

Understood

for learning & attention issues

Strengths-Based IEPs: An Overview

Strengths-Based IEP's - at a glance

- A strengths-based IEP uses student abilities to help work on weaknesses.
- IEP goals are built around what the student can do and how the team can use those abilities.
- Helping students identify and leverage their strengths, interests and preferences can lead to more self-awareness and self-advocacy.

"Oh and I'm so excited
for our IEP meeting
tomorrow!"

Said no one.
Ever.

adiaryofamom
somee cards
user card



Why are we focused on strengths-based IEPs?

- IEP meetings can be stressful. If the school and the parent disagree about how to help a student, it can be a very difficult situation.
- Too often, IEPs and IEP meetings focus almost entirely on student weaknesses, deficits, or the things they can't do.
- NCLD and Understood want to promote a new approach to IEPs that can help build and maintain positive school-family relationships, while also helping students learn and grow.

“IEP meetings can make you feel really defeated. As a former teacher, who is now a parent of 2 children with IEPs, I think the Strengths Based IEPs section [of the toolkit] is a game changer for parents and teachers.”

-A former teacher of the year who is a former special education teacher and now has 4 stepkids, 2 have IEPs



Strengths-Based IEPs: Fact Sheet

A strengths-based IEP is...

- ✓ An approach that leverages a student's abilities to help work on weaknesses.
- ✓ A way to combine standards-based IEPs with a [growth mindset](#) that helps students believe they can improve their abilities.
- ✓ A process that can lead to more self-awareness and self-advocacy.

A strengths-based IEP is *not*...

- ✗ A superficial look at strengths. Abilities are thoughtfully woven into IEP goals.
- ✗ An adults-only process. Students are encouraged to help identify strengths and actively participate in IEP meetings.
- ✗ Just about strengths and weaknesses. It also focuses on interests and preferences.

This new kind of IEP reframes how IEP teams talk about—and use—strengths

Too often, IEP teams discuss a student's strengths by saying things like "What I like about this student is...." These comments can be hard to connect to the rest of the IEP in actionable ways. But IEP teams can reframe the strengths discussion so it focuses on abilities: "*What does the student do well?*"

For example, for students who struggle in math, what do they do well in that subject? Are they good at using a calculator? Do they prefer to work independently or in groups? Strengths-based IEPs aim to start with a strength for each of the skill sets described in the student's present level of performance.

Teacher training in strengths-based IEPs can help schools work on...

Using **strengths finders** to identify abilities, interests and preferences

Preparing students to participate in **IEP meetings** and self-advocate

Helping weave strengths into **IEP goals** as a way to set high expectations

Expanding **IEP templates** to focus on strengths, interests and preferences

Spotlight: Student-led IEPs

Student participation in IEP meetings can deepen the discussion about strengths, interests and preferences. It can also help students set ambitious goals and meet them. That's what happened at Georgia's [Rutland Middle School](#), where student-led IEPs have had a big impact on kids with dyslexia and other learning issues. These students not only learned about their strengths and weaknesses. Several kids set a goal of no longer needing special education in high school—and a handful reached this goal by the end of the first semester of ninth grade.

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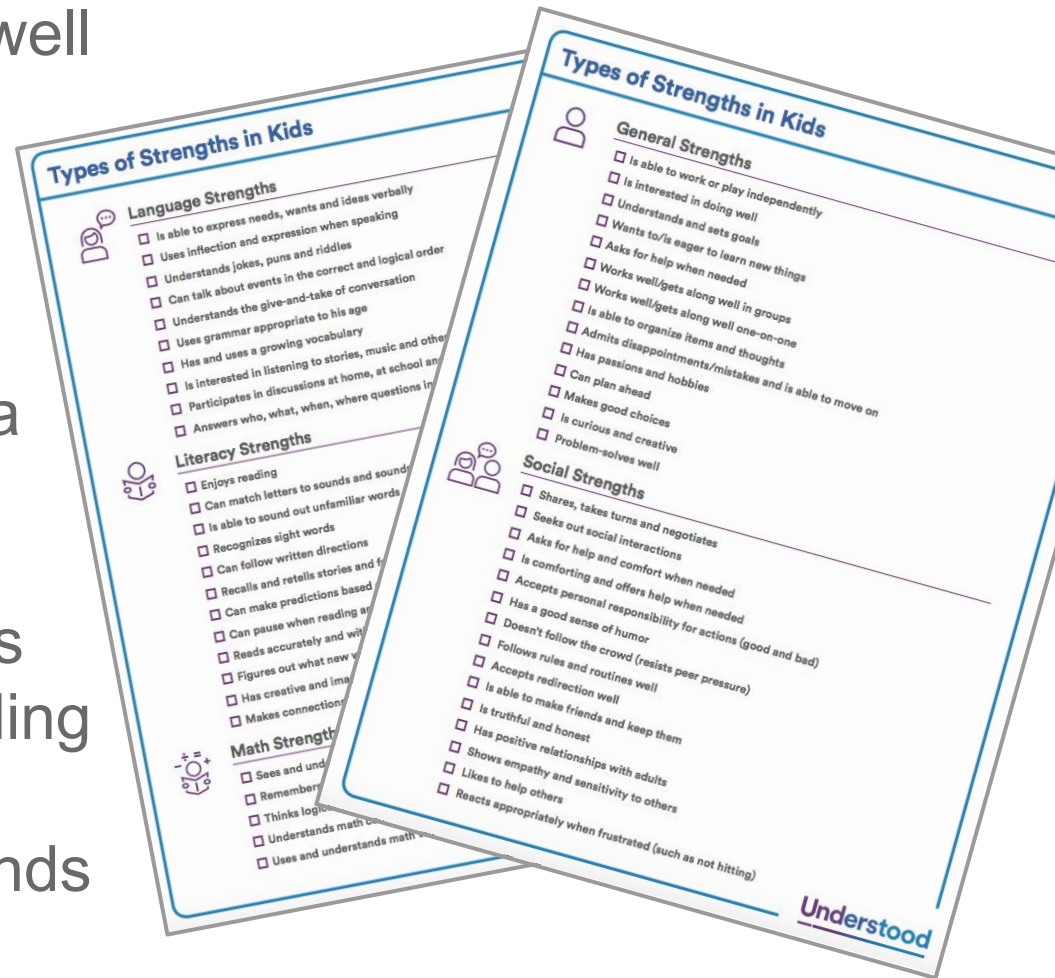
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What are examples of strengths?

- General: problem-solves well
- Social: is truthful and honest
- Language: has and uses a growing vocabulary
- Literacy: recalls and retells stories and facts after reading
- Math: sees and understands patterns in nature and numbers



SMART Goals	SMART IEP goal	SMART strengths-based IEP goal
<p>Specific</p> <p>Measurable</p> <p>Attainable</p> <p>Results-Oriented</p> <p>Time-bound</p>	<p>By May 15, Elana will know from memory all products of two one-digit numbers with 90% accuracy in four out of five tries.</p>	<p>Elana will use her skills with a times table to help transition by May 15 to knowing from memory all products of two one-digit numbers with 90% accuracy in four out of five tries.</p>
	<p>Given fourth-grade level (4.0) reading material, Nura will write three details from the passage in her own words with 85% accuracy on three out of four consecutive assignments.</p>	<p>Given fourth-grade level (4.0) reading material on nonfiction topics, Nura will deploy her love of learning and her interest in science and history to write three details from the passage in her own words with 85% accuracy on three out of four consecutive assignments.</p>
	<p>Aidan will complete his science lab reports on time and with 85% accuracy in three out of four consecutive assignments.</p>	<p>Aidan will use his preference for hands-on learning and his skills with technology to dictate his notes during science lab and complete his science lab reports on time and with 85% accuracy in three out of four consecutive assignments.</p>

How can we make this a standard practice?

Teacher training to help educators learn to:

- Use strengths-finders to identify abilities, interests and preferences
- Prepare students to participate in IEP meetings and self-advocate
- Help weave strengths into IEP goals as a way to set high expectations
- Expand IEP templates to focus on strengths, interests and preferences

What are we asking for?

- Schools to start every IEP meeting with a discussion about strengths
- Schools to send parents some key questions to consider about their child's strengths before each IEP meeting
- The CEC to issue a resolution or proclamation about strengths in IEPs

For more information...

- Parent Toolkit: How to Ask for Schoolwide Teacher Training to Help Kids With Learning and Attention Issues: [u.org/schoolwide](https://www.u.org/schoolwide)
- Strengths-Based IEPs: What You Need to Know: [u.org/sb-ieps](https://www.u.org/sb-ieps)