

# POWER PARENTING

THE SECRET TO RAISING CHILDREN WHO WILL THRIVE?  
FOCUS ON INDIVIDUAL CHARACTER STRENGTHS, HAPPINESS AND  
WELL-BEING JUST AS MUCH AS INTELLIGENCE.

BY JAMIE FRIEDLANDER



Like many parents, financial adviser Dennis Ryan has two daughters with starkly different personalities. Emma, 18, is introverted and intellectual, and she hated competitive sports as a young child. “She was the kid in left field with the glove on her head picking dandelions,” he says. Annie, 15, is the polar opposite: She’s incredibly social, a leader among her friends and always glued to her cellphone. “She never wants to miss a single text or Instagram post,” Ryan says.

He has paid close attention to his daughters’ contrasting personalities as they’ve grown older. He inspired Emma to participate in the Latin club and charity work, while he encouraged Annie to take advantage of what he calls her “gift of gab” by using her popularity to be a positive leader among her friends.

Ryan’s parenting style is a prime example of what Lea Waters, Ph.D., head of the Positive Psychology Centre at the University of Melbourne, calls strength-based parenting: an approach to parenting in which “parents place more of their focus and energy on the strengths, talents and positive qualities of their children, as compared to focusing their time and energy on fixing the faults, flaws and weaknesses in their kids.”

Strength-based parenting—which is fueled by the concepts of positive psychology—is still in the nascent stages of research, but many parents already do it subconsciously. Waters says the handful of scientific studies on the topic have shown it can help children become

more successful as adults. Other valuable parenting techniques for raising well-rounded children include stressing the importance of soft skills, teaching children that failure is acceptable and inevitable, defining more broadly what it means to be smart and using the concepts of positive psychology to help children be happier.

Waters says most people were raised to believe the best way to improve a child is to fix what is wrong with him or her, when instead we should focus on nurturing his or her inherent strengths. Johnny isn’t good at math? Don’t drill it into him 24/7. Instead build on his natural talent for language by encouraging him to write short stories.

In attempting to fix our children’s flaws, Waters says, we think we’re doing the right thing, when instead “whether you mean it or not, you’re consistently and constantly telling your child, *You’re not good enough. You are impatient. You don’t have good social skills. You’re uncoordinated.*” Instead of fixing the negative qualities, improve upon your child’s naturally strong character strengths, such as kindness, grit, creativity and leadership.

## THE NEW SMART

Although strength-based parenting is imperative for raising conscientious, well-adjusted children, most parents also want their children to be considered smart. They want their children to flourish and fare better than they did—to score better on the SATs, to land a better job than they did, to go on to make more money than they do. Although raising children to be intelligent is crucial, it’s not enough. In today’s world, with so much competition for quality jobs

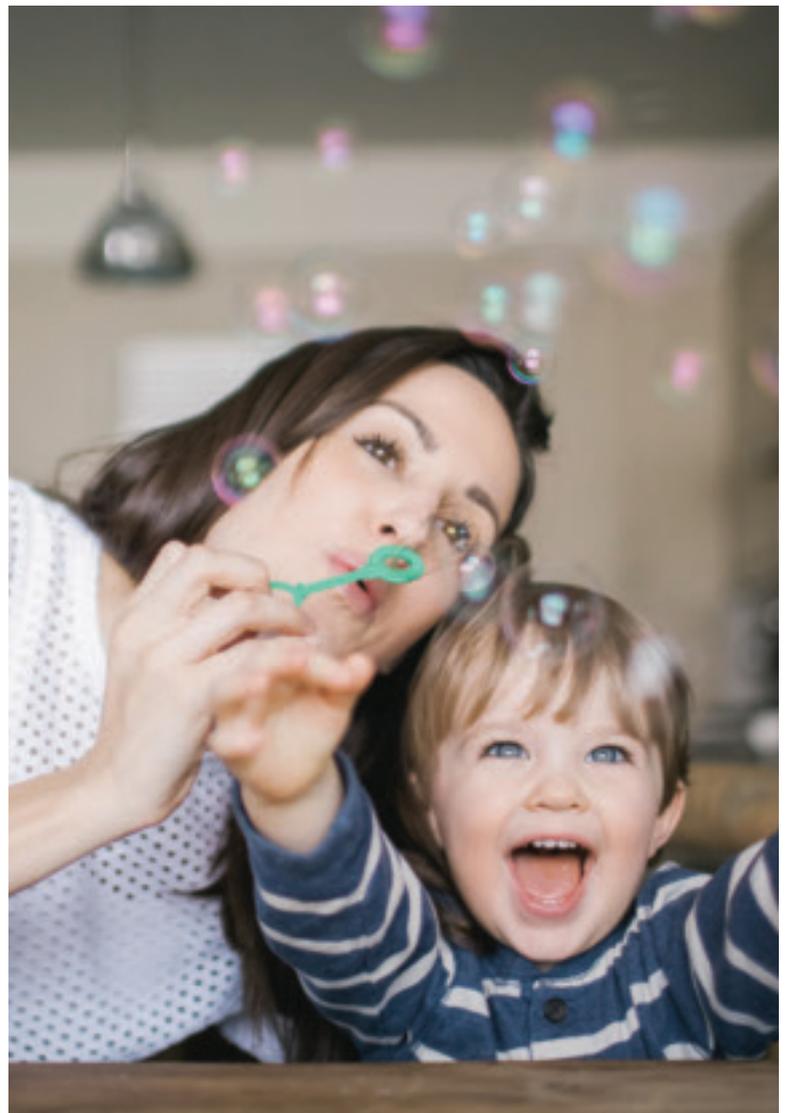


## BEST PRACTICES

### STRENGTH-BASED PARENTING

Lea Waters, Ph.D.—head of the Positive Psychology Centre at the University of Melbourne and author of the forthcoming *The Strength Switch: Using the New Science of Strength-Based Parenting to Help You and Your Child Flourish*—shares her tips for being a parent who uses the concepts of positive psychology to cultivate your child's inherent strengths.

- 1. Make a “strengths silhouette.”** When her son Nick, 13, was 4 years old, Waters rolled out a piece of white butcher paper, traced his body against it and taped it onto his bedroom dresser. Every time she saw him exhibit a character strength (below), she would write it in his silhouette. “The idea behind the silhouette is that it’s showing him visually that these things are inside of him, so it’s very symbolic.” She left the silhouette up in his room until he was 10 years old.
- 2. Create fulfilling environments.** If your daughter exhibits signs of creativity, enroll her in a painting class. If your son shows his empathetic side, encourage him to volunteer at the local food pantry.
- 3. Connect over personality differences.** Once children are old enough, they’ll begin spotting character strengths in their parents, too. “It can help parents and children who are different understand each other,” Waters says. “For example, if you have a father who is full of zest and is the life of the party and a more introverted son, they might not get each other. But when you look at the strengths of introversion and extroversion, you start to find a bit of common ground.”
- 4. Remember: All children have strengths.** Waters says identifying strengths in children ensures parents that even though some strengths, such as gratitude and perspective, might not appear very strong in their children, all 24 are there. “Even if some of them don’t show very often, they’re universal. That helps me as a parent.”
- 5. Remind yourself that it’s never too early, and it’s never too late.** Waters emphasizes that although you can begin spotting strengths in your children starting at age 3 or 4, it’s never too late. “Even if you have a 25-year-old and you haven’t done it yet, you can start doing it now and it will change the dynamic of the relationship between you and your child.”
- 6. Vocally recognize your child’s inherent strengths.** Once you spot a strength in your child, label it (e.g., *How kind of you to share with your sister, Nick.*). “Everyone, even grown-ups, wants to be seen for who they are and want to be validated for their good qualities,” Waters says.



## IN CHARACTER

Look for these 24 character strengths in your children. We all exhibit them in one form or another, but some shine brighter than others.

### WISDOM

Creativity  
Curiosity  
Open-mindedness  
Love of learning  
Perspective

### COURAGE

Bravery  
Perseverance  
Honesty  
Zest

### TEMPERANCE

Forgiveness  
Modesty  
Prudence  
Self-regulation

### HUMANITY

Love  
Kindness  
Social intelligence

### JUSTICE

Teamwork  
Fairness  
Leadership

### TRANSCENDENCE

Appreciative of beauty and excellence  
Gratitude  
Hope  
Humor  
Spirituality

To see how your child's strengths stack up, take the Character Strengths test at [Viacharacter.org/survey](http://Viacharacter.org/survey).

## TRUE GRIT

One of the most significant indicators of how successful someone will be is his or her level of grit, or dedication to and passion for pursuing a long-term goal in the face of setbacks and failures, says Angela Duckworth, Ph.D., positive psychologist and author of *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance*. Grit has little connection to talent, she says, and most times people with more grit (and not necessarily natural talent) go on to be the most successful. Duckworth used a questionnaire to measure the grit in high school juniors in Chicago and found it was the most important factor in determining who would be successful as young adults.

“People with grit are not driven by pleasure or fun as much as they are by the gratification of being excellent at what they do and realizing that excellence benefits other people,” Duckworth said at the International Positive Education Network’s (IPEN) Festival of Positive Education.

The best part? “Grit, like any other aspect of your character, can change.” Below are Duckworth’s stages for building grit in your child.

- 1. Interest:** Develop your child’s interests before training his or her weaknesses. The interests develop intrinsically, but children need external support.
- 2. Practice:** Know the science of *deliberate practice*, which is 1) setting a stretch goal; 2) focusing 100 percent on the goal; 3) getting feedback on your progress; and 4) refining your skill and reflecting as necessary. “These four things in combination are what it means to practice like an expert,” she says.
- 3. Purpose:** Cultivate the purpose of the interest. Your child should see his or her pursuit goes beyond self-motivation. In this stage, children should fully realize what they’re doing is connected to other people. Ask your children questions, such as: *Do you take into account whether this will benefit other people? Do you feel a responsibility to make the world a better place?*
- 4. Hope:** Your child should develop resilience in the face of setbacks and failures throughout his or her journey. This is where you can foster a growth mindset (in which a person’s abilities can be improved through hard work) instead of a fixed one in your child.

and other jobs giving way to technology, prospective employers want candidates who are creative, deep thinkers, too. Happiness, grit, creativity, communication, courage and critical thinking are arguably more important for developing your child’s intelligence than being able to name the capitals of every state.

“It can’t be that everything can be reduced to your score on a narrowly construed bubble test,” says Kathy Hirsh-Pasek, co-author of *Becoming Brilliant: What Science Tells Us About Raising Successful Children*. “It has to be that success means more than just preparing our children in reading, writing and math.”

We need to redefine the word smart, says Roberta Michnick Golinkoff, co-author of *Becoming Brilliant*. “While you want your children to do well in school, it’s not enough. We want parents to know there is nothing wrong with wanting your kids to be successful personally and to have happy and well-adjusted lives.”

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Important as it might be, being considered smart won’t necessarily mean a child goes on to have a happy, well-adjusted adult life. “Education means not cramming people with meaningless facts they regurgitate in exams,” said Sir Anthony Seldon, one of the leading proponents of positive psychology, at the International Positive Education Network’s (IPEN) inaugural Festival of Positive Education held this past July. “Transformative, real education is about drawing out what is inside—those multiple attitudes and intelligences.”

Traditionally called soft skills, abilities such as communication, teamwork, adaptability and time management are just as important to a child’s success in school and life as anything else, Hirsh-Pasek says. “I’m trying to put a bullet through hard and soft skills,” she says, “because I think rather than demeaning some of these skills that are so important and so foundational, we should begin to understand that there really is a breadth of skills all kids need if they’re going to succeed and be happy kids in the present and then be good, collaborative, thinking, smart people in the future.”

### LEARNING TO FAIL

One of the most prevalent problems plaguing today’s society is our “one-answer culture,” Golinkoff says, because when children fail, “they really fail.” A dyslexic child may do dismally on the SATs and be deemed unintelligent, when in fact he or she may exhibit some of the character strengths inherent in dyslexic people, such as creativity and high emotional intelligence. We need to teach children that there are multiple ways to be smart.

## TOP OF MIND

How does grit play a role in your life?



Kelly Tomlinson Pollack, CEO and founder of Tomlinson Management Group

On a day-to-day basis, it takes a lot of grit just to get out of bed at 5:30 a.m., exercise, eat a healthy breakfast, get ready and get on the road at a decent time. By the time I've done all of that, I really feel like I've accomplished something to start the day off right. Having the tenacity to take care of myself first is the fuel that jump-starts the rest of a successful day for me.



Jeb Ory, CEO and co-founder of Phone2Action

Being an entrepreneur is one of the most rewarding things you can do with your life, but it's also one of the most challenging and uncertain callings. What's important is picking myself up after every setback and moving ahead no matter what. Grit is grinding it out, staying up as late as necessary to finish the job, waking up early and going the extra mile no matter what.



Heather Whaling, founder and CEO of Geben Communication

I'm very competitive, so when I identify a goal I want to achieve, I go all in and persist until I figure it out. When I had my son three years ago, I had to get crystal clear on my definition of success as an entrepreneur, a mom and an advocate for women. By defining my version of success, how I spend my time has become hyper-focused so I can accelerate progress in those key areas of my life.

# “Without confidence, people cannot accept new challenges and stretch beyond their comfort zones.”

## THE 6Cs

These are six of the most important character strengths to foster in children, according to Roberta Michnick Golinkoff, Ph.D., and Kathy Hirsh-Pasek, Ph.D., authors of *Becoming Brilliant: What Science Tells Us About Raising Successful Children*.

“The 6Cs are the road maps toward success,” they write. “They are not isolated competencies. Like having both a belt and suspenders, the 6Cs, taken together, improve our chances for success because each skill is constructed on the others.”

- **COLLABORATION:** “Whether it’s with your life partner or your co-worker in Switzerland, collaboration—in person or online—is essential to how humans learn, how they accomplish tasks and how they improve their performance. Collaboration is about building community and regulating your impulses. It is the foundation on which all other skills build because when we enter the world alone and incompetent, the first thing we do is make contact with other humans.”
- **COMMUNICATION:** “Communication involves speaking so others can understand your message, writing clearly and well so others will comprehend what you have written and truly listening. Success in communication at work is just part of what our children need. To be successful and happy in their interpersonal relationships, they have to talk to others in a respectful way. Name calling? Unacceptable. Sharing feelings in a genuine way? Absolutely.”
- **CONTENT:** “Somehow our culture got duped into thinking that content is the only C of value. Parents, schools and the learning industry overvalue it. It is time to ask how we can educate children in a way that promotes deep learning that transfers to new problems we have never encountered before. We need to stretch the definition of content to include *how* to find the answers needed to solve the problem and *how* to put together the information and resources to make it possible. In school we teach the facts rather than teaching children how to learn, how to evaluate information, and how to draw integrative and innovative conclusions.”
- **CRITICAL THINKING:** “Without critical thinking, we would just blindly accept whatever we heard without questioning it. Making informed choices demands that we question—not just repeat—what we have learned. Shouldn’t we arm our kids with the realization that not all information is equal or vetted or evaluated, let alone true? Kids need to become skeptics; critical thinkers are open-minded and consider different points of view.”
- **CREATIVE INNOVATION:** “Is creativity different from intelligence or just being smart? Although being smart never hurts, creativity is not the same as intelligence: We all know people who are geniuses but who panic when a road is closed or can’t think how to use the leftovers to make a new dish. We need to be strong critical thinkers, or we will not be intelligent thinkers.”
- **CONFIDENCE:** “Confidence has two components. The first is the willingness to try. Without confidence, people cannot accept new challenges and stretch beyond their comfort zones. The second aspect of confidence is persistence. With confidence, we also accept that sometimes we will fail and that failure is an opportunity, not defeat.”

Hirsh-Pasek stresses the importance of allowing young children to tinker and explore, because in exercising their creativity, “one of our kids might just develop the next iPad or the cure for cancer.”

In teaching children to fail, we can also allow them to hone in on their unique skill set. Children start out with an I-can-do-anything attitude in preschool, Golinkoff says, and if they don’t grow out of this phase, they won’t develop their specific talents and skill sets. Don’t tell your daughter she’s a natural swimmer if she’s not. Instead, try to strengthen her natural gift for leadership or compassion.

## THE HAPPINESS FACTOR

Catering to your child’s character strengths, teaching him or her how to fail and instilling in your child the skills necessary to be intelligent in today’s society are all important. But the most important quality, the most necessary component for raising a child, is ensuring he or she is happy. Raising children with the tenets of positive psychology and developing their happiness at all times is the secret weapon for effective parenting.

“Having a positive mindset is one of the greatest competitive advantages we can give somebody,” positive psychologist Shawn Achor, “The Happiness Guy” for *SUCCESS*, said at IPEN’s Festival of



## GET THE CREATIVE JUICES FLOWING

We need to redefine how we measure intelligence in children to focus more on creativity, says Scott Barry Kaufman, Ph.D., the scientific director of the Imagination Institute and a researcher at the University of Pennsylvania’s Positive Psychology Center. Standardized tests and the ability to regurgitate memorized information aren’t necessarily the best ways to measure intelligence. “Understanding a person’s test score is not understanding a person,” he said at IPEN’s Festival of Positive Education.

Here are Kaufman’s steps for cultivating creativity in children:

- 1. Allow time for constructive daydreaming.** In school, an example of this would be connecting the lesson plans directly to each student’s personal goals.
- 2. Support harmonious passion** instead of obsessive passion, where one’s goals are dependent on external contingencies.
- 3. Encourage diversity of experiences** and allow your child to engage in anything that may shatter someone’s worldviews or assumptions of how the world works. Give children a more flexible perspective on themselves and the world.
- 4. Foster a sense of risk-taking** by letting children know they can be divergent thinkers.
- 5. Applaud outside-of-the-box thinking** and appreciate the unique minds of children who might have learning differences. Children should feel as though there are a wide range of possibilities and not just one single answer for every problem.

Positive Education. “I think we’re afraid of happiness as a society,” he says. People think if they’re too happy, they won’t be hungry enough for success. But by positively supporting children during the learning process, they can reach higher levels of happiness and in turn be more successful in school.

He says one way we can help our children is by shifting the thought process from *If I work harder, I’ll be more successful and I’ll be happier* to *If I’m happy, I’ll work harder and I’ll be more successful*.

At the end of the day, we cannot prevent the inevitable failures and setbacks our children will face. But we can arm them with the tools to remain resilient no matter what happens.

“We cannot help our children from bad things happening to them,” Seldon says. “Bad things will happen to us in our lives. But if we do these things—if we give young people the best possible character, education, virtue, skills and positive psychology approaches—it will give them the optimal chance to be able to cope with it.” ♦

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