



What Are Character Strengths?



I am so excited for you to begin to understand the huge pool of resiliency that character traits are! Character traits provide a map of how to be when confronted with very difficult situations.

I am including on this website lists of many valuable traits that different people have highlighted to include on our list of fifty-two weeks of character traits. Those are Benjamin Franklin, Stephen R. Covey and the Stoic philosophers. We can also include family stories, miracle stories that have happened to us and Spiritual Gifts. There is so much to teach and understand at family dinner!

Dr. Martin Seligman did an in depth study of not just character traits but character *strengths*. Some of the traits can also be strengths as you will see throughout the year of reading these stories. Character strengths will reinforce our children by already highlighting what they are doing naturally well. Because they love us, and are attached to us, they seek our validation and love. My children looooooved me talking about their strengths to them.

We as parents can benefit from being exposed to positive psychology and the way it shows us what to focus on. I have been a perennial

worrier. I am so grateful that I discovered Dr. Martin Seligman's work. Through his books, I learned to focus on "what went well," instead of "what is wrong" or "what could go wrong." My husband and I have taken many of Dr. Seligman's suggestions into practice. Daily, I write down three things that went well that day. My husband and I also do this weekly on Sundays and write down a long list of what went well in the past seven days. We also talk about *why* things are going well, as Dr. Seligman suggests. It's amazing how changing our focus to "what went well," rather than "what went wrong," has changed our outlook. It is a way to look at the past week and see all the gains that we have made, however small. This small dose of positive psychology has had a great impact in my life and has helped me be a better parent. I have also applied this principle to seeking out the positive character strengths in my children and talking those over with them.¹

Dr. Martin Seligman is a pioneering psychologist who is known as the founder of "positive psychology." He brought a scientific framework to positive psychology, resilience, learned helplessness, depression, optimism, and pessimism. He said the beginning of positive psychology happened when he was weeding his yard with his 5-year-old daughter Nikki. She told him, "If I can stop whining, you can stop being such a grouch." Her challenge stopped him in his tracks.

What if, he began to wonder, he studied well-being instead of unhappiness, accomplishment instead of failure, strength instead of sickness? Perhaps psychology could become less fixated on neuroses, less dependent on Prozac, and, altogether, more useful. Perhaps he could improve his life and redirect the profession: "Positive psychology called to me just as the burning bush called to Moses."²

Over the next thirty years, Dr. Seligman poured himself into this new philosophy, writing dozens of papers and bestselling books, and sharing his insights into positive psychology with academics, professionals, students, medical communities, military personnel, and the general public. Among his better-known books are *Flourish*, *Authentic Happiness*, *Learned Optimism*, *The Optimistic Child*, *Helplessness*, and *Abnormal Psychology*.

Dr. Seligman says, “Our character strengths are what come most naturally to us.” All of us, including our children, have natural abilities, or character strengths, that we are already using and enjoying what comes easily without realizing it. We as parents can help our children see what character strengths they already have. This helps them realize what they are already good at, which can encourage them to see that getting more character is a muscle to be worked on.

In his book *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification*, he creates a broad latticework of all the character strengths we as humans can have. Seligman and his team spent three years analyzing spiritual texts and studying the values of different cultures. They ended up with this 814-page encyclopedia.³ Here are his 24 Character Strengths, divided into subcategories:

- **Wisdom & Knowledge:** Creativity, Curiosity, Open-mindedness, Love of Learning, Perspective.
- **Courage:** Bravery, Integrity, Perseverance, Zest/Enthusiasm.
- **Humanity:** Kindness, Love, Social Intelligence.
- **Justice:** Fairness, Leadership, Teamwork/Citizenship.
- **Temperance:** Forgiveness, Humility/Modesty, Prudence, Self-Control.
- **Transcendence:** Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence, Gratitude, Hope/Optimism, Humor, Connection/Purpose.⁴

I will highlight the traits that Dr. Seligman lists as character *strengths* as they come up in the 365 days of stories. Our enthusiasm for their strengths will ignite an excitement in our children. We don’t have to change them or work with them. It is who they already are, and that knowledge is glorious. This awareness is liberating and so beneficial to both parent and child and encourages all of us to keep working and adding to our strengths.

We must teach that this is not a competition—we can all have humility and gratitude as our strengths. As we teach our children about their character strengths, let’s remind them to have a growth mindset. Even if something comes easily to them, they still have to

put forth the effort to do it well. Dr. Carol Dweck, the psychologist who introduced the growth mindset principle, reminds us:

The key to instilling a growth mindset is teaching kids that their brains are like muscles that can be strengthened through hard work and persistence. So rather than saying “Not everybody is good at math. Just do your best,” a teacher or parent should say “When you learn how to do a new math problem, it grows your brain.” Or instead of saying “Maybe math is not one of your strengths,” a better approach is adding “yet” to the end of the sentence: “Maybe math is not one of your strengths yet.”⁵

Carol Dweck’s first sentence thrills me—“their brains are like muscles that can be strengthened through hard work and persistence.” This is such a big idea to show our children why it is worth it to work hard—our brain muscle gets better and better.

I thought it would be helpful if I highlighted one character strength from each of my children. Of course, we all have many strengths and it is exciting to learn what is possible as we look at the list and learn from the character stories on this website. To help you see how to nurture character strengths, I am using mental models from their lives with their experiences. Please refer to the Mental Models article on the web site for more info on what mental models are. Each of the following six strengths and definitions are Dr. Seligman’s classification found on his website after you take the free survey—www.viacharacter.org.



1) Creativity: “I am creative, conceptualizing something useful, coming up with ideas that result in something worthwhile.”

“There are two essential components to Creativity—originality and adaptiveness. A creative individual generates ideas or behaviors that are novel or unusual and these make a positive contribution to the individual’s life or the lives of others.”

The “adaptiveness” part is critical because creativity can make a positive contribution to the person’s life or others lives. Being creative in order to hurt yourself or people is not a character strength.

My son Chase started creating when he was very young. His younger sister’s ninth birthday was beach party themed, and he said, “I know! I can build a hotdog stand for her birthday.” He then spent nine hours cutting and shaping an old cardboard box into a little stand. I clearly remember his happiness, serving the hotdogs from his creation. I have a picture of him grinning from ear to ear, so happy with his ingenuity and the impact it had on the party. This Creativity strength propelled him into hours of drawing on reams of paper donated from a relative’s political race, building a sled on skis, and silk screening shirts in high school.

How did I support this Creative strength?

Creative kids are messy. All of my children benefited from being able to draw, cut, and paint. I looked for stuff I would be throwing away anyway for them to use to make their creations.

My mother had taught me the importance of allowing children to create, so I learned to be patient with the mess. Sweeping up dried Play-Doh and wiping up spilled paints was worth the development I knew was happening in my children, and the pride and joy in their faces as they showed me their creations. Remember to praise their effort, their work in an art project, instead of saying, “You are so creative!”

When Chase was silk screening shirts in high school, he lived in the basement of our house in a little apartment that had a small kitchen sink. That sink was never the same after all of the painting Chase did, but to know he was spending long hours in our basement with a couple of friends was worth it to me. I liked that he was at our house doing creative things. It was easy to encourage a strength that kept him busy for hours at a time.

2) Curiosity: “I seek out situations where I gain new experiences without getting in my own or other people’s way.”

“There are two key components to curious individuals: They are interested in exploring new ideas, activities and experiences, and they also have a strong desire to increase their own personal knowledge.”

From a very young age, Nico, our oldest daughter, was a big talker. She was lively, always asking questions with no filter. One talkative dinner when she was two, my husband looked over her head as she was chattering away and said, “Remember when we wanted her to talk?” I loved her bright spirit and how she noticed everything and included me in her world of wonder. She was so aware and good at noticing things I would have missed. Her curiosity brought a child’s awe into my life many times.

How did I support this Curiosity strength?

I actually struggled with it because she was such a talker. I loved her liveliness and questions but it was exhausting. I got her into reading, which really helped, and she spent a lot of her time immersed in books. Nico was also very entertaining and kept us laughing with her observations and insights because she was so watchful and aware.

When Nico was 14, we were visiting my brother’s house in Mexico, and Nico and my sister-in-law, Jeannie, went out on floats in the ocean for a long time, like a couple of hours. Jeannie came back in and said to me, “Your children are *interested and interesting*.” I had never thought about those two important elements together before. It meant we weren’t focusing on ourselves but asking good questions. It meant we had relevant things to talk about. Jeannie was giving the whole family credit after only talking to this one daughter.

This experience really helped me see the value of her curiosity and helped us focus as a family on being interested and interesting. She started a mental model for us to not talk about ourselves all the time and to ask other people how their day is going, or what is going on in their lives.

Recently, another daughter attended some mini-TED talks given at BYU. She said it gave her more ideas on how to be more interested in someone. One question was, “What are you looking forward to?” Another question, “What have you been thinking about lately?” Focusing on being interested in other people has helped all of us be more curious like Nico is.

3) Love of Learning: “I am motivated to acquire new levels of knowledge, or deepen my existing knowledge or skills in a significant way.”

“Love of learning means a passion for learning, a desire to learn just for learning’s sake. In fact, curiosity and love of learning are among the most closely related strengths in the VIA Classification. They can still be distinguished though. While curiosity is the motivating force that leads you to seek out new information, love of learning refers to the desire to hold on to and deepen that information.”

Sophie loved to learn. She steadily wore me down to skip kindergarten when she found out it was only two and a half hours a day. She read the Book of Mormon by herself before she was baptized, on her own initiative.

Sophie also wanted to earn money. She was constantly asking to learn new ways to earn money and how to do things. She had a little weaving kit and a manual typewriter she would write letters on. She wanted extra jobs because her regular 3 or 4 jobs a day were just to help the family with no money being paid for her contribution.

How did I support this Love of Learning strength?

I navigated her skipping kindergarten and going directly to first grade. I provided workbooks and paper for her to write her own math problems. I had a teacher teach her to use an abacus. I bought her a little broom and dustpan so she could sweep our garage to her heart’s content for money. I encouraged and helped her think of other ways to earn money.

4) Leadership: “You value each member of your group and inspire people to do their best.”

“This character strength’s focus is on the personal qualities of leaders, rather than the practice of leadership. These qualities include the ability to understand others and inspire them toward a common goal, the capacity to mitigate conflict and mold consensus, and the desire to lead other people.”

Abby saw no problem with directing her three older siblings. She could see clearly what needed to be done and tell us all in a straightforward way. I wanted to help direct that clear thinking and talking into something positive. I loved the framework of students helping run schools. 14-year-old Abby loved student government in high school. She ran in 8th grade and easily won for her freshman year. That was such a great experience for her that she ran her sophomore year for her junior year and—lost. She realized that just because you enjoy something, and it comes easily for you, you still have to work hard. This is a growth mind-set realization. She said, “Next year I am going to work much harder than I did.” She ran junior year for her senior year and became Student Body Secretary.

How did I support this Leadership strength?

Abby had older siblings who also ran for student body officer positions and we would gather to brainstorm and be encouraging. I would help her gather supplies, but it was always her deal. We went to help her put up posters at school, and supported her through the week of primaries when she came home sometimes discouraged. We would talk it over, and help her through obstacles she saw. When she lost her Junior year it was very hard. If you win you feel great but if you lose you feel exposed and judged. I kept reinforcing that failures help us to get better and we have to keep trying.

5) Prudence: “I act carefully and cautiously, looking to avoid unnecessary risks and planning with the future in mind.”

“Prudence involves far-sighted planning as well as short-term, goal-directed planning. It is often referred to as cautious wisdom, practical wisdom, and practical reason.”

Another son, Ross, was in the 5th grade and had a thoughtful, careful personality. We were on two paddle boats in a small lake. Our adult friend, Justin, was on one boat with the boys, including Ross. Justin said, “Let’s go and take over the girl’s boat!” Ross turned to him and said, “Do we have insurance?” That strength of prudence—being careful about one’s choices; not taking undue risks; not saying or doing things that might later be regretted—has served Ross well in his life. But when Justin told us privately that day, we had a good laugh about it. We rejoiced in this strength!

How did I support this Prudence strength?

I would highlight things that Ross did or said that showed he was being careful about his choices. I also encouraged him to branch out so he wasn’t being overcautious to the point of missing out on potential opportunities and experiences. He ran for student government and tried out for tennis, so he was still being challenged and pushed, but it is wonderful to have a careful teenager.

Prudent people are also planners. He navigated the tricky path of medical school with his MCAT test taking, all the applications, and surviving his first year. He decided to run for a student leadership role that increased his chance of getting a residency position, which was very competitive. From three years of residency he had to find a job. He picked a job that had loan forgiveness plus lifetime medical benefits after five years. That was a careful and prudent choice. I wish I could take credit for this strength, but it was all him.

6) Perseverance: “I persist toward my goals despite obstacles, discouragements, or disappointments.”

“Perseverance is sticking with things. It means being hardworking and finishing what is started, despite barriers and obstacles that arise.”

My youngest son, Cameron, was very persistent. He would not give up when something was important to him. He taught me to be very careful about what promises I made to him because he would persistently hold me to them. He was good at having friends over and planning things, because he had to be persistent in our chaotic household to make things happen. This makes me wonder if he was born persistent or if he had to learn to be as the youngest of six? I enjoyed watching him grow on his mission and use this strength as his time in Mexico City was cut short at 16 months because of Covid-19 and then finish his mission in Arkansas.

How did I support this Persistence strength?

As a child, he would be very persistent with things he wanted, but not with things he didn't want to do, which is natural. I worked with him to help him be persistent with the things he didn't want to do. I thought if I didn't have the patience, who would? I helped him develop a bread-making business for his mission when he was twelve. I had to gear up for this because once he started I didn't want him to quit when he lost interest in it. At first he said, “This is fun!” as we worked together making bread. After a few weeks he said he didn't want to do it anymore. I kept working with him until he could do it all on his own—grinding the wheat, making, baking, delivering the bread—and then his persistent strength took over and he did it on his own, for four years, until he turned sixteen. Then he told me he was ready to work at the mall and I said, “Great!”

This little job that he persisted at was great essay material when he applied to college.



Our Children's Strengths Are a Framework for Them To Build On

In 2019, I was driving 26-year-old Abby to the airport. Because I had been teaching Martin Seligman's Character Strengths to parents, it was on my mind. I asked Abby to pull up his website, viacharacter.org, to look at all 24 strengths. She said, "Sure!" I said, "As you are looking at them, rate yourself and see how you are doing, or what you could work on." She started going through them and was giving herself high marks. That made me happy. She got to "Brave," and I knew she never liked to ask people she didn't know, questions or directions. She got her younger siblings to do that for her. So of all the 24 Character Strengths, in her self-assessment, she said, "That's my worst one." I said, "Wait, a minute! You just moved two states away to Portland, Oregon, all by yourself and managed to graduate from a difficult program at BYU. And start a new job. That is all very brave!" She brightened and said, "You're right!"

Later in the week, she said she was talking to a friend about the Character Strengths (which I love, the student becoming the teacher) and he said, "Abby! This year you planned three different big trips with friends, navigating airports, and foreign cities—" He paused and said, "You are brave!"

We get to spy these little kernels of promise in our children. We are encouraging strengths that are already in place.

What strengths do your children have? How do you observe that? Go home and tell them. This isn't about empty praise, because using our strengths well takes effort and work. Dr. Carol Dweck said we have to praise our children the right way to promote a growth mindset. We don't say, "You are so smart!" Instead we can say, "Your project took a lot of work and I can see all the time you put into it." Dr. Dweck's point is to praise *the work and effort* something takes to accomplish rather than saying empty platitudes: "You're so great!"

Dr. Seligman clues us in as to why we need to learn what our character strengths are. We can have what he calls "The Pleasant Life," where we enjoy basic pleasures like relationships, our connection to our environment, and getting our bodily needs met. The next

step up is “The Good Life.” We wake up to discover our strengths and use them to make our own lives more interesting and better. The most desired tier is “The Meaningful Life,” where we use our unique strengths and skills to make life better for others.

Seligman’s models fight two conflicting theories about human well-being. There is the one theory called Individualism where we should only take care of ourselves and use our strengths for us, and the Altruistic theory where we downplay our individual needs and live to sacrifice for a greater good. I like how he marries the individual and altruistic into a three-tiered model. Seligman’s approach shows us how basic our lives would be without a knowledge of our strengths in The Pleasant Life. He then shows us a way to recognize our strengths to first fulfill us with The Good Life. Then we use our strengths to help others to have The Meaningful Life.

I have found talking about our children’s strengths is best one-on-one or with both parents and the child. First, they love any time alone with us, and, secondly, it avoids other siblings feeling like they are lacking as we highlight another child’s strengths. Ask them first what they think their strengths are. Then you could add one or two strengths that you have noticed and how your child puts effort into those. Just start making a list and let them post it by their bed where they can look at it and think about it. Very simple, but very powerful.

We can start teaching our children about their particular character strengths. Look for their character strengths which will be included in the year of stories. So much good is already in our children to help shape their identity. This is a powerful parenting tool, to highlight our children’s strengths and not their weaknesses.



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1. Martin Seligman, *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-being* (Atria Books, 2011), 30–44.
 2. Peter Gibbon, “Martin Seligman and the Rise of Positive Psychology,” *HUMANITIES: The Magazine of the National Endowment for the Humanities*, Summer 2020, vol. 41, no. 3, www.neh.gov/article/martin-seligman-and-rise-positive-psychology
 3. Ibid.
 4. “Character Strengths,” *The Positivity Project*, posproject.org/character-strengths/#myanchor.
 5. “The Stanford Professor Who Pioneered Praising Kids for Effort Says We’ve Totally Missed the Point,” *Care Counseling*, 28 Apr. 2017, care-clinics.com/the-stanford-professor-who-pioneered-praising-kids-for-effort-says-weve-totally-missed-the-point/.



Dr. Seligman offers a strengths test for free on his website:
www.viacharacter.org.