



Why Gifts and Strengths?

(an article written for The Whole Self Center an agency that provides services for individuals with autism in Maryland)

Adolescents and young adults with ASD and other related disabilities can be supported and guided to explore gifts despite the challenges associated with disabilities. Why? Because each individual possesses strengths that are meant to and can be built upon, if first they are recognized and supported.

The very act of developing and using a gift is a form of an individual's unique self expression. Attwood (2005) states that people with autism can express themselves through gifts and strengths in ways they may not be able to through verbal communication. Indeed, talents and strengths can mark a person's contribution to the world, in effect become keys that unlock doors to developing and supporting h/her emotional needs in all areas of living (Marquette).

In reality, we advocates and professionals become weighed down trying to stay one step ahead in managing a child or student's behavior in an effort to maintain a certain level of functioning. The notion of guiding an individual to contribute to society can often seem out of reach. To the contrary, it is quite possible to recognize and support strengths and gifts.

Behavior plans and various therapies and medications are significant in the treatment of autism, yet these techniques are not enough to support the person emotionally, physically, cognitively. Used alone the techniques may help to diminish aversive behaviors, but they may not lead the individual to self expression through his or her best strengths. Seligman (2005) said it best, "Curing the negatives does not produce the positives." Identifying the best strength or gift and then contributing to others opens doors to the positives in life for every individual. Additionally, once an adolescent or young adult has identified his or her gifts and strengths, and begins using them with the necessary support, the individual's behavioral challenges may greatly diminish.

I have developed the model Walking the Path (WP) through which a Gifts and Strengths Action Plan can be designed to help youths with ASD move into areas in the community and become less dependent upon behavioral support plans (Marquette, 2006). The model is based on the literature review in best practices and new research with 15 young adults who have various levels of ASD living with purpose in the community, and yes, using their strengths and gifts (Marquette).

The WP model is for advocates and professionals who seek ways to explore gifts and contributions for the child, student, adolescent, young adult, patient, or client with ASD. This process draws on the collaboration among persons with disabilities, families, professionals, and community members. These roles become powerful when an individual's capability is viewed in terms of having the support to pursue these goals.

Consider these points:

- The exploration process for discovering strengths and gifts can begin even when a behavioral treatment plan is in place.
- There is a positive impact on the individual when she or he has the opportunity to use a strength, which builds quality in her or his life.
- The act of exploring and identifying strengths can increase personal growth in other domains of life.
- The strength and gift exploration process is for all ages and levels of autism (Marquette).

Striving for meaning and purpose

Offering activities where youth discover purpose can lead to opportunities in which they make a contribution. Establishing meaningful activities in life are important, and without them a sense of helplessness may emerge. This can often become a major quality of life issue for families as well. It is rare to hear about the positive quality of life that people with ASD have particularly after the age of 21. After that age many individuals with ASD live in isolation, empty and without meaning (Blue-Banning & Turnbull, 2002). This scenario promotes dependency; as dependency increases, depression and helplessness emerge. This then becomes a self-perpetuating cycle for the adolescent/young adult with ASD.

How do we begin to prevent individuals from entering that cycle? What perspectives can we explore? First, let us examine what quality of life looks like. Quality of life involves participating in meaningful activities with others, thus belonging to a group. It is about being acknowledged, being understood, and being valued by community members. These conditions are representative of a person's well-being or happiness (Marquette). That is where the exploration of gifts and strengths is found.

Take a moment and consider these views. I encourage these perspectives when examining the emotional side of autism. What if the adolescent/young adult's:

- behavioral issues/outbursts are not completely a biomedical condition, but emerge because of unmet emotional needs.
- behavioral challenges/withdrawal are not fully symptoms of autism, but stem from lack of meaning in their life.
- the individual's competence level is not merely a set
- of deficits, but reflects the lack of opportunities and exposure to positive enriching environments supported by open minded people.

His or her responses to others or the environment are not fully defiance and stubbornness, but the result of fears that he or she cannot communicate nor understand. We begin to recognize strengths and gifts as a key to facilitate his/her growth away from dependency towards contributing something of value to the community or society.

How do we get started in helping someone identify his or her strengths and gifts through the WP model? First, there are two kinds of contributions, (a) a gift and (b) a strength:

(a) a gift is clearly noticeable. Some gifts are quite evident in individuals with ASD, such as artists who paint on large canvases or musicians who play beautiful pieces of music. These particular gifts are perceived by society as highly valuable. There are many individuals affected with autism that have extraordinary gifts.

(b) a strength may seem quite ordinary or not easily recognized. Yet the strength once offered becomes valuable within a certain niche or group.

You may ask, "What if my child does not have an extraordinary talent?" or "What if Mark has extreme challenges?" Is exploring gifts and strengths still an option for these individuals? Absolutely yes!

Sometimes it can become difficult for us to see a student's strengths. When advocates or professionals

identify a characteristic in an individual, the next step is to explore, discover, and evaluate what new information can be used in guiding the individual into further exploration of their gift. This process can be lengthy and is the approach offered in WP. Seligman (2002, p. 136) states that a person's strengths can be built upon. I suggest that we chase the strength and remain open about how the individual can use it.

An illustration:

I want to introduce you to James, who is in his 20s and has autism. He is nonverbal. James is one of the young adults in Marquette's (2006) research study. Occasionally, James exhibited outbursts requiring the advocate to remove him from a situation. With an opened view by his mother and collaboration among professionals and friends who met to discuss options concerning his best interest, James' strengths and gifts were identified. Equally important, James' personal growth has been noted.

The collaborative group discovered one of James' strengths was his ability to place numerous objects in their appropriate place and follow through with an entire task to its completion. He also enjoys being around small children and babies enjoying the sounds of their cries and laughter. His community coach explored options and negotiated a contract with two preschools whereby he sets two long tables with snacks, drinks, and condiments for the children. His gift has become the task of preparing snack time as well as the joy he expresses in his own unique style with the children. How does he express joy? James laughs heartily and flaps his hands when the children all run in and shout loudly "YEAH James is here!" His response to their excitement is giggling and delight at seeing their happy faces. There is a reciprocal reaction. Their appreciation is expressed to James with hugs, which is their gift to him.

Consider the process based upon the perspectives of those involved in recognizing and supporting James' strengths.

We can explore where James fits in this world because we know something fascinating can literally 'touch' him. Although we may not know what that something is.

We can help James explore how to 'get in touch' with 'that something' that drives him because the 'something' that drives him is that which makes his chimes ring. It is functional and may be his purpose in life.

When his strength emerges, we can guide him to develop and contribute to exert positive energy to 'touch' someone else, thus, bringing joy to another.

When James tries exploring new ways to give and participate with guidance and support by us, he is enabled to 'get in touch' with the person he is and the positive difference he can make. He may or may not be able to communicate to us in words, but he has definitely communicated through his body language. Delight in his whole body movement, eyes, and smiles tell us he enjoys doing the activity and receiving feedback, all of this is his strength.

Most importantly, he has participated in lifting himself out of helplessness. That is he has moved from being cared for into a venue of giving and contributing something of value. The gift of preparing snacks for preschool children may be considered quite ordinary to many people, but in James' case, it is quite extraordinary and is highly valued by the children.

A condition for quality of life is finding meaning and purpose and the result is attaching to something larger than the person is (Seligman 2006, p. 287). James has accomplished this by using his strength; he found meaning and joy. Is James completely independent? Not at all, yet his success became a reality because a group of advocates listened, explored options, observed James in activities, and arrived at a creative solution.

To close, the Walking the Path (WP) model can help people with autism and other related disabilities build a life of meaning and purpose through identifying strengths and gifts. Medicating and correcting a person's behavior may be crucial to reaching or maintaining a certain level of functioning. Indeed, these therapies and treatments quite often lessen the harsh effects of autism or help the person adjust to people and diverse environments, but these options may not create meaning or emotional well being for a person with autism.

We can support our youth with ASD to move from dependency upon others to using their best strengths to develop their own personal growth. Believing and guiding children and young adults' in the autism community to actively contribute their unique gifts and strengths and to develop self expression becomes a value to the person and others as well. Having the essential skills to function, achieve greater independence and/or adjust to diverse environments are vital. But the development of those skills alone does not completely claim a person's world. Nor can they be separated from his or her life as a whole, that is, of purpose and value. Most importantly, the WP model is about establishing practices that treat the person's emotional side of autism (Marquette, 2006).

References

Attwood, T. (2005). Diagnostic assessment for asperger's syndrome: the

continuum of autism. Future Horizons Conference, Cincinnati.

Blue-Banning, M., & Turnbull, A. P. (2002). Hispanic youth/young adults with disabilities: Parents' visions for the future. *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities*, 27, 204-219.

Marquette, J. M. (2006). Autism and Post High School Transition to Community Assisted Living: Parental Perceptions. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Louisville, Louisville, KY.

Seligman, M. (2005). Key note address at the Annual School Psychologists Convention, Atlanta.

Seligman, M. (2006). *Learned optimism: How to change your mind and your life*. (3rd ed.). New York: Vintage Books.