

The Principles of Wraparound: Chapter 2.3

A Roadmap for Building on Youth Strengths

Kathy Cox, Clinical Director
EMQ Children and Family Services



A core element of the wraparound process is the planning of services that build not only on family assets, but also on youth strengths and capabilities. This principle is founded in the belief that by capitalizing on the capabilities of children and adolescents, wraparound providers create a sense of hope for the future and enhance motivation for change (Saleebey, 2002). To facilitate the process of assessing the internal and external resources of youth, a variety of methods and tools have been advanced, ranging from informal “strengths chats” (VanDenBerg & Grealish, 1996) to standardized measures, such as the Behavioral and Emotional Rating Scale (BERS; Epstein & Sharma, 1998). Little work has been done, however, to delineate the process of tapping the strengths identified through these and similar means. In an effort to fill this gap, this chapter provides a roadmap for wraparound practitioners, intended to guide their efforts in developing plans of care that build on the skills, interests, and capacities of the youth served.

A Conceptual Framework for Understanding Strengths

One conceptual model that is useful in guiding the assessment of youth strengths is offered by Cowger (1997). This author contends that a comprehensive assessment gathers information along two intersecting continuums: the environmental versus individual axis and the strengths versus obstacles axis. Four domains can be created when these continuums are enclosed and have been labeled as follows: *personal strengths*, *personal obstacles*, *environmental strengths*, and *environmental obstacles*. Strength-

based assessment does not ignore the challenges represented in the obstacles domains, but it does highlight and emphasize the personal and environmental strengths that each youth brings to the process of meeting needs, overcoming barriers, and resolving problems.

A concept that illuminates the role of environmental strengths in guiding intervention planning is that of the *enabling niche*. James Taylor (1997) defines the social niche as an “environmental habitat of a category of persons, including the resources they utilize and the other category of persons they associate with” (p. 219). Within the broader concept of the social niche, he draws a distinction between entrapping niches and enabling niches. Entrapping niches tend to stigmatize individuals and offer few incentives for skill development or goal attainment. In contrast, enabling niches are said to recognize capacities, and offer rewards for skill acquisition and/or progress toward goals. The development of such spaces and places for encouragement and enrichment can be critical to youth recovery and healthy development.

Building on Strengths in Wraparound

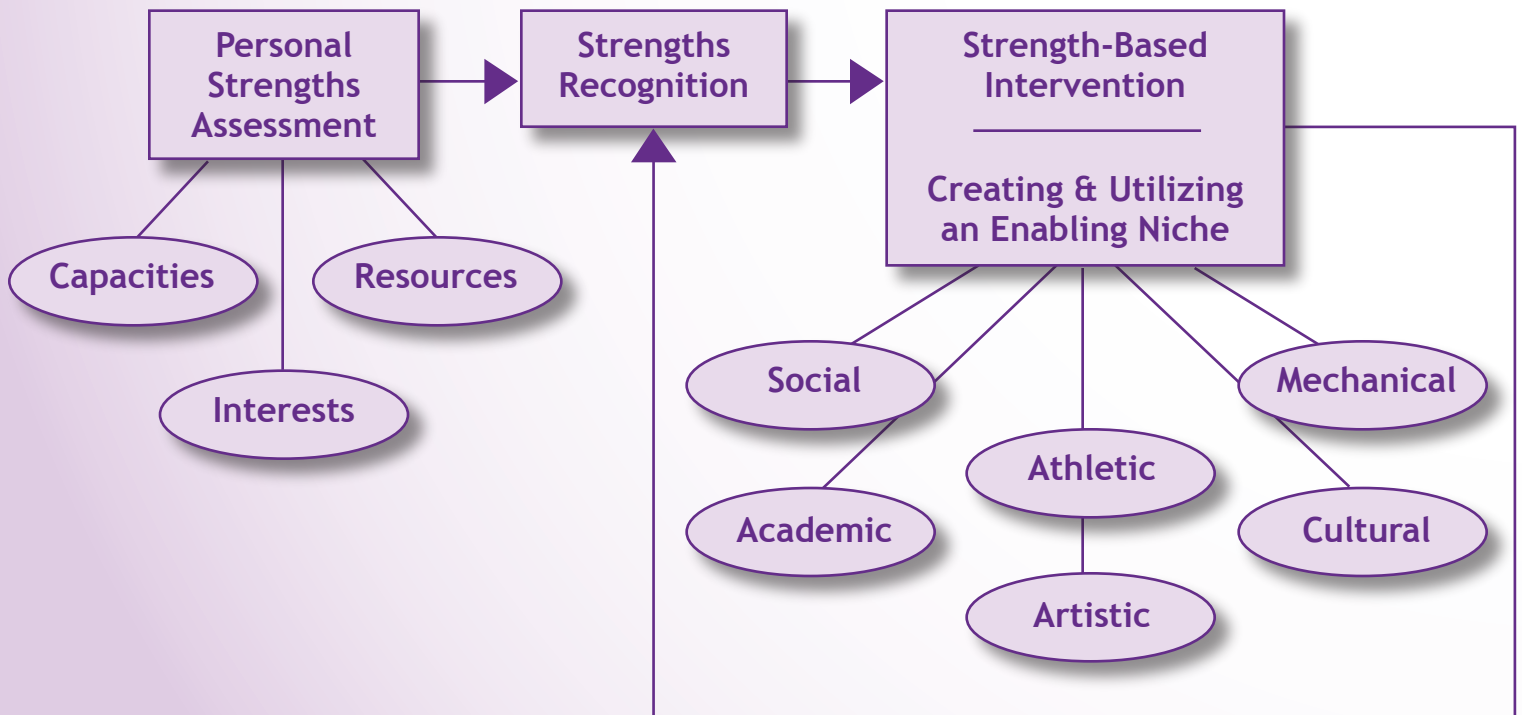
The practice model offered below aims to capitalize on the youth’s personal strengths in order to enhance his or her environmental assets. It does so by first conducting an in-depth assessment of the youth’s capacities, interests, and resources. It continues with a formal process of strengths recognition and, finally, the design and implementation of strength-based intervention focused on two main goals:

1. Creating an enabling niche, and
2. Utilizing this niche as a vehicle for furthering the youth’s progress toward improved emotional or behavioral functioning. (See Figure 1.)

Assessing Youth Personal Strengths

A wide range of strategies, both formal and informal, can be used to facilitate the process of strengths assessment. The “strengths chat” recommended by VanDenBerg and Grealish (1996) involves the practitioner having a conversation with the individual about what they view their

Figure 1. Process for Building on Youth Strengths



strengths and resources to be (p. 12). This type of strengths chat conducted with a child or adolescent can be focused around the completion of an assessment tool developed by the current author, referred to as the *Personal Strengths Grid*. (See Table 1, end of this chapter.) This tool is designed to guide discussion of the youth's capacities, interests, and resources within the domains of social, academic, athletic, artistic, mechanical, and cultural/spiritual functioning.

Strengths Recognition

A key component of the wraparound process is the acknowledgement of the youth's skills, interests, aims, and abilities. This ideally takes place during team meetings, with participation by service providers, family members, and their natural supports, such as friends, neighbors, and mentors. One can speculate that this focus on assets increases the child or adolescent's willingness to engage with formal and informal providers and participate actively in the wraparound process. Additionally, parents have been found to be significantly more satisfied with human services when such strengths recognition is performed (Cox, 2006). The positive impact of this practice is likely to be enhanced, however, when combined with the use of interventions that build on the unique strengths of the child recipient of wraparound.

Strengths-Based Intervention

The wraparound team is also charged with designing a plan for services that is tailored to the unique strengths and needs of the youth. It is common for the needs to include the child's emotional or behavioral problems. Strength-based interventions aimed at resolving such challenges tap a particular youth asset, while striving to improve the child's functioning at home, in school, and/or in the community. For example, a boy who loves cars (and who has issues with impulsivity) might be taught to manage his behavior by learning to "put the brakes on" and "read the stop signs." His family might be encouraged to adopt language infused with auto-related metaphors while praising his progress toward following directions at home and at school. He might be offered an opportunity to work toward earning a remote control car by consistently completing tasks. While these inter-

ventions may prove beneficial, they would be enhanced by a plan to create or support an enabling niche for this youth. For instance, he might be enrolled in a stock car racing club or provided an opportunity to learn auto repair by assisting a mechanic at a neighborhood auto shop. During such endeavors the boy could be assisted in practicing his newfound skills in impulse control.

Case Example

Alicia is a 15-year-old girl who resides with her mother, Ana, and 10 year old brother, Jason. The family lives near Alicia's maternal grandmother and aunt in a semi-rural area. Mother was struggling financially as she sought employment as a nurse's aid. Alicia displayed symptoms of severe anxiety and traumatic stress stemming from an episode of sexual abuse by her mother's ex-boyfriend that occurred 2 years previously. She also appeared angry at her mother for initially refusing to believe her when she first disclosed the abuse. Alicia has a flare for dramatics and can be playful and engaging yet had difficulty sustaining friendships. She spent her free time alone in her room watching old movies on T.V. and writing in her journal.

During her assessment with the wraparound provider, the Personal Strengths Grid was used to guide discussion about Alicia's interests and abilities. As a result, she disclosed that she enjoys both writing and play-acting. These strengths were recognized at the first wraparound team meeting that included her mother, grandmother, aunt, school counselor, and therapist along with the wraparound facilitator and family partner. Her therapist began work in helping her acquire

A focus on assets increases the child or adolescent's willingness to engage with formal and informal providers and participate actively in the wraparound process.



coping skills in preparation for the creation of a written trauma narrative. When the narrative was completed, joint mother-daughter sessions were held in which Alicia shared parts of her narrative with her mother. Ana had been prepared by the therapist to respond to Alicia's story in a manner that was supportive and validating. In addition to therapy, the wraparound plan included a focus on job search assistance for mother and social skill development for Alicia. The school counselor helped Alicia connect with the drama club at school and she was offered a part in the school play. This counselor also coached her in strategies for initiating and maintaining friendships with the other students in the play. Alicia's mother, grandmother, aunt and brother were all present for opening night of the performance. Alicia's symptoms lessened as she neared the end of her therapy and found a social niche that was enabling.

Conclusion

If wraparound practitioners are to give more than lip service to the notion of building on strengths, they must embrace not only a philosophy that recognizes youth assets, but also a practice methodology that leverages child and adolescent capacities and interests toward the achievement of service planning goals. The framework above is intended to guide providers in the implementation of strength-based planning as it applies to children and adolescents. It is understood that the wraparound process entails much more than this one element of service. Indeed, strength-based planning often entails building on natural supports of families in order to meet their needs within a wide variety of life domains. However, a well-designed and strength-focused approach

to addressing youth emotional and/or behavioral challenges is often critical to the overall effectiveness of wraparound.

References

- Cowger, C. (1997). Assessing client strengths: Assessment for client empowerment. In D. Saleebey (Ed.), *The strengths perspective in social work practice* (pp. 59-73). New York: Longman.
- Cox, K. (2006). Investigating the impact of strength based assessment on youth with emotional or behavioral disorders. *Journal of Child and Family Studies, 15*, 278-292.
- Epstein, M.H. & Sharma, J.M. (1998). Behavioral and emotional rating scale. Austin, TX: Pro-Ed.
- Saleebey, D. (2002). *The strengths perspective in social work practice*. Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
- Taylor, J. (1997). Niches and ecological practice: Extending the ecological perspective. In D. Saleebey (Ed.), *The strengths perspective in social work practice* (pp. 217-227). New York: Longman.
- VanDenBerg, J.E. & Grealish, E.M. (1996). Individualized services and supports through the wraparound process: Philosophy and procedures. *Journal of Child and Family Studies, 5*, 7-21.

Author

Kathy Cox is a Clinical Director for EMQ Children and Family Services. As such, she oversees three wraparound teams in the Sacramento region that serve up to 98 youth and families each year. She has conducted research and published articles on strength-based assessment, wraparound, and other community-based approaches to serving high-risk youth and families.

Suggested Citation:



Cox, K. (2008). A roadmap for building on youths' strengths. In E. J. Bruns & J. S. Walker (Eds.), *The resource guide to wraparound*. Portland, OR: National Wraparound Initiative, Research and Training Center for Family Support and Children's Mental Health.

Table 1. Personal Strengths Grid

Sources of Information Regarding Strengths:

Youth's Name: _____

 Youth Interview Caregiver Interview Other

Age: _____

 Teacher Interview Observation

Strength Domain	Social	Academic	Athletic
Capacities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Initiates relationships with ease <input type="checkbox"/> Sustains relationships over time <input type="checkbox"/> Good interpersonal boundaries <input type="checkbox"/> Relates well with peers <input type="checkbox"/> Relates well with adults <p>Comments:</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Good reading skills <input type="checkbox"/> Good writing skills <input type="checkbox"/> Good math skills <input type="checkbox"/> Good verbal skills <input type="checkbox"/> Good computer skills <p>Comments:</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Good at team sports (e.g. basketball, football, baseball) <input type="checkbox"/> Good at independent or non-competitive sports (e.g. swimming, gymnastics, jogging, rock-climbing, yoga) <p>Comments:</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>
Interests	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Wants to have friends <input type="checkbox"/> Wants relationships with caring adults <input type="checkbox"/> Wants to belong to peer groups, clubs <input type="checkbox"/> Likes to help others <input type="checkbox"/> Enjoys caring for animals <p>Comments:</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Enjoys reading <input type="checkbox"/> Enjoys writing <input type="checkbox"/> Enjoys math or science <input type="checkbox"/> Enjoys computers <p>Comments:</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Wants to play team sports <input type="checkbox"/> Wants to learn individual or non-competitive sports <p>Comments:</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>
Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Has close (pro-social) friend(s) <input type="checkbox"/> Has access to adult mentor <input type="checkbox"/> Has access to naturally occurring groups, clubs, volunteer work, opportunities etc. <p>Comments:</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Has access to opportunities to display, share, or enhance academic abilities <p>Comments:</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> School offers athletics programs <input type="checkbox"/> Neighborhood offers athletics programs <p>Comments:</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>

Personal Strengths Grid (Continued)

Strength Domain	Artistic/Creative	Mechanical	Cultural/Spiritual
<p>Capacities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Talent in visual arts (drawing, painting, etc) <input type="checkbox"/> Talent in performing arts (singing, dancing, drama, music, etc.) <input type="checkbox"/> Skills in domestic arts (cooking, sewing, etc.) <p>Comments:</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Able to assemble & disassemble bikes, appliances, computers, etc. <input type="checkbox"/> Skills in using tools for carpentry, woodworking, etc. <input type="checkbox"/> Skills in car maintenance/repair <p>Comments:</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Knowledge of own heritage <input type="checkbox"/> Knowledge of spiritual belief system <input type="checkbox"/> Practices cultural/spiritual customs/rituals <p>Comments:</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>	
<p>Interests</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Desires to develop talent in visual arts <input type="checkbox"/> Desires to develop talent in performing arts <input type="checkbox"/> Desires to develop talent in domestic arts <p>Comments:</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Enjoys fixing appliances, etc. <input type="checkbox"/> Enjoys building, woodworking <input type="checkbox"/> Enjoys working on cars or desires to learn mechanics <p>Comments:</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Likes to attend church or other place of worship <input type="checkbox"/> Desires to learn about own heritage <input type="checkbox"/> Desires to participate in cultural or spiritually oriented activities <p>Comments:</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>	
<p>Resources</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> School offers programs in type of art preferred <input type="checkbox"/> Neighborhood offers programs in type of art preferred <p>Comments:</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> School offers vocational program in mechanical area of interest/skill <input type="checkbox"/> Has opportunity to serve as apprentice in mechanical area of choice <p>Comments:</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Connected to place of worship <input type="checkbox"/> Has access to opportunities to participate in culturally oriented activities <p>Comments:</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>	

Other strengths: _____

Completed by: _____

Date: _____

Supervisory Review: _____

Date: _____