A STRENGTHS-BASED APPROACH FOR PRIMARY CARE CLINICIANS WHEN A PATIENT HAS MENTAL HEALTH CONCERNS

The following guidance is based on the Vermont Child Health Improvement Program.

When a child or an adolescent is diagnosed with a mental illness, the condition often becomes the central issue of every office visit. Along with discussing what might be wrong, these children or adolescents and their families need to remember that there are many positive traits the child or adolescent has and can be developing, even under difficult circumstances. It is these positive qualities and strengths that will help a child or adolescent manage his illness and progress toward adulthood.

A strengths-based approach to mental illness is not just about championing the idea of strengths; the strengths approach helps uncover and engage a child or adolescent’s strengths. Following are the 5 elements of a strengths approach:

### 1. Ask about strengths.

Asking 1 or 2 of the following questions can help uncover which strengths a school-aged child or adolescent already has or needs to develop. Asking these questions also lets patients know that these are important aspects of their lives.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>May Reveal Presence of or the Need to Work On</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tell me about what are you good at, what you enjoy.</td>
<td>Mastery, Independence</td>
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<tr>
<td>Do you have a chance to help others at home, at school, in your faith-based group, or in your community? Tell me more about that.</td>
<td>Generosity, Belonging, Independence, Mastery</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tell me about the important people in your life. Who do you go to when you have a problem you need help with?</td>
<td>Belonging</td>
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<tr>
<td>What are your responsibilities at home or school?</td>
<td>Generosity, Belonging, Independence, Mastery</td>
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<tr>
<td>What do you like to do after school?</td>
<td>Generosity, Belonging, Independence, Mastery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tell me about how you deal with stress.</td>
<td>Independence, Mastery</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

You can also ask parents the following:

- Tell me about the things your child or adolescent does well.
- What are some of the things you do together as a family?
- What makes you most proud of your child?

### 2. Comment on youth strengths when appropriate.

Along with noting strengths in a patient’s record, congratulate patients on their strengths. Many will be surprised and proud to learn these qualities are important. It may also be appropriate, depending on the patient’s age, to discuss the strengths with the parent or caregiver in front of the patient. Youth and parents will often beam with pride.

Also discuss the family’s strengths as a whole. Try to address any problems or risks that the family dynamic might create for the child or adolescent.

### 3. Use a strengths-based framework drawn from the literature.

While strengths are an intuitive notion for many people, developmental psychologists and social workers have developed several frameworks for thinking about strengths. The strengths used in the Table work well in the office setting because they group a wide array of important developmental strengths into 4 key categories—generosity, independence, mastery of a skill or subject, and a sense of belonging. These 4 areas can be remembered with the acronym GIMB. You can learn more about other frameworks through the Search Institute and the Forum for Youth Investment.

### 4. If a behavior change is needed, use a shared decision-making strategy.

While it may not be possible to include the child or adolescent in all discussions, when behavior change is needed, consider using shared decision-making strategies and motivational interviewing. By first discussing what’s going well, you will be able to engage the patient more positively in a discussion of potential changes and point out the inner resources the patient has to support that change.
It is also important to discuss how the child or adolescent deals with stress and negative emotions. Every child deals with frustration, anger, sadness, or worry; to grow and mature, the child must develop ways to manage these feelings.

Try to develop a medical home for the child. Link the family to other professionals, mental health services, and support groups when necessary.

5. Ask for feedback from youth to establish a youth-friendly practice environment. Asking for feedback from patients and parents reinforces that they are not just recipients of care; they can take part in making healthy choices for themselves now and in the future.

Resources
Suggestions and resources on how to take a strengths-based approach to well-child care are available through Bright Futures (http://brightfutures.aap.org) and Connected Kids: Safe, Strong, Secure (www.aap.org/connectedkids).

References