

## Building on Child Strengths

Strengths-based practices involve identifying children’s abilities and interests and using that information to encourage and support child engagement and learning in everyday activities. Strength-based assessment and intervention practices focus on the competencies a child already uses as the building blocks for promoting child engagement, competence expression, and mastery of new competencies in everyday activities.

[Watch a video of this guide](#)

### Strengths-Based Child Learning Opportunities

- Observe a child’s participation in different everyday classroom activities and routines and consult with parents or primary caregivers to identify the child’s strengths (i.e., his or her abilities and interests). Identify the range of behavior and skills the child is able to use in interactions with toys, materials, and people; things the child does well; and things the child is just learning to do. Also, identify the child’s favorites and preferences; what captures the child’s attention, makes the child smile and laugh, or gets the child excited; what the child prefers to do; and what the child likes to spend time doing.
- Determine the behavior, skills, and interests the child is able to use to stay involved in interactions and play with materials, adults, or other children during everyday classroom activities. Identify the activities, materials, people, contexts (e.g., when and where), and conditions that bring out the best in the child.
- Provide the child lots of opportunities to participate throughout the day in a variety of everyday classroom activities that get the child to express his or her strengths. Ensure the availability of materials and people that match what the child likes to do and is able to do.
- Support the child’s use of strengths in the activities by responding to child behavior in ways that keep the child interacting with classroom materials, other children, or adults. Join in and take turns with the child, comment on what the child is doing, imitate the child’s behavior, and provide naturally occurring reinforcing consequences.
- Promote learning by encouraging the child to elaborate on his or her behavior in the activities. Demonstrate slightly more complex behavior, make suggestions, encourage different uses of materials, assist the child to do something a little differently, and so forth.
- Continue to observe the child’s participation in everyday classroom activities over time. Identify changes in the child’s participation in the activities, abilities, and interests. Use this information to decide how activities should be modified to ensure new learning opportunities that maintain the child’s engagement with materials, peers, or adults.



### A Quick Peek

Fenner and the other preschool teachers knew that Dev knew a lot about zoo animals. They had observed him telling other children about his trip to the zoo and spending lots of time with the toy zoo animals in the classroom. Fenner noted that Dev was just beginning to pretend and make up stories with the animals. He decided to put the zoo animals, along with other props, in the block area for Dev and others to explore. One afternoon, while reading a book with Dev, Fenner observed that Dev got excited about a large illustration of a tiger in the book. “You know, there’s a tiger in the block area today,” said Fenner. He smiled as Dev took the book to the block area and started lining up the blocks to build a corral for the animals. As Dev looked for other things to put in the enclosure, Fenner pointed to the toy cars, which Dev eagerly placed next to the animals. Together they started telling the story about the animals in the book, taking turns with the rhymes, while Dev used the animals to “act out” the story line. Dev enjoyed this activity so much that Fenner decided to provide other ways Dev could pretend with the zoo animals or act out other stories from books he loved.

### You’ll know the practice is working if...

- Children stay engaged in everyday classroom activities
- Children use their interests and abilities to participate in everyday activities
- Children acquire and use new skills in everyday activities

This practice guide is based upon the following *DEC Recommended Practices*: Assessment 2, 4, 7, 9, 10  
 The DEC Recommended Practices are available at <http://dec-sped.org/recommendedpractices>

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