

Talking with Children about Their Strengths & Weaknesses *

Moments of frustration are common for youth with the learning problems and for the adults who work with them. Some youth give up and see themselves as failures.

Dr. Mel Levine suggests using a process called **demystification**, which, through open discussion with supportive adults, helps youth learn to clarify & specify their differences & understand that, like everyone else, they have strengths & weaknesses.

This process creates a shared sense of optimism that the youth & adult are working toward a common goal, and that learning specialists work together to demystify youth's difficulties with reading.

Eliminate any stigma. Empathy can reduce youth's frustration & anxiety about their learning difficulties. Emphasize that no one is to blame & that you know that often they need to work harder than others to read successfully. Explain that everyone has differences in the way they learn. Reassure youth that you will help find ways for them. Share an anecdote about how you handled a learning problem or an embarrassing mistake.

Discuss strengths and interests. Help youth find their strengths. Use concrete examples but avoid false praise. To a youth who describes a movie well, you might say, "I like the way you can remember the details that show how funny that movie was." Identify books, videos, Web sites, or places in the community that can help youth build on their strengths and interests.

Discuss areas of weakness. Use plain language to explain what aspect of learning is difficult for the youth. For example, you might say, "You may have difficulty understanding what you read because your attention drifts during reading, which causes you to miss details and lose your place."

Emphasize optimism. Help youth realize that they can improve—they can work on their weaknesses and make their strengths stronger. Point out future possibilities for success given their current strengths. Help youth build a sense of control over their learning by encouraging them to be accountable for their own process. A youth with comprehension problems who learns to use Post-it Notes to record important information from a reading selection can become responsible over time for remembering to use this strategy.

Identify an ally. Help youth locate a mentor—a favorite teacher, a tutor, an adolescent, or a neighbor—who is available to work with and support them. Explain to youth that they can help themselves by sharing with others how they learn best. Older youth can explain the strategies that work for them, while younger ones may need adult support. Encourage youth to be active partners with their allies.

Protect from humiliation. Help youth strengthen self-esteem and maintain pride by protecting them from public humiliation related to their differences in learning. Always avoid criticizing youth in public and protect them from embarrassment in front of siblings and classmates. For example, don't ask a youth who has decoding problems to read.

* Adapted from Dr. Mel Levine, Educational Care