

PROFESSOR LEA WATERS, Ph.D. PRESENTS...

THE
MOST
IMPORTANT
QUESTIONS TO ASK **3**

To become a

STRENGTH-BASED PARENT





I'm so excited to be able to support you in your strength-based parenting journey by offering you regular newsletters and letting you be for the first to know when my book comes out 'The Strength Switch: How the new science of strength-based parenting can help your child and your teen flourish' (Penguin Press).

Today I want to share with you the 3 most important questions you need to ask to become a strength-based parent. But first let's look at what strength-based parenting is and why we need to be strength-based parents.

Lea Waters Ph.D.

THE CASE FOR STRENGTH-BASED PARENTING

Strength-based parenting is a style of parenting that encourages you to intentionally and regularly build upon your child's positive qualities. It's about noticing **what your kids have done right** before you look at what they've done wrong.



It means placing more emphasis on **amplifying your child's potential** than fixing their shortcomings. In sum, it's about helping them to become the **best version of themselves**.

I've been a psychologist for 23 years and a researcher for 20 years, and I'm fascinated by what helps people thrive. My studies show that **when children and teenagers have strengths-focused parents, they report better psychological outcomes**, including:

- higher levels of life satisfaction;
- higher amounts of positive emotions such as joy and hope;
- a better understanding of their own strengths;
- using their strengths to help them meet homework deadlines;
- using their strengths to help deal with friendship issues;
- coping with stress in more proactive ways;
- lower levels of day-to-day stress.

So, strength-based parenting seems like the way to go right?

Yes, but when I asked a sample of nearly 10,000 teenagers to rate the degree to which their parents were strength-based, approximately 25 percent rated their parents as low in SBP and about 20 percent gave their parents just a moderate rating.

Only a little over half rated their parents as being strength-based (and even then the scores were not high). There's an opportunity for many parents to become more strength-based.



THE THREE ELEMENTS OF A STRENGTH

In order to be strength-based, you need to know what your child's strengths are. That's harder than it seems because we live in a society that places disproportionate emphasis on success which means many people unwittingly define strengths as things we perform well.

When I was a child, I studied clarinet. I hated it, but I was good at it. My teacher convinced my parents to keep me enrolled because I performed well and had musical talent. I did it for years because it was one of my strengths. Right?

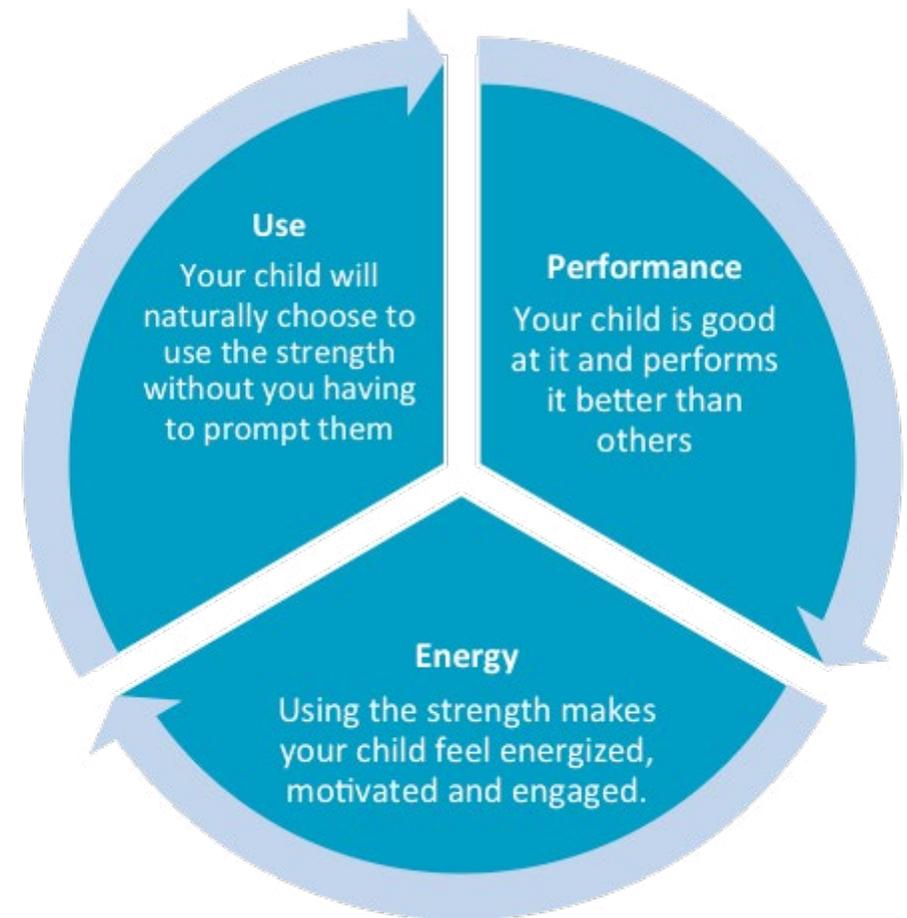
Wrong. A strength isn't just something your kid does well, it also has to be something they enjoy doing and choose to do.

A true strength has three elements: **performance, energy and use.**

My son, Nick, is good at tennis. He is naturally athletic so he has the performance element. But I know tennis is not a true strength of his because he never finishes his practice. The 'energy' and 'use' elements are missing.

On the other hand, I can't get him to stop practicing basketball. He's out in the backyard shooting baskets whenever he gets a spare minute (**use**), he has abundant energy to practice (**energy**) and he's good at it (**performance**). He's just been selected for the A grade team. #proud mom

If it's a true strength, these three elements will form a beautiful feedback loop as shown in the diagram.



The Three Elements of a Strength

Great performance provides the child with a shot of high energy, so the child naturally chooses to do more. In turn, high use—also known as effort or practice—improves performance levels. So, for example, if you notice that your child is energized when she plays the piano, and you provide enjoyable opportunities for her to play, if she’s mining a true strength she will likely practice more, which improves her performance, which then energizes her . . . and so the loop continues.

If it’s not a true strength, performance will not lead on to energy and your child will be doing something because he thinks he ought to rather than because he wants to, like me with the clarinet.

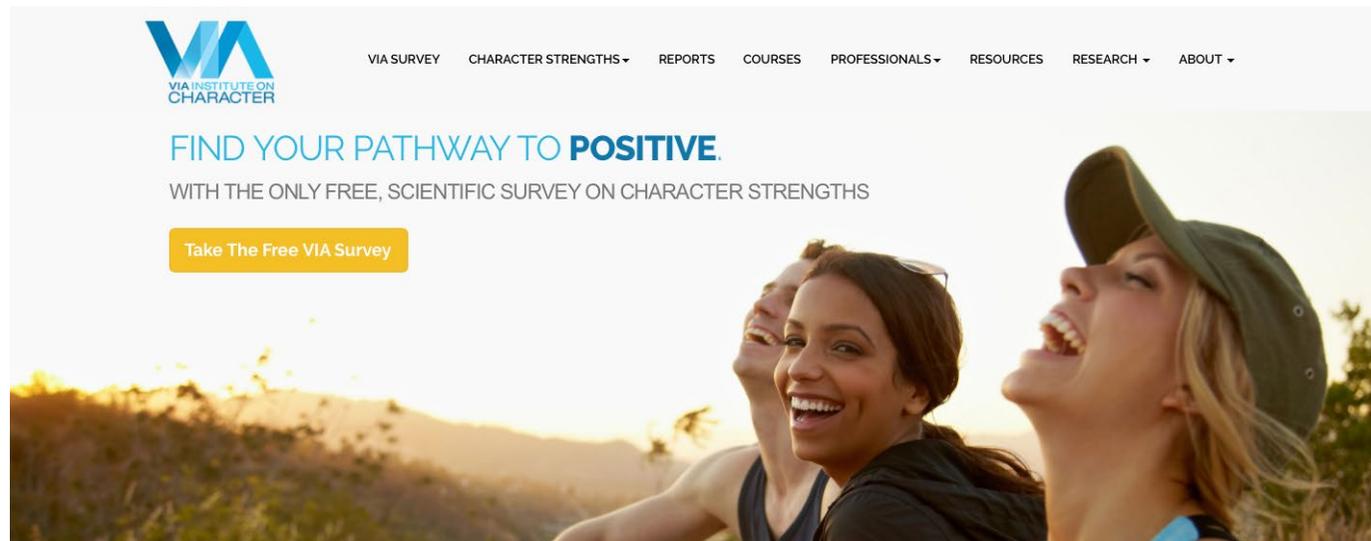
Knowing these three elements helps you to see what a true strength is in your child. In my case, it helps me know that I’m better to help Nick invest more of his time and energy in basketball than tennis.

When you see your child do something well, do it with energy, and do it a lot—you’ll know you’ve unearthed a strength. This doesn’t only apply for talents such as sport or music it also applies to the second bucket of strengths – our character strengths.



Character strengths are our positive personality qualities such as kindness, persistence, curiosity and bravery. Every child has character strengths and you'll notice that your child has some aspects of their character that they perform well such as the child who has emotional intelligence above and beyond her years or who has the self-regulation of an adult.

As well as the performance element, the character strength will evoke high levels of energy when used and the child will naturally use that strength over and over. If you want to learn more about character strengths I invite you go to the Values in Action Institute website:
<https://www.viacharacter.org/>



THE 3 STRENGTHS QUESTIONS TO ASK TO BECOME A STRENGTH-BASED PARENT

To help you be a strength-based parent, I suggest you start by observing your child's daily behavior, interactions, and interests and ask yourself these three questions while you're watching your child...



1 DO I SEE PERFORMANCE?

Watch for when your child shows above-age levels of achievement, rapid learning, and a repeated pattern of success.

Examples: The young child who, within a short time of picking up a baseball bat, is routinely making great hits. The grade-schooler who buries her nose in books and uses more complex words and sentence structures than her peers. The teenager who consistently displays a more sophisticated understanding of emotions than most adults.



2

DO I SEE ENERGY?

Strengths are self-reinforcing: The more we use them, the more we get from them. They fill us with vigor.

You'll notice your child has abundant energy when using a strength. My daughter, Emily, has a talent for art, and when she's drawing or painting, I notice that she has unusually big stores of energy. She rarely gets tired when she's being artistic.



3

DO I SEE HIGH USE?

Finally, look for what your child chooses to do in her spare time and how often she engages in a particular activity.

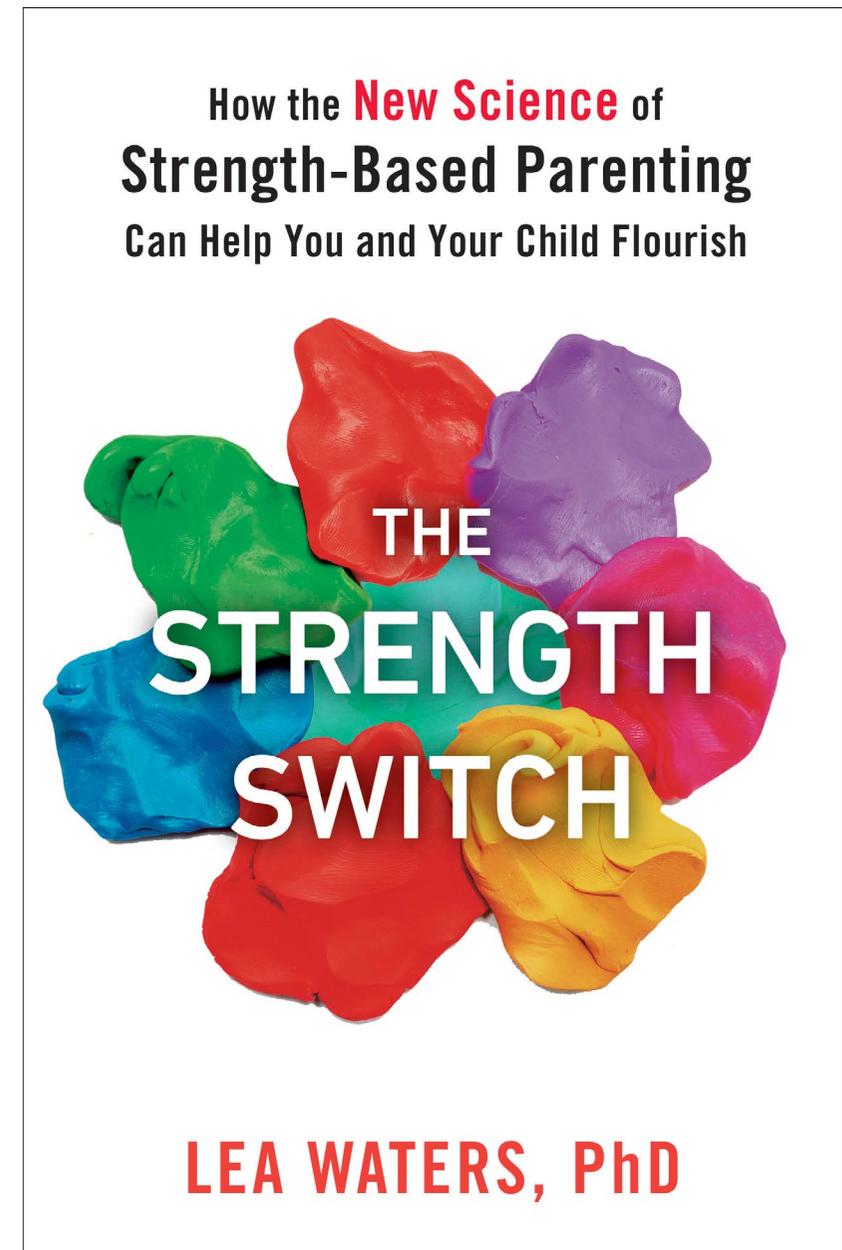
Emily is constantly doodling, seemingly without even realizing it. She'll be watching TV, but with a pencil in her hand. If cartoons are on, she draws the characters while watching. It's just part of who she is.



When you see your child do something well, do it with energy, and do it a lot—you'll know you've **unearthed a strength**.

This is the basis from which you can start to **grow and build upon your child's strengths**.

We'll look at more tips how to do this in my newsletters, and my upcoming book 'The Strength Switch: How the new science of strength-based parenting can help your child and your teen flourish' due for release mid 2017.



About Professor Lea Waters, Ph.D.

Professor Waters, Ph.D., is a psychologist, researcher, speaker and author who specializes in positive parenting, positive education and positive organizations.

Lea is the first Australian to be appointed as a Professor in Positive Psychology and holds the Gerry Higgins Chair in Positive Psychology at the University of Melbourne. She is the founding Director of the Centre for Positive Psychology, University of Melbourne (2009–2016) and was listed as one of Australia's Top 100 Women of Influence by the Financial Review and Westpac Bank (2015).

Professor Waters is the president elect of the International Positive Psychology Association, has affiliate positions with Cambridge University and University of Michigan and has been listed in the Marquis 'Who's Who in the World' since 2009. She has presented her research in United States, United Kingdom, Europe, Asia and the Pacific and has published over 85 papers in scientific journals and books.

She is a highly regarded speaker and has received invitations to speak at conferences across the world including the International Positive Education's World Congress, the Canadian Positive Psychology Association's National Conferences, the International Positive Psychology Association's World Congress and the New Zealand Positive Psychology Association's National Conference. Her TEDx talk focuses on how we can spread positive messages through social media. A gifted teacher and facilitator, Lea has been awarded International and National Teaching Awards including the Management Educator of the Year (2004) by the Australian and New Zealand Academy of Management and has received two National Teaching Excellence Awards from the Australian Government (2008, 2011).

Professor Waters features in the ABC TV documentary *Revolution School* and is regularly featured in the newspaper and on radio.

Her Positive Detective Program is being used by schools and families in the United States, Canada, United Kingdom, Finland, Mexico, China, Hong Kong, Singapore, Indonesia, Australia, and New Zealand.

Follow Lea on [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#) @ProfLeaWaters and join Lea on [Facebook](#) at Lea Waters.