

Optimizing Mental Health and Well Being: Successful Parenting is One Key Component¹

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Abstract

This brief article introduces a “triple package” of well-researched, learned social-emotional skills and traits - Emotional Intelligence, social skills, and character strengths, called “strengths of the heart” - which predict to successful life outcomes for all kids, including gifted and talented youth. The article is based on a newly published book by the author, based on his 40+ year career as an academic clinician at Duke University and Florida State University. The author’s research and extensive anecdotal clinical experience led him to recognize that when bright kids develop savvy and age-appropriate social skills, strong Emotional Intelligence, and keen character strengths, they are much more likely to successfully use their extraordinary head strengths in smart ways to do well in life. They are much more likely to be socially aware, to have positive mindsets, and to take the perspective, values and beliefs of others with different backgrounds and cultures. And they are much more likely to establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships and make responsible decisions into adulthood.

Keywords: *Heart Strengths; Social-Emotional; Emotional Intelligence; Character Strengths; Social Skills; Parenting*

Parenting from the Heart: Introduction

¹Parts of this article are based on the book, *Parenting from the Heart: Raising Resilient and Successful Smart Kids* (2024). New York: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group.

A short anecdote helps set the stage for the underpinning of this article. One quiet, sunny afternoon, I was sitting in my office overlooking the bustling campus grounds of Duke University, a beautiful, bucolic, and highly respected university. I was adjusting to my first summer as Executive Director of the Duke program for gifted students, Duke TIP. While preparing for a budget meeting with Duke University's Associate Provost, a loud knock on my office door brought me out of my reverie. The director of Duke TIPs education programs, a typically calm, unruffled, and seasoned educator, insisted that I take a few minutes away from preparing for my annual budget meeting to talk with one of our summer residential students. Apparently, the student, who I will call Damien, had found himself embroiled in a heated and nasty argument with a few of his fellow classmates, a disagreeable-enough classroom conflict to warrant the student being asked to leave the classroom and brought to deal with me. In my role as headmaster of Duke's summer program, and as a trained clinical psychologist, staff found me a helpful resource in dealing with students on campus who were challenging - challenging behaviorally, academically, socially, or emotionally.

This bright young man - just shy of his 15th birthday, sat across from me with an angry, brooding scowl. Damien was in no mood to acknowledge, much less discuss, what had triggered his frightful mood. It didn't take a Scotland Yard detective to see that he was neither inclined to talk about nor explore with me why he was unable to keep his cool during a heated classroom discussion. This incident back in the summer of 1998, finding an intellectually gifted young man acting rather dumb - totally losing his cool and melting down to the point where he was unable to manage his emotions under the pressure of a spirited classroom discussion, became a watershed moment in my clinical and consulting work with bright kids. It proved to be an epiphany for me. The incident prompted a recognition of my need to better understand the social and emotional world of gifted and talented students [1-4].

The epiphany, almost 30 years ago, was that a great many fabulously bright students - intellectually gifted and talented kids - with what I call magnificent "*head strengths*," didn't always have nearly as well-developed "*heart strengths*". By heart strengths, I mean values, beliefs, personal assets, and skills in the areas of self-awareness, social maturity, open-mindedness, self-management, honesty, gratitude, kindness, empathy, humility, compassion, self-reflection, tact, and forgiveness. And responsible decision-making. I have come to view and call these character strengths, virtues, skills, and competencies "*strengths of the heart*".

Over the last 30 years, my graduate students and I have explored in our lab and in the field the importance and relevance of *strengths of the heart* in the lives of gifted kids, adolescents, and young adults [4]. I just finished writing a trade book for parents based on my experiences, dating back to my early days at Duke University. The book describes how parents can help their bright kids become better adjusted, more happy, thoughtful, self-reliant, and optimistic. And more resilient. For the readers of this article, many of your clients who are parents may find the book helpful. The book is inexpensive and can be purchased on www.amazon.com or online

directly from the publisher (<https://Routledge.pub/Parenting-from-the-Heart>). The material in the book is now being piloted by the author as a part of a workbook to guide a ten-session parent workshop [5].

For a moment back to Damien's story. Damien was fantastically bright, by any measure of intelligence. In the fourth grade, his tested IQ score on a widely used test of intellectual ability was above 140. In the sixth grade, he took the SAT college admissions exam - a test originally designed for high school juniors and seniors, in a procedure that the reader may be familiar with called by talent search programs "out of level testing". He scored in the 99th percentile for sixth graders. A bright young man, indeed. He also was an accomplished musician. However, his instructors and the staff recognized during his summer on the campus of Duke University that this young adolescent was not very emotionally intelligent! His EQ did not nearly match his high IQ.

Damien often behaved in a self-centered and egotistical manner. According to staff, he would lose control of his emotions, and make bad decisions, especially under stress when in the classroom, dorm, or cafeteria. Or during casual social encounters. He seemed to have little appreciation or concern for how his behavior impacted and was viewed by others. He lacked several important social skills expected of kids his age, such as waiting his turn, listening before responding, accepting diverse opinions, and sharing with others. And yet, he was a super-bright and talented young man. A kid with a whole lot of potential. He had what I have come to call amazing head strengths.

Damien didn't have a psychiatric disorder. He wasn't a gifted kid with a co-existing psychological disorder. What the field calls the twice exceptional or 2e student [6]. It would have been much less complicated for our summer academy to view and "pigeon-hole" him, and many other bright students like him, as twice exceptional or 2e. But that really wasn't his issue. Damien was an intellectually bright and talented young man. But he lacked a commensurate level of *social intelligence*. This was his personal demon causing him a great many small and even large problems. He could be quirky. For sure. But he wasn't twice exceptional. And Damien didn't have a sub-clinical disorder, either [2,7]. He was super bright; he had abundant *head strengths*. However, Damien was lacking in commensurate social intelligence, Emotional Intelligence, and *social skills*; what I have come to call *heart strengths* [8].

My research and research by others, along with considerable anecdotal clinical experience, indicate that *heart strengths* make a real difference in the lives of all kids, including gifted and talented youth. In our research and clinical work, we have found that parents play a huge role in helping teach, encourage, and reinforce these important life skills. These are life skills that build resilience and protect bright kids from the many challenges that all kids face growing up. Helping kids develop *heart strengths* contributes to their well-being, resilience, and life success. It helps them navigate the many challenges that all kids face growing up in the 21st century. Well-developed *heart strengths* optimize their mental health and can serve as a prophylactic during difficult times. Parents (and teachers) can make a real difference in their kids' success by encouraging *heart strengths*.

We are now exploring how mental health professionals and school counselors can augment and enhance a youngster's resilience and coping by teaching *heart strengths* in individual and group counseling [4].

My hope is that practitioners reading this article will have the inclination and motivation to include a focus on *heart strengths* in their consulting practices. In my experience, confirmed by findings from our research lab over the past 30 years, is that encouraging parents to pay attention to and nurture their child's *strengths of the heart* should be part of every treatment plan. There is now incontrovertible evidence that *strengths of the heart* make a real difference in the lives of all kids, including gifted kids [5]. It is actually enjoyable and gratifying to incorporate the teaching and encouraging of *heart strengths* such as empathy, compassion, gratitude, persistence, patience, grit, and humility into one's clinical and consulting practice. It complements a 'positive psychology,' preventive approach to mental health and well-being. In my own clinical practice, in our research labs at Duke University and Florida State University [8] and in others' investigations [9-11], *heart strengths* and social-emotional life skills have been shown to consistently promote resilience, well-being, friendships, and life satisfaction. These ideas are backed by solid scientific research.

In clinical supervisory sessions, working with young clinicians, I have repeatedly been impressed by the observation that beginning therapists and counselors find it enjoyable and gratifying to weave teaching *heart strengths* into their therapeutic work with parents and troubled youth. Encouraging *heart strengths*, along with *head strengths*, makes perfectly good sense psychotherapeutically. It improves outcomes!

As I write this article, children's mental health is in crisis. Prior to the Covid-19 crisis, for example, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported that one in five children have a mental disorder (www.cdc.gov/gov/childrensmentalhealth/access.html). Most mental health authorities assume that recent pandemic-related stressors have only further increased the unique challenges that kids today face [12], compromising kids' ability to cope and be resilient. A great many children and youth today suffer from social, emotional, and behavioral challenges that don't necessarily qualify as mental disorders - counselors call these subclinical problems. They aren't mental health disorders. But these behaviors, nonetheless, can be distressful for the child and certainly unsettling and worrisome for the parents. And they compromise a child's success trajectory.

One of my favorite 'pop' opinion writers, David Brooks, recently penned a piece in *The New York Times*, "America is Falling Apart at the Seams". In this provocative essay, Mr. Brooks points out that all kinds of bad behavior are now on the rise. As two examples, he cites a *Wall Street Journal* report that schools have seen an increase in both minor incidents and more serious issues, such as fights and gun possession, and a rising drug epidemic that just keeps getting worse. He concludes his essay by suggesting that perhaps some kind of social, spiritual, or moral virus may be at the core of the impolite, coarse, and disrespectful, boorish, selfish, and self-

centered behaviors seen in the USA and worldwide [13]. Brooks intimates that perhaps our nation has stumbled into a dangerous period of narcissism.

In my new book, I contend that, whether Mr. Brooks' thesis is correct or not, putting *strengths of the heart* at the forefront of what we teach in our homes as parents, and what we introduce and teach in our clinical and consulting sessions in our work with parents and youth is the perfect antidote for many of today's mental health, spiritual, and moral ills [14].

Conclusion

When I first proposed the idea of *strengths of the heart*, back in 1998, I recognized that I wasn't offering a groundbreaking new psychological theory. Rather, I was weaving together a unified model that incorporates three well-established yarns - *emotional intelligence*, *social skills*, and *character strengths*. Findings in my research lab, feedback from literally hundreds of parents that I have worked with over the years, and compelling anecdotal evidence suggest that when kids develop savvy and age-appropriate social skills, strong emotional intelligence, and keen character strengths, they are much more likely to successfully use their *head strengths* in smart ways to do well in life [15-18]. The triple package of *heart strengths* predicts to extraordinarily successful life outcomes; it helps explain why some kids from disadvantaged and troubling backgrounds, early trauma, and inhospitable, aversive environments do strikingly better than others in terms of conventional measures of success and well-being [18-20].

My colleagues and I, here in the USA and in China, are now developing a pilot workshop program guided by the principles and specific interventions found in my new book, *Parenting from the Heart* [14]. We are creating a 10-week parent training program using chapters from the book to guide each of the workbook units and parent sessions. The units include: The Search for Optimal Mental Health: Successful Parenting; Grandma's Rules to Become a Cool Parent; What are Strengths of the Heart; Understanding and Teaching Emotional Intelligence Skills; Character Strengths Make a Difference; How to Effectively Model and Teach Social Skills; Changing Harmful Behavioral Patterns; Learning Self-Compassion and Self-Kindness; and Identifying and Disarming Your Personal Triggers.

Our work on resilience and the triple package of super-traits led us to also develop a new parent gifted rating scale that incorporates test items based on components of *strengths of the heart*. The new rating scale is called the *Gifted Rating Scales GRS™ 2* [19]. The scale is published by MHS test publishers and will be available to clinicians and educators in January 2024. We are very excited about the global application of a well-researched parent rating scale that incorporates reliable and valid indices of *heart strengths*.

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