

Shame based: "I heard you were teasing the new student at school. I'm so humiliated that everyone knows about this. Typical of you to be mean. When will you ever change?"

Strength based: "I'm disappointed that you were teasing the new student at school. I see kindness and generosity in you so many other times. Last week you got up from watching TV to help your grandmother up the stairs and carry in her packages. I was so touched and proud to see how you noticed she needed help and you stepped forward. Your kindness is such a good quality in you. Is there a reason why you aren't using it with the new student?"

Or: Guilt based: "Why did you quit the team after you lost the game? That's not like you. You know that's poor sportsmanship."

Strength based: "I'm curious what made you decide to quit the team after you lost the game. That just doesn't seem like you. What do you think might have happened if you had brought forward some of your strengths of perspective, teamwork, or fairness?"

Helping children see where they might be underusing their strengths builds their mindfulness about their behaviors. It's also empowering: Kids realize that it's not a matter of their being "bad" but rather that their best self was not present in a particular situation: I didn't do this because I'm a bad person. I just forgot to bring in certain strengths. I know I have those strengths inside of me. If I bring them in next time, this situation won't happen again.

Strength underuse, like overuse, becomes easier to address the more you become a strength-based parent. As your child begins to see that she has many strengths available to her, the two of you will find endless combinations of how she can use her strengths to stay out of trouble and move forward positively in all sorts of situations.

Question #3: Is It the Flip Side or Shadow Side of a Strength?

Sometimes what we see as a problem is really the flip side, or what psychologists call the "shadow side," of a strength.¹⁰ In those situations, we need to help our kids learn new ways to regulate or express their strengths:

Mia asks questions incessantly. It can be exhausting. While I want her to learn, grow in wisdom, and always be curious, at times I just want some peace and quiet! I have been speaking to Mia about how much I love her curiosity and the way she is interested in so many things. I suggested to her that it would also be good to be curious in other ways—without talking. She could be curious about people and what is around her. Together we have worked on showing curiosity about people's body language, i.e., how to tell when someone is looking distracted or, let's face it, getting annoyed with all the questions.

Mia now sees that her curiosity about people and their body language could help her to know when it is a good time to ask questions and when it is best to stay quiet. When it isn't a good time, she chooses to feed her curiosity in other ways, using her other senses. This has helped her to become more aware and know when quiet is required.

Even what we might consider highly challenging behavior might be better handled if we can flip our view to see it through a strength lens, as this teacher discovered:

I thought I knew my eleventh graders pretty well—I had known them for their entire lives at school and taught some of them at some stage. However, talking with them about their strengths surveys allowed me to see them in different ways. For example, we teachers often found one girl challenging. She would do anything to get out of things she didn't want to do, and her mom backed her up all the way, which was frustrating. She always questioned things, challenged school rules, asked why she had to do things, et cetera. She wasn't nasty, just obstructive and needed careful handling, otherwise she could get very argumentative and sometimes rude.

But looking at her strengths and discussing them with her enabled me to understand where she was coming from, and to have a conversation about some of the things that had gotten in the way of our relationship. Her top strength, by far, was curiosity. Her second was fairness. Her third was honesty. She wasn't challenging; she was curious. She wasn't obstructionist; she was honest. If she felt she, and other students, weren't being treated fairly, she was going to tell us!

It was as if scales had dropped from my eyes. In our conversation, I could also express my frustration that she got out of things by using notes from home and how I felt that wasn't fair. She took that on board and, honestly, it hasn't happened since.

Sometimes it's our children who focus on the shadow side of their strengths and need our help to see themselves more positively:

Annalise was a little embarrassed at having appreciation of beauty and excellence as her top strength. She thought it sounded "flaky." That changed in ninth grade, when the students were told they had to conduct research (including generating new data) and produce a "product" based on their findings.

Annalise was interested in the relationship between music and emotions. She developed a product called the "Positivity Playlist," a playlist of ten songs she selected for their positive impact on mood. She surveyed students to identify what genres of music they listened to and then spent a lot of time assembling a playlist that met her criteria for genres, tempos, lyrics, and continuity within the playlist. She took a beautiful photo of yellow daisies for the playlist cover and used it as a brand image on all of her supporting materials, wrote an excellent report, and got an A for her efforts!

In talking about the experience with Annalise, I said that her strengths of appreciation of beauty and excellence and her creativity were evident in the originality of the idea and the care she put into getting just the right look and feel for the playlist and accompanying materials. Many students and teachers had commented on her creativity and attention to detail. She felt really proud of her work.

This very positive experience has led to some fantastic learning developments: This year she's taking a course called History of Aesthetics and is loving it! She's at the top of the class and was singled out for the quality of one of her essays. Her academic confidence is overflowing into other subjects, too. So many positives—and it started with honoring her strengths.

Question #4: Could It Be a Blocked Strength?

A blocked strength can cause a strong emotional response. When we can't live in a way that feels authentic to us, it feels wrong and we get angry. How many of us have been hard to live with at home when we feel undervalued or underutilized at work?

Remember the story I told in Chapter 3 about my writer friend who had tantrums because she didn't yet know how to read? Not everyone feels the depth, richness, magic, and joy of playing with words, but that child had an inborn strength she was struggling to cultivate, and her strength was blocked because she grew up in an era when kids weren't taught to read before first grade. If your child is acting out, ask yourself if his strengths are being frustrated or blocked in some way.

Question #5: Could It Be Forced Overuse of a Weakness or of a Learned Behavior?

It's almost a cliché in the business world: A talented achiever gets promoted into a management position that's a far cry from the original tasks in which she excelled and from which she derived great satisfaction. Even if she's a good manager, she's miserable because her new job forces her to constantly use learned behaviors rather than work from the energizing flow of her strengths. And if management skills are weaknesses for her, let's just say that she won't be the only one who's miserable on the job. Being forced to use weakness or learned behavior could lead to bad behavior.

It's exhausting and stressful to be in a situation where we must constantly use a weakness. Also depleting is being repeatedly required to use a learned skill that we know how to do—and may even perform well and be praised for—but that doesn't energize us and isn't balanced by the opportunity to flex our strengths. If it's hard for us as adults to handle this, imagine how a child, lacking the coping skills of a mature adult, might

feel and react in such situations. If your child's behavior is frequently challenging, look at what his typical days are like. Perhaps the bad behavior is a result of him having to over-rely on weaknesses or learned behavior.

Putting Strength-Based Discipline into Practice

It takes only a few minutes to think through the questions above and get a sense of how your child's strengths are playing out (or not) in a given situation. Once you've got a handle on what might be happening, here are four tactics to try:

Tactic #1: Use Circuit Breakers to Reestablish the Strength Connection

You learned about these in previous chapters. They can really help us and our kids replenish self-control by calming the nervous system and shifting thinking from the emotion-driven limbic system to the rational frontal lobe, a driver of self-control. You can still let your child know his behavior was unacceptable, but the discussion will be more effective if you use these tactics to downshift to a calmer mode before addressing the situation:

- Take some downtime. Say, "I need time to think about this before we talk about it." Then go do a good goofing-off activity that settles your emotions. Perhaps suggest your child do the same.
- Do a two-minute breathing exercise. There's almost always time, even in a tough situation, to take a few deep, steady breaths. This, too, calms the nervous system.
- Spend some time feeling grateful. Bad things happen, but that doesn't mean there's nothing in life to enjoy and appreciate. Find something to be grateful for. Be grateful that you even have a kid to argue with in the first place. Depending on your child's mood, the two of you might do this together. Maybe try petting the dog together, taking a time-out for a snack, or walking around the block. It may calm the brain's limbic arousal and help both of you get a better handle on feelings.

Tactic #2: Suggest Dialing Up or Dialing Down a Strength

I introduce the idea of dialing up and dialing down strengths to the teachers and parents I work with. It's effective in the classroom and one-on-one.

Basically, you suggest to the child that she needs to turn up or turn down the "volume," or intensity level, on her strengths to address specific issues she's dealing with. You'll discover which strengths need to be dialed up or down by asking yourself Questions 1 and 2 above about strength overuse or underuse. Doing this with your child helps her learn to regulate herself and understand that different situations call for different behaviors:

Claire and I spoke about what a wonderful strength bravery is, but how, if overplayed, it could make her too bossy with her sisters and result in clashes. We talked about how she could turn this strength down if she felt it wasn't serving her so well. We also talked about other times she gets to do things her sisters can't because she's "brave." And we talked about how she is someone who sticks with things—and that sometimes that's good, but at other times it's dialed up too high and becomes stubbornness.

You might even find that your child eventually turns the tables on you!

Henry is a social, rambunctious five-year-old with a boundless enthusiasm for life. We ask him to dial up or down his strengths in situations—e.g., kindness when he has hurt another, forgiveness when another has hurt him, patience when he needs to wait for what he wants—almost every day! One day when he noticed me impatiently flicking the radio stations in the car, he informed me that I needed to use more of my strength of patience!

Tactic #3: Encourage a Strength versus Fixating on the Negative Behaviors

This tactic can create constructive dialogue around even serious behavior problems, as this school psychologist explains:

A tenth-grade boy at our school was getting into trouble, socializing with the wrong people, and he had just been caught shoplifting. He had already been suspended a few times and we were not expecting him to complete tenth grade. He and I did the VIA Survey of Character Strengths and identified, among other things, that leadership was one of his signature strengths. This discovery and our conversation about it proved pivotal. First, I think it was the first time he had ever received feedback that he had all of these good qualities inside. He was so touched to hear about them that he cried. Secondly, we were able to focus on fostering his leadership strength in healthy ways. We learned that outside of school he was a great rugby player and was the captain of his team. We were able to cultivate his leadership strength in school, and he successfully finished the year.

This family made a ritual of celebrating achievement rather than nagging about who was falling short:

We reward achievement and results with a family celebration dinner. We give our sons their favorite meal and include a special cake. At the dinner, the effort and achievement of our sons are honored. This tradition acts as a motivator.

Tactic #4: Substitute or Swap in a Strength

A friend of mine is a remedial massage therapist who always starts by working with the healthy tissue before she addresses the inflamed and injured area. If she starts directly on the injured tissue, her patients become rigid and the healing isn't effective. Similarly, if you go straight for your child's weakness, your child will naturally become defensive. You can help your child work on her weaknesses more effectively by starting first with her "healthy tissue"—her strengths. When Nick or Emily comes to me with a problem, I've trained myself to swap in a strength and ask: "What is a strength you have that can help you fix this?"

I wasn't always so quick to take this approach. Emily would be the first to admit that impatience is a weakness of hers. When she was in the first grade, her teacher told me Emily was talking too much in class. It turns out Emily was finishing her work more quickly than her classmates and became impatient waiting, so she talked to her friends as they were trying to finish their work. I spoke to Emily a number of times about this and asked her to wait patiently. She didn't exactly take my advice to heart. When she was sent to the school principal, I needed a new tactic.

I realized that I was framing the issue in terms of her weakness—the fact that she lacks patience. Instead of trying to minimize a weakness, I decided to maximize a strength. So I turned on my Strength Switch and thought about the positive feedback I'd gotten from her teacher at the parent-teacher conference the previous semester, when the teacher had praised Emily's cooperative nature, her love of learning, and her kindness. Emily has been kind ever since she was very young, when she would share her toys, include people in her games, and go out of her way to make others feel good. Kindness is one of her core strengths.

I talked to Emily about how she could show kindness to her friends by letting them finish their work because it would make them feel good to have that sense of accomplishment, just as she felt good about her own love of learning. I also suggested that she could show kindness and cooperation to her teacher by not disrupting the class.

As soon as I turned on my Strength Switch and reframed the situation through her strengths of kindness and cooperation rather than harping on her weakness of impatience, Emily immediately understood what she needed to do, and her classroom behavior improved.

Use the Three Ps to Work with Weaknesses

There are times, of course, when you've got to confront weakness head-on. Maybe your child struggles in an academic subject but needs to achieve a certain grade in order to meet his educational goals. I wasn't good at math, but I had to do well enough to get into graduate school for psychology, survive statistics, and get my PhD, so I set about getting extra tutoring. Or maybe your child is impatient like Emily and needs to learn to manage those feelings better.

After all, we all have weaknesses. Matt and I think patience is such an important trait that we are working on it directly with Emily.

The key to working with weaknesses is to make sure your focus doesn't become too deficit oriented. Remember the clay-modeling exercise we did in Chapter 1? Use gratitude, mindfulness, and self-control to ensure that your attention hasn't been overly drawn to the holes in the clay. Do what needs to be done to address the weakness so that it's not getting in the way of goals, good behavior, or performance, but don't expect your child to turn a weakness 180 degrees into a strength.

At home and in my work with parents, I find that a three-pronged approach I call the Three Ps—priming, present-moment, and postmortem—can be effective in working with weakness.

Priming

What it is: In priming, you give the child a heads-up that he's going into a situation where he will need to work with a particular weakness.

Success tips: Be calm and matter-of-fact. Life happens and we all sometimes have to deal with things we don't like to do or aren't good at. Ask the child what strengths he can draw on to manage his feelings. Suggest some circuit breakers the child can use if he starts to feel stressed. If possible, do your first priming processes in low-stakes, low-pressure situations, when both of you are feeling even-keeled and rested, so your child's self-control—and yours—is likely to be strong.

EXAMPLES

- Emily's impatience: "This is going to be a long car drive. It's going to take us at least an hour. There's a lot of traffic. I can't do anything about it. I understand it's annoying. It's annoying for me, too. This is one of those situations where your being impatient is not going to get us there any faster. It's just going to make you feel restless and annoyed and anxious. So be mindful of this as we go into the situation. What are some things we can do to help you feel less impatient during the car ride?" (To this, Emily will often suggest bringing a book, some artwork to do, or her finger puppets to play with.)
- Improving a sports skill: "You would be a lot harder to beat in basketball if you could learn to shoot outside the key. You're great at shooting under the basket, but everyone expects you to miss outside the key, so no one defends you there. You're wide open to make the shot if you can build that skill. This week, let's practice making it more automatic to stop and shoot outside the key. I know it's not your favorite shot to take, but it will really expand your offense and it'll get better with practice."
- Improving an academic skill: "You know this material well, but your test scores don't reflect it. I think you're letting yourself down through poor exam preparation leading up to the test, and I wonder also if you're getting nervous during the test and that is stopping you from thinking clearly. This month, before we get into the hectic period of finals week, we're going to work on exam prep and strategy, from how you sleep and study to how you use your time and calm your nerves efficiently during the test."

Present Moment

What it is: There are two levels to choose from. Level One is simple mindfulness—flagging the issue for the child as the situation is happening to help the child prepare. Level Two is actively working on the weakness in the moment. The more your child practices addressing her weakness in present-moment situations, the less dominant it becomes.

Success tips: Ideally, practice Level Two at a time when you and your child are feeling rested and able to practice mindfulness, unlikely to lose your tempers.

EXAMPLES

- Emily's impatience, simple mindfulness: "This is one of those times when I see your patience is being tested."
- Emily's impatience, working on the weakness in the moment: "Now's the time to take a couple of deep breaths and think about a different way of responding. Let's look at it from another perspective. Is being impatient going to make the car drive any faster? Is it going to make the legal system change the speed limits? Is it going to make the other cars on the road get out of the way because there's an impatient nine-year-old in the backseat of the car? Nope, impatience is not going to change things."
- Improving a sports skill: Direct the child to do the shot in the game, with prompts or corrections called out or given during time-outs. Improving an academic skill: Obviously you won't be in the exam, so you can't help the child in the moment. But you can coach him while he takes practice exams at home. Here you can be in the present moment, coaching him to take deep breaths, keep track of the time, highlight the key aspects of each question, and ask questions if needed. This way, when the moment does arise, your child will be prepared to overcome the poor exam technique that has limited him in the past.

Postmortem

What it is: Here you talk with your child after the fact to identify what happened, discuss how things went, look at what needs improvement, and agree on steps for getting there. A postmortem might happen a few minutes, hours, or days later (when everyone's feeling cooler): "OK, let's talk about what just happened/this morning's test/the game last night/what happened the other day."

Success tips: The goal here is to help the child become mindful about how events unfolded, how she was feeling, how she acted/reacted, and what she can do differently next time: "What was it about that situation that made you feel this way/do or say what you did? What strengths do you think might help you manage better? Is there a strength that needs to be dialed down or up? What do you think we could try so things might go better next time?"

EXAMPLES

- Emily's impatience: As well as drawing on Emily's kindness to address her talking in class, I also spoke with her about her impatience and asked her to tell me what thoughts and feelings she was having when she finished her work and looked around to find others still working. I suggested she use the time to review her work and make sure there were no errors, or make her work look better/prettier. This last idea really appealed to her creative and artistic side, and she learned that there were ways to not listen to her impatient thoughts.
- Improving a sports skill: With skills, postmortems are usually about determining next steps for improvement via additional resources and practice. It starts with looking at what went right and what didn't: "You nailed the shot here and here, but there were missed opportunities here and here." "This shot fell short because your body wasn't lined up properly." Then, together, lay out an approach for skill improvement. Be sure to talk about mind-set issues that may be holding the child back.
- Improving an academic skill: Here, too, it's about agreeing on the needed resources and practice, based on recent events: "Let's talk about last week's test. You knew your stuff, so do you think the test score matches how much you knew?" "How did you calm yourself down? Did you do some deep breathing?" "How did it go with timing on the test? Did you get stuck for too long in some sections? How could you do better with keeping time?" "Did you ask your teacher to explain if you were unsure about the instructions?" You might talk about arranging for tutoring, setting up study or test prep schedules, doing timed test run-throughs, or other processes to address specific issues in systematic, achievable steps. Also talk about the child's thoughts and feelings to see if these may be undermining the child on some level.

What is your commitment?

