



Alberta  
Mentoring  
Partnership

# Strength-Based Community Mentoring

A Practice Guide For Organizations



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# Introduction

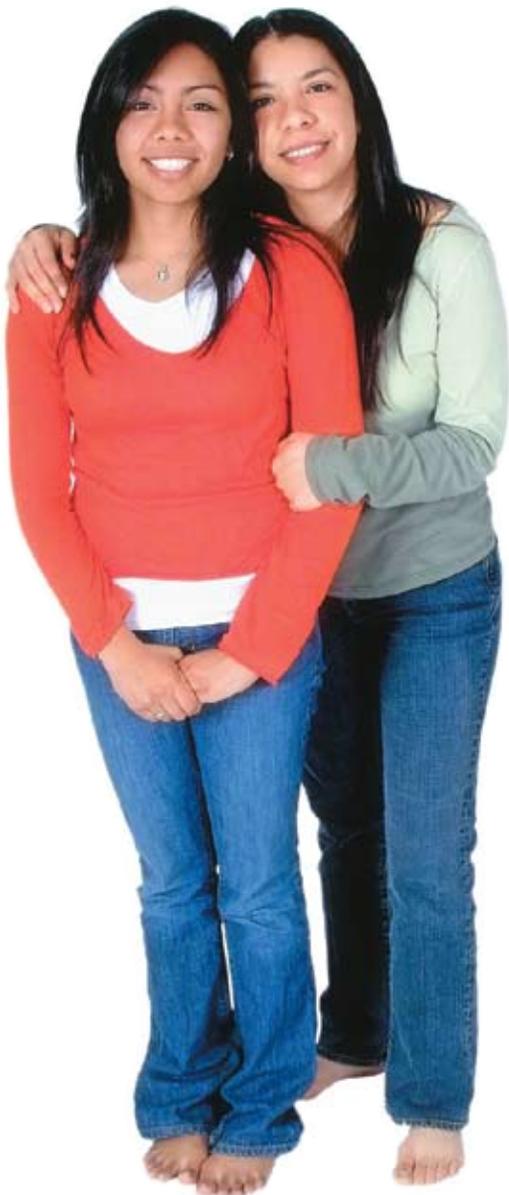
**R**ather than the traditional perspective of engaging young people with a problem orientation and risk focus, a strength-based approach seeks to understand and develop the strengths and capabilities that can transform the lives of people in positive ways. The strengths approach, like mentoring itself, recognizes that prevention is only one part of an integrated approach that looks at what all people need to mature in healthy ways. Although focused on developing the wholeness of young people, this approach does not ignore the critical role prevention and intervention in addressing the risks and significant challenges many young people face. Instead, it highlights the strengths and capacities in and around a person that are critical to their well-being and how these protective factors can be nurtured and enhanced. The challenge that faces community mentoring programs that wish to embrace a strength-based approach to working with people is the reality that you cannot give anything away that you have not experienced yourself. Developing and sustaining a strength-based approach

in an organization requires the creation of a strengths orientation throughout the culture of an organization. This requires commitment and leadership that reflects and models its principles. It is about having a strength-based way of thinking, describing and practicing that is consistent and purposefully supported by every one.

The strengths approach invites consideration of the following: (For a detailed overview of the theory of strength-based practice, see paper on AMP website – “The Strength-based Perspective”)

- It is a philosophy based on values and guiding principles for working with people to bring about change.
- It is a way of engaging people that is primarily dependent upon positive attitudes about people’s dignity, capacities, rights, uniqueness and commonalities.
- It creates conditions that enable people to identify, value and draw upon their strengths and capacity in ways that creates meaningful and sustainable change.
- It provides and mobilizes resources in ways that complements people’s existing strengths and resources as opposed to compensating for perceived deficits.

- It acknowledges and addresses power imbalances between people working in the human services and those with whom they work.
- It seeks to identify and address social, personal, cultural and structural constraints to a person's desired goals, growth and self-determination.
- It acknowledges and addresses power dynamics, cultures, and structures in organizations that are incongruent with social justice practice.



A strengths-based culture is one where staff and volunteers are supported and invited into open and honest communication. Expectations about all aspects of work, performance, attitudes and behaviours are clear as well as one's rights and responsibilities. There is a shared vision and responsibility for achieving that vision. Success is celebrated and good practice acknowledged.

Wayne McCashen (2005) has insightfully talked about strength-based practice as being a values and principled driven philosophy of practice that has implications in parallel ways for the following roles and relationships:

- Community mentoring organizations and how they support and work with community partners.
- Leadership in a community organization and how they support and work with staff.
- Staff in a community organization and how they support and work with mentor volunteers.
- Volunteer mentors and how they support and work with young people.

# Strength-based Practice in Organizations

Strength-based practice is not just an “add on.” It needs to be modelled so that a culture of strengths can be developed. Strength-based mentoring organizations must be very intentional about embedding strength-based thinking in all organizational activities, internal and external. This includes attention to all programming, decision-making, planning, supervision, communication, and administration processes. It also means being very deliberate when working with partners or communities to co-create strength-based relationships, visioning and programming.

Embedding a strength-based approach and parallel practice can at first appear to be less complex than it really is. The language used to describe today’s mentoring practices and programs is often positive in its tone and partners may also share a respectful and optimistic intent. However, what is considered to be “best practice” in mentoring has evolved over decades. Some processes, practices or tools may still hold “deficit-based” or “problem focused” assumptions at their core. As a result, what an organization is actually “doing” in practice may be sending contradictory messages. It may even be undermining positive outcomes for children and families.

Organizations committed to “living” a strength-based approach can undertake a strength-based organizational review. They can do this independently or in collaboration with others to deepen their collective learning. In either case, it will include the consideration of the following (McCashen, 2005):

- Modeling of respectful, inclusive, collaborative, transparent practice.
- Enabling the sharing of power and responsibility for service delivery, internal decision-making and operations.



- Providing leadership in initiating, developing, and sustaining strength-based practice.
- Enabling staff participation in, and shared ownership of, the visioning process.
- Focusing on the strengths and resources of staff.
- Acknowledging power imbalances in the organization and works to address them.
- Acting to address structural constraints to participation.
- Being mindful of cultural and personal constraints and how dominant stories and ideas can constrain change.
- Being committed to transparent practices and accountability.
- Being clear about bottom line and accountability.
- Enabling the development of a clear picture of the future and measurable goals
- Keeping a focus on exceptions and strength stories.
- Seeing the problem as the problem – not the person



# How to Begin?

## The Strength-based Organizational Review

Even for organizations recognized as being strength-based, the prospect of undertaking a strength-based organizational review can be daunting. The potential scale and scope of the project can be overwhelming. If organizations are to maintain their enthusiasm and commitment to building a strength-based culture, it is very important that they may remember an old familiar adage:

The following chart provides a “road map” for a strengths-based organizational review. It illustrates how comprehensive embedding of a strength-based approach must be if it is to promote the desired culture shift. This is followed by a suggested strategy on how any mentoring organization can proceed to “eat the elephant,” as well as considerations for key mentoring organizational functions and processes.

*“How do you eat  
an elephant?  
One bite at  
a time.”*



# Strength-based Organizations Self-Evaluation Framework

Processes	Tools	Training
<p><b>Organization Level Processes</b></p> <p>Do our hiring practices, staff and agency policies, organizational structure, communication processes, board structure, marketing and branding reflect a focus on and valuing of a strength-based philosophy?</p>	<p><b>Organization Level Tools</b></p> <p>Do the website, communication devices, policy manual and marketing materials exemplify an organization committed to strength-based practice?</p>	<p><b>Organization &amp; Leadership Level Training</b></p> <p>Are our recruitment, orientation and training for board members and organizational leadership congruent with a strength-based philosophy and focused approach?</p>
<p><b>Leadership Level Processes</b></p> <p>Do our meeting structures, staff development practices, supervision processes and program evaluation processes exemplify a strength-based approach?</p>	<p><b>Leadership Level Tools</b></p> <p>Are our staff, client and program evaluation tools, logic models etc. consistent with a strength-based approach?</p>	<p><b>Leadership Level Training</b></p> <p>Is our leadership trained to mentor and facilitate experiences with staff through training, supervision and supportive guidance that reflects what staff are being asked to practice from a strengths perspective?</p>
<p><b>Front Line Level Processes</b></p> <p>Does the day-to-day work of front-line staff consistently demonstrate a stronger emphasis on strengths?</p>	<p><b>Front Line Level Tools</b></p> <p>Are the staff manuals, modes of communication, resources, client assessments, service plans, case conference and staff meeting structures more heavily focused on strengths and successes?</p>	<p><b>Front Line Staff Level Training</b></p> <p>Does staff training and orientation reflect a focus, valuing, understanding and ability to implement roles from a strengths perspective?</p>
<p><b>Volunteer/Mentor Processes</b></p> <p>Are the recruitment, screening, supervision, matching, support, recognition and other retention processes congruent with strength-based principles?</p>	<p><b>Volunteer/Mentor Level Tools</b></p> <p>Are the resources, manuals and modes of communication provided reflective of a strengths focused organization?</p>	<p><b>Volunteer/Mentor Level Training</b></p> <p>Does the volunteer orientation and training emphasize the importance of their strengths and ability to mentor from a strengths perspective?</p>
<p><b>Mentee Level Processes</b></p> <p>Does engagement and matching of mentees centre on strengths – a mentee-focused approach that continues through match support and match termination?</p>	<p><b>Mentee Level Tools</b></p> <p>Are the resources provided and skills taught to mentees adding to their ability to understand and draw upon their strengths?</p>	<p><b>Mentee Level Training</b></p> <p>Is any training provided to mentees consistent with strength-based principals?</p>

# First Step: Understanding the Challenge

It is important that an organization's frontline, supervisory and management staff, as well as its board members begin this process with a shared vision and consistent understanding of what it means to be strengths-based. Even where organizations have undertaken previous training on strength-based approaches, it is critical to ground this review on what it means to "live" a strength-based philosophy. External strength-based experts can be helpful here in challenging assumptions and catalyzing in-depth, honest reflection.

*"The stance we take in relation to others reflects choice. We can position ourselves in ways that invite respect, curiosity, and connection. We can also position ourselves in ways that invite judgment, disconnection, and disapproval. The stance we take has profound effects on relationship and is shaped by our values and conceptual assumptions"*

Madsen, 1999

Organizations need this pre-liminary review to build or confirm a shared understanding of:

- what is the strength-based philosophy;
- what mentoring "looks like" in a strength-based context (e.g., formal, natural, and strategic mentors);

- what are the strength-based assumptions we are bringing about children and families;
- why "the stories" shared by the child and family are essential to understanding and providing effective mentoring supports. Stories are the child and families' perception of their own reality –what they consider to be important and meaningful to them. For example, what would they consider to be something they would like to engage in at the beginning of the relationship as opposed to what we might think is important;
- what success "looks like" in a strength-based context.

This would be followed by frank discussions on three things: recognizing an organization's strengths in existing process practice (i.e., appreciative inquiry); identifying areas which require a more detailed review (i.e., continuous improvement); and selecting priorities for immediate action. Through this reflection, the organization is modelling a strength-based practice: building upon what is working while acknowledging and committing to act on areas where it can be more intentional.

# The Strength-based Review Process: System and Systematic

Ideally, an organization would review all its practices and processes to ensure everything it does is strengths-based. The reality is that such a process takes staff time, and “the work” of the organization cannot be put on hold for this task. However, an organization could undertake the following steps:

## **Step 1 – Create a staff committee.**

This committee should include staff from front-line to management, as each role brings different expertise on the practices as well as the context for the practices.

## **Step 2 – Training on what is strength-based.**

Undertake a shared learning experience to ensure everyone on the committee shares consistent perspectives on the purpose and practices of strength-based mentoring.

## **Step 3 – Identify priorities for change.**

Have the committee undertake an identification of priorities for review (e.g., functional areas, specific processes and tools). This could include having staff across the organization complete a checklist capturing their observations (See Appendix A).

## **Step 4 – Develop a plan and timelines of what staff hope to accomplish.**

Be specific about the tasks to be done and who will be doing this work.

## **Step 5 – Clarify what messages need to be embedded across priorities.**

This ensures a consistent philosophy or lens is used across the work.

## **Step 6 – Making changes to the tool, process, form, etc. and pilot this on a small scale.**

This is an art and craft; how something works in “real time” cannot be planned. Test, readjust and test again to be sure the change is leading to the desired results.

## **Step 7– Training the staff on the change.**

Training remains an ongoing task. Staff must understand how to use the new tool, process etc. as well as the messaging that goes along with it. Both need to be aligned so that staff can be intentional in new messaging and don't fall into old habits

## **Step 8 – Ongoing evaluation.**

Continue to assess the effectiveness of changes over time, to ensure that tools help foster the desired outcomes for children and families. When tools and messages are updated, any changes must also follow the strength-based approach

Mentoring organizations can begin to reflect on priority processes they feel require the most attention (e.g., training of staff and mentors). Based upon their observations, staff can design improved approaches, test their effectiveness and evaluate the results. By engaging teams of front-line, supervisory and management staff in this continuous improvement, organizations enhance their strength-based culture. They will also find that learning in priority areas will heighten awareness and accelerate parallel learning in other areas.

Organizations can monitor their progress in relation to the *Strength-based Organizations Self-Evaluation Framework*. They can identify additional priorities in order to be comprehensive over time. As they review each priority processes and practices, organizations should consistently ask:

- What is the purpose in this activity?  
What are we really trying to achieve?
- Are we consistently “living” a strength-based philosophy? (i.e., are all processes, practices, forms, tools, communications, reporting, etc. consistently strength-based?)

- What is working? What can we build on?  
What could be eliminated?
- Where might we be sending conflicting messages or promoting unintended results?
- How does the activity enable children, young people and families to “tell their story”? How does our response reflect the wants, needs goals they articulate?
- How does our approach promote the use of strength-based strategies in response to all situations?



# Strength-based Reviews for Mentoring Organizations: Reflection on Special Functions

Formal mentoring organizations commonly have core service delivery functions that support mentoring delivery. These functions may be undertaken by one person, or across several units. Following are some observations and questions for reflection that may help organizations maintain a strength-based perspective when it reviews specific functions.

## Child and Young people Enrolment

Parents often call mentoring organizations to refer their children. In other circumstances, a grandparent, teacher or social worker may make the call. Right from the start, how an organization “sees” a child or family, and the assumptions they are making about their life situation or potential, will shape how staff, mentors and partners also perceive this child. It is important that organizations be diligent in ensuring that all processes, practices, forms and documentation strive to engage and describe families in a strength-based way.

Some questions for reflection include:

- What are our purposes in responding to a referral call? (e.g., To start building a relationship with the parent? Enable the parent to connect with the best service for their needs?)

- How do our referral processes allow the parent, or other referrer, to tell their story? (e.g., what led you to call here today?)
- To what degree do our referral forms, follow-up questions and documentation share and reflect our strength-based philosophy and practice?
- What information do we want collect and why? For what purpose? How does this information reflect our strength-based perspective and strength-based purposes (e.g., describing a child’s or family’s strengths, as opposed to deficit-based labeling)?
- How do we ensure we are not making assumptions about a family’s situation? (e.g., Do we notice and note the assumptions we are making about a family’s situation? How are challenging life circumstances reflecting a family’s strengths?)

Organizations usually follow up on referral contacts with a family assessment interview and/or a child assessment interview. Families may not be experienced with strength-based approaches. In fact, some may have learned to list or label their needs in order to obtain the supports they require. In addition to obtaining useful information in the interview process to assist in the matching process, it is very important to educate parents and model strength-based perspectives.

Some questions for reflection include:

- What are the purposes of the interview? (e.g., To begin to build the relationship?  
*To enable parents and children to become aware of and identify their individual strengths?*  
*To obtain the information helpful in making a successful match?*  
*To explore information that might impact forming a relationship with a caring adult? )*
- How do interview questions help the parents or children “tell their story”? (e.g., is the interview like a natural conversation, with open-ended questions and follow-up queries?)
- How do we help them reframe deficit-based thinking into strength-based perspectives?
- How do interviewers describe the roles of the mentor, the child or young people, the parent? Do these descriptions foster strength-based perspectives?
- How do interviewers invite the child and the parent to play an important role in supporting match success? (e.g., their ideas for match activities, and their input in staff follow-up on how the match is working out).

Finally, organizations engage children and parents in an orientation and safety training. It is important that these sessions deal honestly, positively and respectfully with this sometimes difficult topic. It is important that children and families understand that awareness and action on these issues demonstrate strength.

## Volunteer Recruitment and Training

Many volunteers are attracted to mentoring because they want to give back to community. They may also wish to provide a child with the same kind of mentoring supports they received as a child. However, mentoring is not about “fixing kids.” The strength-based philosophy views all children and families as already being “at potential.” Organizations must be very intentional about the messages they are communicating in marketing and volunteer recruitment in order to attract potential mentors who share this strength-based perspective. These messages can also set the stage for strength-based conversations in mentor training and support.

Some questions for reflection throughout the volunteer recruitment process include:

- In our advertisements, how are we depicting the children and families we serve? (e.g., Do they reflect all the faces of the children we serve? Do they illustrate their strengths?)
- Are we describing the children seeking mentors in a strength-based way? (e.g., Children or young people at potential and waiting to share the journey versus disadvantaged kids?)
- How are we inviting them to tell their story? (i.e., how are we modelling this strength-based skill? Open-ended questions?)
- How are we inviting them to be a mentor? (e.g., how are we describing the role of the mentor?)
- Do we describe the range of life situations that children may be experiencing? How do we do this in a strength-based way?
- How can we reframe mentor assumptions about different family situations in a strength-based way?

Upon recruitment, many mentors receive further training on the mentoring role. Some questions for reflection on a strength-based review of training include:

- How are we explaining the contribution of the mentoring role? (e.g., helping the child or young people to explore and understand their strengths in or to enhance their core competencies towards positive young people development versus filling in the gaps of their difficult life circumstances or correcting behaviour?)
- How do we help volunteers increase their knowledge, skill and confidence in strength-based practice and a young people-focused relationship-building?
- How do we prepare mentors to be aware of, hear and explore “the story” shared by the child? How are we equipping them to respond to “the story” in strength-based ways?
- How do we help mentors to know they are “on track”? (e.g., the relationship is building, the child or young people is being supported in their healthy development, their confidence is building)
- Does our explanation of volunteer guidelines reflect a strength-based lens? (e.g., being clear on expectations and inviting volunteers to meet them in order to ensure a positive mentoring experience versus “no breaking the rules”?)
- How are we preparing mentors for potential scenarios while modelling a strength-based philosophy and response? (e.g., encouraging and reinforcing positive young people choices vs. managing problem behaviour)

## Matching Volunteers and Children

Organizations often develop internal processes to assist in matching volunteers and children. These include such tools as “assessment summaries” that capture key points from child and family interviews, as well as volunteer interviews. While often “invisible,” these internal processes can be very influential in shaping the perspectives and language of staff doing the matching, as well as what is “presented” to (i.e., shared with) the families and volunteers. Some organizations “present” several potential children to mentors, enabling the volunteers to choose the match that feels like the best fit for them.

In reviewing matching assessment tools or forms, questions for reflection include:

- What is the purpose of this internal tool? (e.g., to summarize and share the stories? To enable matching of people with shared interests? To predict dynamics that might play out in a match?)
- Does this tool make transparent the assumptions about the capabilities and potential of the volunteer? The capabilities and potential of the child or family?
- What is the review process to ensure that assumptions and language reflect strength-based thinking?
- What is presented to the volunteer? To the child and family? How does this promote strength-based perspectives on themselves? The match?

Organizations usually host “match meetings” where the child and volunteer are introduced and get to know each other. Sometimes they schedule pre-meetings, so the parent and the volunteer can also begin to form a relationship. Questions to consider are:

- What is the purpose of these meetings? (e.g., To begin to build the relationship? To clarify expectations (versus to explain the “rules”?)
- How does the process enable the child and volunteer to begin to share their own story? (e.g., exercises to identify individual and shared interests)
- How does the flow enable the mentor and child to begin to build a relationship? (e.g., conversations about shared interests or characteristics?)

## Match Support

Sometimes people confuse strength-based approaches with “give a kid a hug and everything will be fine.” This could not be further from the truth. Strength-based strategies are about engaging people, building the relationship, and then bringing in boundaries. Strength-based approaches deal honestly and openly in all situations, both positive and negative.

Regular, honest yet positive reflection builds trust relationships, and models processes that mentors, young people and parents can emulate. It is important that all organizations support mentors, children, parents and “the match” in becoming skilled and confident in such ongoing evaluation.

To learn more about the characteristics of effective mentoring – see *Strength-based Mentoring: A Practice Guide for Mentors* on the Alberta Mentoring Partnership website ([www.albertamentors.ca](http://www.albertamentors.ca)).

Mentoring organizations undertake regular follow-up processes to support match effectiveness. Following are some questions to consider when reviewing these processes:

- How are we reinforcing with volunteers, children / young people, and parents what positive young people development looks like? (i.e., are they aware of the competencies gained in positive young people development? Where are they observing them?)
- Does our tone in follow-up processes reinforce strength-based perspective? (e.g., proactive vs. paranoid)
- Do conversations inform kids and mentors on the strength of the relationship (e.g., is there respect? Do they talk about meaningful things?)
- Are we continuing to hear “the story” from children, volunteers and parents?
- When situations occur, how do we help matches turn this into a strength-based learning? (e.g., if this happens again, what is our process? Who would we go to for support? What is the contingency plan? Now, let’s put this aside and focus on the relationship / fun!)

Matches will close for a variety of reasons. Volunteers or families move. Children develop different interests. Volunteers may have a change in availability due to personal or work demands. Matches need to be supported in understanding that this is part of life; organizations can support match closure activities that mark this transition (e.g., acknowledging and celebrating the “gifts” of the match for both the child and the volunteer).

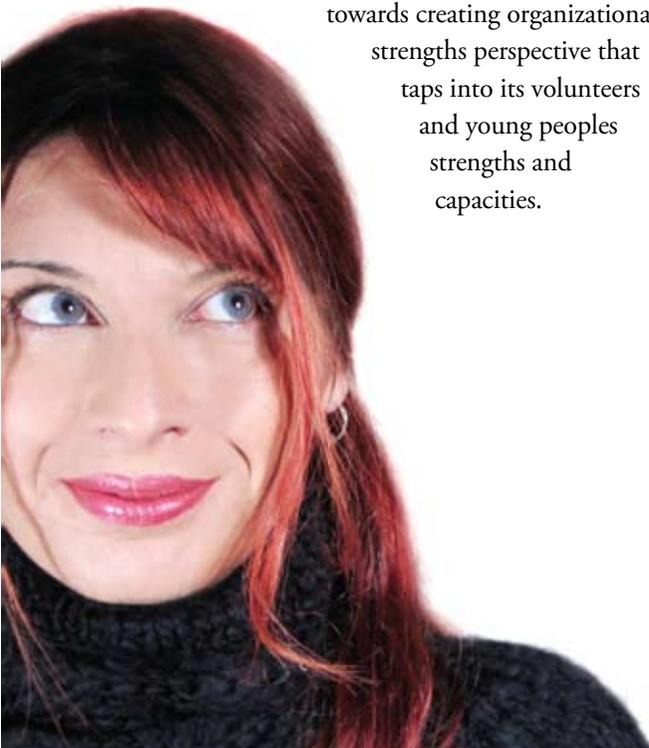
# Strength-based Reviews: Supporting the Staff

If staff are going to be asked to practice from a strengths perspective, the mentoring organization needs to support staff in developing a personal value system that reflects a “half cup full” and having resources at work that nurture and solidify that value system. The characteristics and beliefs of strength-based staff can be amplified when they are supported by colleagues and management in the following ways (Benard, 1998; McCashen, 2005).

**Provide opportunities for staff to reflect on and discuss their personal beliefs about resilience and strength-based principles:** What does it mean in our practice and workplace if all volunteers and young people are to be perceived as resilient and at potential? Answering this question as an individual and then coming to a consensus on the answer as a staff is the first step towards creating organizational strengths perspective that taps into its volunteers and young peoples strengths and capacities.

**Form a strength-based practice review group:** Provide opportunity and resources to read up on strength-based practices, the role of positive young people development and resilience. Share stories of personal and readings of individuals who successfully overcame the odds. Who was the person in our lives that made the difference and what was it about that relationship that made the difference. Polakow (1995) stated that, “It is important to read about struggles that lead to empowerment and to successful advocacy, for resilient voices are critical to hear within the at-risk wasteland.”

**Focus on the organization’s culture and climate:** Mentoring organizations that have strength-based cultures and capacity building experiences are often described as being like “family,” “a home,” “a community I belonged to.” Creating a safe haven is just as important for the staff as it is for the volunteers and young people they support and with whom they work. It requires a collective focus on working from strengths tied to passion. It is about being inclusive, respectful, encouraging, honest, socially just and supportive – based upon the relationships that evolve professionally and personally.



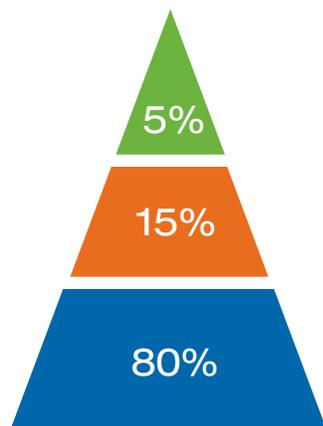
*A young people's strengths and capabilities are supported as necessary by resources in their natural and community networks.*

**Foster collaboration with other community resources to coordinate needed services for young people and their families:** If one is to be strength-based, the needs of the whole young people will be considered and will often require the support of school, family and community in collaborative ways. The supports may include professionals, organizations, information, knowledge, material resources and decision-making resources. In a strengths approach, the types of resources are just as important as how they are offered and mobilized to complement the intended young people's strengths and goals. This is different from attempts to 'correct' perceived deficits in a person. If external resources and supports are not offered in the context of what is meaningful and building upon the young people's existing strengths and resources, they can undermine the young people's ability to learn and be self-determining. They can send messages such as: "You have no strengths that are relevant" or "You cannot cope or change your life" or "You need our expertise."

A strength's perspective points out that the starting point is "what's right with people" and external resources should be added when required and in ways that are purposeful and complementary to a person's strengths and goals.

**Building Staff Capacity:** Nurturing and sustaining a belief in a strengths perspective is not only the critical task of staff; it should be a primary focus of the organization's management. Staff need the same concepts and resources as the volunteers and young people: caring relationships with colleagues; positive beliefs, expectations, and trust on the part of management; and ongoing opportunities to reflect, engage in dialogue, and make decisions together. It is critical that the mentoring organization's culture be supportive of creative staff who are attempting to respond to the story of the young people in meaningful ways. As well, the organization should offer opportunities for further training, scheduled times to share requests for support and to share and learn from successes and provide opportunities for more experienced staff to mentor newer staff.

## Supports based on Student Profiles



**Impoverished Profile:** Collaborative-based assistance: intense, comprehensive and long-term focused that requires sustained help.

**Vulnerable Profile:** Purposeful one-on-one assistance and emotional support to help students facing challenges and stressors.

**Resilient Profile:** Promotion of strength-based adult/peer interaction that lead to pro-active academic, social, & emotional programs/interactions and relationship building that promotes positive youth development for all children and youth.

# Strength-based Reviews

## Organizations Supporting Natural, Formal, Strategic Mentors

Not all organizations that support mentoring do this through formal mentoring (i.e., matching a child with an adult they are meeting for the first time). There are different kinds of mentoring relationships that are less formal.

Ideally, it is the child's story that should determine and guide the type of mentoring relationship or support offered. For example, children often have caring adults in their lives who they look up to and respect (e.g., coach, uncle, and neighbor); these adults have the potential to be natural mentors. Organizations may be able to support these adults to be more aware and intentional in playing a mentoring role for these children.

Other organizations hire paid mentors to build relationships with groups of children or young people (e.g., success coaches in a school setting; recreation leaders in a community setting). Organizations can encourage these staff to be purposeful in building relationships with specific young people. However, in this situation, the young people also chooses the mentor through the process of relationship building; they are not “matched.”

Both these approaches broaden the network of caring adults in a child's life. They also underscore for children and young people that they have the power to seek out positive role models as mentors throughout their lives. This represents a very healthy strength-based strategy.

Questions for reflection for all organizations working with children and young people include:

- How could we help children and young people identify potential mentors in their natural network (i.e., work with the parent and child to identify which adults are important in the child's life)? How could we assist in by extending an invitation to these adults to understand their importance to these children, and what natural mentoring is about? How could we support these mentors to be successful in strength-based mentoring?
- How could we enable paid staff to be more purposeful as strategic mentors? (e.g., a teacher, therapist, or life coach in a school setting, etc.) How do we build their understanding of strength-based mentoring? How do we support them to build relationships with children and young people that have identified them as important?

# Strength-based Reviews: Leadership and Corporate Functions

If an organization is to be successful in providing strength-based supports for children, families, staff and volunteers, strong leadership is required to consistently embed strength-based approaches. It is only a number of staff feel engaged in aligning strategies, processes, practices and tools that a strength-based organizational culture can take hold.

Following are some further questions for reflection for leadership and corporate functions:

## **Governance:**

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- How are our vision, mission and principles consistent with a strength-based approach?
- How do our board management processes model strength-based strategies?
- How do we recruit board members that bring this perspective? How do we develop this?
- How do our partnership strategies and agreements demonstrate strength-based approaches with families served as well as our partners?
- How do our advocacy strategies reflect a strength-based messages and priorities?

## **Evaluation**

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- How do our outcomes and targets reflect strength-based thinking?
- How does the data that we collect reflect a strength-based lens?

- How do our evaluation processes underscore a strength-based process for children, families, mentors, partners and ourselves?

## **Communications and Marketing**

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- Are all our communication messages across all levels of the organization consistent with a strengths-based approach?
- Are we portraying children, families, volunteers, partners and ourselves in a strength-based way?

## **Fund Development:**

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- How do fund development strategies further the community understanding of strength-based programming?
- How do fund development initiatives celebrate the strengths of our community?
- How does reporting to funders demonstrate for, and educate others on our strength-based practices and processes?

## **Human Resources and Staff Training**

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- How are we recruiting and preparing front-line staff to deliver services in a strength-based way?
- How are we recruiting and preparing managers and supervisors to lead staff in a strengths-based way?
- How do our management and supervisory processes (e.g., performance management) model strength-based thinking?

# Building Strength-based Capacity: An Ongoing Iterative Process

For organizations that wish to develop a strength-based practice, the process requires purposeful training and professional development based upon the strengths approach. This includes on-the-ground practice, supervision, and management that develops and sustains the culture, and supportive structure. When organizations embrace strength-based practice, there is an innate contradiction and violation of its basic principals because it reflects the “power-over” perspective. Strength-based practice is encouraged and learned through strong leadership, through seeing it modelled internally and applied in the service delivery as well as through learning and professional development.

Building a strength-based organizational culture is a long-term process. Research suggests that it takes at least three years for organizations to move from awareness to comprehensive, intentional cultural change. Leaders will need to see this as an ongoing, interactive process of organizational learning. Staff can be engaged to reflect on, redesign and try out new strength-based processes, practices and tools. These changes can be assessed on a small scale for their immediate effectiveness. They can and should be tracked over time to determine which changes most effectively support building

match relationships and positive young people development competencies. However, the long-term benefit will be the creation of an organization where staff, mentors, children and families feel respected, heard and supported in their growth and development. They will be living a continuous improvement philosophy that leads to positive change for all involved.

The strengths approach is contagious. It intuitively makes deep sense to those who reflect a “half cup full” attitude in life. It is a powerful and profound philosophy for practice that has the power to transform and build the lives of those being cared for and those facilitating the care process. For many, it is not only a philosophy of practice but also a philosophy for life, because it is based upon attitudes and values reflecting a deep respect others, their intrinsic worth, potential and human rights.

# Conclusion

In summary, community mentoring organizations wishing to embrace a strengths perspective will be guided by a set of guiding principles. These guiding principles are not just theoretical. They are about the real attitudes and values people hold that shape and influence approach to mentoring. A true strengths-based approach is one that governs the way we think about young people and their families, communities, schools and social networks and the way we go about our work on a daily basis for all actions and interactions. It draws one away from a primary emphasis on procedures, techniques and knowledge as the keys to change and highlights the fact that each and every individual, family, group and community holds the keys to their own transformation. Those who embrace the strength-based approach have the privilege of walking along side those they are working with in supporting the exploration, realization, and expression of “greatness.”

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It is an acceptance that solutions will not be the same for everybody; the strengths and circumstances of each person are different, and young people need to be fully involved in identifying their own goals and building their own strengths and resources. The strengths approach reminds us that it is not our role to change those in our care and that we do not need to be experts as to the answers or solutions to the problems of others. It provides a framework and tools that enable us to take up the challenge of learning in partnership with others. It invites us to become facilitators of change and reminds us that anything is possible. In many ways, it is as liberating to us as care and service providers as it is to those we serve.

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