

# Strategies framed by strengths and interests

**Author:** Anne-Marie Harrison,  
Ideas Afresh Ltd



Situational examples included below are not intended as relative to any particular individual or school setting but do reflect true examples.

## Introduction

Strategies framed by strengths and interests supports SENCOs and those working with school aged children and adolescents, with a diagnosis or presentation of autism and /or associated neuro developmental differences (referred to as learners below) to explore identify strengths and interests as a positive guide for appropriate strategies.

## Build strategies based on interests and strengths

Camilla Proctor (Autism Articulated 2016) reminds us that **“autism isn’t a one-size-fits-all disorder... for every proud self-advocate there is a Mom somewhere changing her adult child’s diaper.”**

This is a powerful and important message in terms of the vast range of autism but also a reminder that observing, reflecting and collaborating is the starting point in all learning journeys. It is only then we can really notice what might be **“lighting the fire for enthusiastic and engaged learners”** (Phil Christie, Understanding PDA). Christie also addresses the importance of enabling learners to **believe** they can access activities and that this could simply mean re-framing; offering choices visually instead of giving a verbal instruction that triggers anxiety.

Re-framing is perhaps a somewhat understated skill many SENCOs are required to do; adapting curriculums to accommodate physical, intellectual and emotional stage not age. The most natural starting point is noticing interests. Thomas Armstrong (2011) emphasises if we are to anchor the interest and develop the strengths of learners we must operate as an open and inclusive teacher. He notes the risks of lost opportunity in the **“business as usual classroom, where teacher aids are working with individual students at the back of the room and this student is never involved in whole lessons.”** In this environment it is almost impossible to re-frame learning around the interests and strengths that may have been noticed. It needs an environment where more personalised and inclusive teaching is the norm. Armstrong identifies this as “a neuro-diverse classroom that capitalises on the support and space available, creating a number of environmental enhancements and mini spaces that enable kids with different instructional needs to learn more effectively”.

Effective learning is built on the individual's strengths. An observation that shiny things capture attention presents an opportunity for a glitter cup to be used as the object to prompt communication by picking it up to ask for a drink. For Stephen Wiltshire his strength is in memory and drawing, recalling immense detail of the magnificent buildings he sketches, and he now has an OBE for his contribution to art. For Sir Isaac Newton it was his cognitive curiosity that was noticed, the whys and wonders of science that others may not even question: why did the apple fall downwards?

Ellie's Mum had noticed her excitement, hand flapping and squealing with delight when she saw a balloon. This soon became the vehicle into interaction, a vital strength for successful communication. Whatever the stage an interest can be fostered. The strength or skill then becomes apparent. The reader's challenge rests in their skill to observe, reflect and extend learning experiences that facilitate fulfilment and a sense of achievement.

### Examine approaches that facilitate self-awareness

Self-awareness and empathy are listed as one of the 10 life skills by the world health organisation. Amanda Morin suggests **“some kids have a harder time reading social cues. It's not that they don't care about other people's feelings. Instead it's that they may not notice or understand”**, she explains self-awareness demands an internalising thought process.

Jamie is fascinated by Minecraft but when he is talking about it, his private self-awareness internalises, **I'm feeling excited chatting and thinking about Minecraft**. Public self-awareness internalises, **I'm sensing they have heard enough about Minecraft**.

Public self-awareness is wrapped up in theory of mind, a developmental process of understanding other people have thoughts, feelings, and perceptions different to your own. It does not develop until around the age of 4 or 5. It plays a crucial part in interacting and participating in a well-received manner with our social world. This development is documented as 'lacking in the repertoire available to autistic individuals' (Perner, et al 1989, Prior et al 1990).

It is important we consider what is behind and required for success as a 'social being' (Winner, 2006). Many practitioners are aware of the challenges learners face when trying to decode social cues. Our teaching strategies are sometimes embedded in an attempt to reveal social scenarios through role play and examples but are we not confounding and perhaps perpetuating confusion?

Our planning needs to be framed around the strengths autistic individuals cite and demonstrate. (Castellon, 2020) which include a detailed, logical, systematic, consistent and factual approach. If a learner is a Minecraft enthusiast, instead of saying 'I think we have heard enough now' or simply limiting Minecraft talk time, we should actually teach the underlying social facts and reasons Minecraft conversation should not dominate every conversation of every day.

**REVEAL:** Not everyone is massively interested in the details of Minecraft, but they may be polite and try and share your interest for a few minutes but will probably soon get bored (logical).

**HIGHLIGHT:** Watch out when talking to people for eye rolling, glancing away, heavier breathing out, slumped shoulders, these are clues that they are tired of listening and getting bored (detailed, systematic).

**ACKNOWLEDGE:** It is good for people to be passionate about different things and I understand you love Minecraft, but people might prefer to talk to you about different subjects too. You may have to listen to what they are interested in too (factual, consistent).

This process teaches social thinking, a skill that helps to regulate our behaviour. It focuses on teaching 'social know-how' which is often the learning gap creating challenges for our learners. Facilitating opportunities to engage in social learning, developing personal and public self-awareness through a practical experience can help fill the social 'gap'.

A trainee year 7 teacher asked her students to write their best skill: **"Even at this young age they were much more able to rubbish themselves than identify their strengths. Once coaxed the positive vibe in the class was great. It was so interesting that the first one to put his box in the ship was an autistic learner who sits quietly and isn't any trouble. He wrote on his box 'I'm brilliant at juggling'. The other students did not know this and were well impressed! I'm now helping Sam run a juggling class one breaktime a week!"**

This experience offered an opportunity for Sam to experience self-awareness - it felt good to share my skill. Public self-awareness - people are interested me, they had positive thoughts in their mind about me.

### **Use praise and celebration in a meaningful way**

High Five! Sometimes we leave those celebrations to the end of a lesson but receiving, giving and accepting praise falls under our social construct development. We may need to employ similar principles to teaching the social constructs around celebration and praise as we did self-awareness. Teaching Standards 2011 highlight the importance and usefulness of celebration and praise:

**"Have high expectations of behaviour, and establish a framework for discipline with a range of strategies, using praise, sanctions and rewards consistently and fairly."**

Perhaps a 2020 version might read:

1. Establish an environment which promotes engaged inclusive learning
2. Use a range of learning styles to facilitate the experience of success
3. Celebrate consistently and fairly and meaningfully

Meaningful praise is the element of utmost importance. Social understanding is the hallmark of an autistic diagnosis, praise is a social process and a social experience. It is an invaluable and important foundation to good mental health. It has never been more important than now, when figures show 1 in 8 children have a mental health problem (mentalhealth) increasing to 7 in 10 among autistic children (youngminds). These figures emphasise the importance of tailored praise. For autistic children commonly used ways of praise and celebration are not always well received.

**“I daren’t even mention when he is doing something well... if I bring attention to it he has a meltdown.”**

Sometimes praise systems can trigger an overwhelming surge of emotions. Taking a picture of a piece of work or something that was happening and just adding it to ‘our classes celebrations’ can feel less intense.

**“I have tried telling him good job and I’ve given him stickers but he pulls them off his jumper and chews them.”**

Identifying a more meaningful reward can be more successful such as character stickers that are of interest, or try using them to complete a picture. This way the process is motivating and the completed picture rewarding especially if it denotes X amount of time doing or playing with something.



**“I used to include her in the school merit system but the last time she told me I can #### my merits so now I just write her mark and say nothing.”**

Leaving a sticky note observing what you liked about a piece of work or action can be a more subtle but positively received way of offering praise. Some schools have had success with a postcard to home system.

It is obviously impossible to explore all the different aspects of praise and celebration here but it is worth emphasising an acceptable way of praising and celebrating, effort, attempt and success is imperative to good mental health. It is not acceptable to avoid it because of reactions, this merely indicates the need to be more determined to observe and reflect on the individual and find some means of personalising and differentiating praise.

Ian Taylor (2020) warns that **“under the umbrella of differentiation much bad practice can hide”** but also reiterates differentiation is possible because it doesn't necessarily **“demand the need for 30 different lessons but more an adaptive, sensible teaching that sets children up to succeed.”**

### **Explore potential of some frequently suggested strategies**

Autistic learners are often supported by valuable and vital augmentative constructed and structured means. These strategies of schedules, timers, first and then boards, choice board and workstations play a vital, relevant, and important role. They offer a calmer and more predictable, manageable method of navigating the world. They should be shaped by the strengths and learning styles observed in each individual autistic learner. It is important to regularly review, update and

discuss the implementation of these strategies to maintain engagement. No one wants our learners to have an 'Alice Through the Looking Glass' life or learning journey. Her experience of being **“guided by a set of rigidly constructed rules that take her along her path to a preordained conclusion”** reflects disempowerment and a lack of choices in any decision making opportunities.

Luke, a preverbal autistic 3-year-old was very rigid in his routines. Daddy had got in the habit of going for a walk each day and calling at the shop for an ice pop. Dad was concerned Luke had become too set on this pattern. He introduced a visual schedule saying first walk, then shop, then ice-pop. At home they already were using a picture schedule so they introduced a 'whoops' card at snack time. They taught Luke 'whoops there are no apples left but you can have a chocolate biscuit instead'. This meant Luke has an initially positive experience of coping with an unexpected change. Dad braved a walk to the shop knowing it would be closed. He had the 'whoops' card ready and a biscuit in his pocket. He was delighted and shared with other parents **“that it's just the start of us being able to be more flexible. They will work on not having a biscuit but for now Luke's meltdowns every time things changed were improving.”**

Using augmentative opportunities to teach social experiences is invaluable. Often strategies can be adapted and there is nothing more rewarding than witnessing a young adult employ the strategies they themselves find helpful. These may be using their phone to follow a schedule, instructions or for social support (braininhand).



For Hana it was adapting a visual method she had found helpful when younger to understand amounts of time:

Hana loved horses and helping her sister at the stable was her favourite pastime. She had an opportunity to go for lessons with school. This entailed going on the bus. She made herself two timelines, something her teacher had done with her when deciding how long she might tolerate the playground:

**HORSE** ----- **1 hour**  
**Bus** ----- **20 Minutes**

She laid one over the other and decided if she took her headphones and some essential oil on her facemask she would tolerate the 20 minutes bus journey because she would have longer than this at the stable. Employing this practical method of executive functioning, to predict, reason, sequence and process a decision demonstrated her skills in labelling and identifying her own strengths in decision making. One of the most rewarding aspects of developing strategies to support learners is experiencing them employing them for themselves.

### **Identify strengths and characteristics to support positive self-esteem**

If you know your learner is an analytical problem solver who can entertain himself, focus and persist, the likelihood is simple Q and As are going to be whizzed carelessly or meticulously through.

If learners are logical, systematic, methodical thinkers whose challenge is coping with executive functioning skills of memory, reasoning, processing or planning, the responsibility of the SENCO and the teacher is to reframe task setting so that it engages with these strengths and offers an opportunity to experience success.

Colour coding to help with organisational skills. Ensuring the processes or steps required to complete a task are visually available in pictures or words. Tasks such as 'Imagine you...' or 'Share with the reader how...' will need structuring and breaking into more logical requests. For example, imagine a writing piece in history can be set up using a historic postcard to look at and reframed into writing four things about what's happening in this picture.

'Share with the reader how...' is for a literal thinker. A learner who is still constructing the social concept of 'share' by dividing out sweets, stands no chance of getting as far as how a volcanic eruption affected Iceland. But the learner may know all there is to know about volcanoes and because of how the question was asked, we fail in sharing knowledge. Concise and to the point 'write about volcanoes in Iceland' is more likely to need following up with 'no more than 200 words' otherwise learners are left at risk of as one parent reported wanting to stay up all night to complete his homework!

The same principles apply from EYFS to University when considering the approaches we use to develop self-esteem tasks need to be engaging and achievable. Learners need to feel valued, sense achievement, experience completion and be proud that as the song lyrics suggest:

**"I am who I'm meant to be, this is me  
Look out 'cause here I come  
And I'm marching on to the beat I drum  
I'm not scared to be seen  
I make no apologies, this is me"**  
Greatest Showman (2017)

## Activity

Support learners build positive self-esteem, and self-recognition understanding skills. This can be supported by strategies like 'Strength cards'.

### Strengths cards

Strengths cards are cards that illustrate different strengths, qualities or abilities. You can buy them or, you could make your own with your child.

To make them, cut out pictures from magazines or the internet that show various strengths and stick the pictures on cardboard. You could include strengths like 'I am brave', 'I am easy to get along with', and 'I am a good listener'.

### Here are a couple of ways you can use the cards:

- Spread the cards out and ask your child to choose a card for herself and each person in your family. You could also ask other family members to choose a card for your child. Spend time talking about the strengths with your child and the situations where your child shows these strengths.
- Put the cards in a colourful bag. Each week ask your child to draw a card from the lucky dip. Throughout the week, notice and reward your child with praise and a sticker whenever he shows this strength.

## Further reading

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Amanda Morin, [https://www.understood.org/pages/en/friends-feelings/empowering-your-child/self-awareness/?\\_](https://www.understood.org/pages/en/friends-feelings/empowering-your-child/self-awareness/?_)

<https://www.strengthcards.co.uk/>

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This resource is brought to you by Anne-Marie Harrison, Education and Training Director for Ideas Afresh Education Ltd, in partnership and with thanks to Witherslack Group. Anne-Marie offers family support and CPD accredited staff training.



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