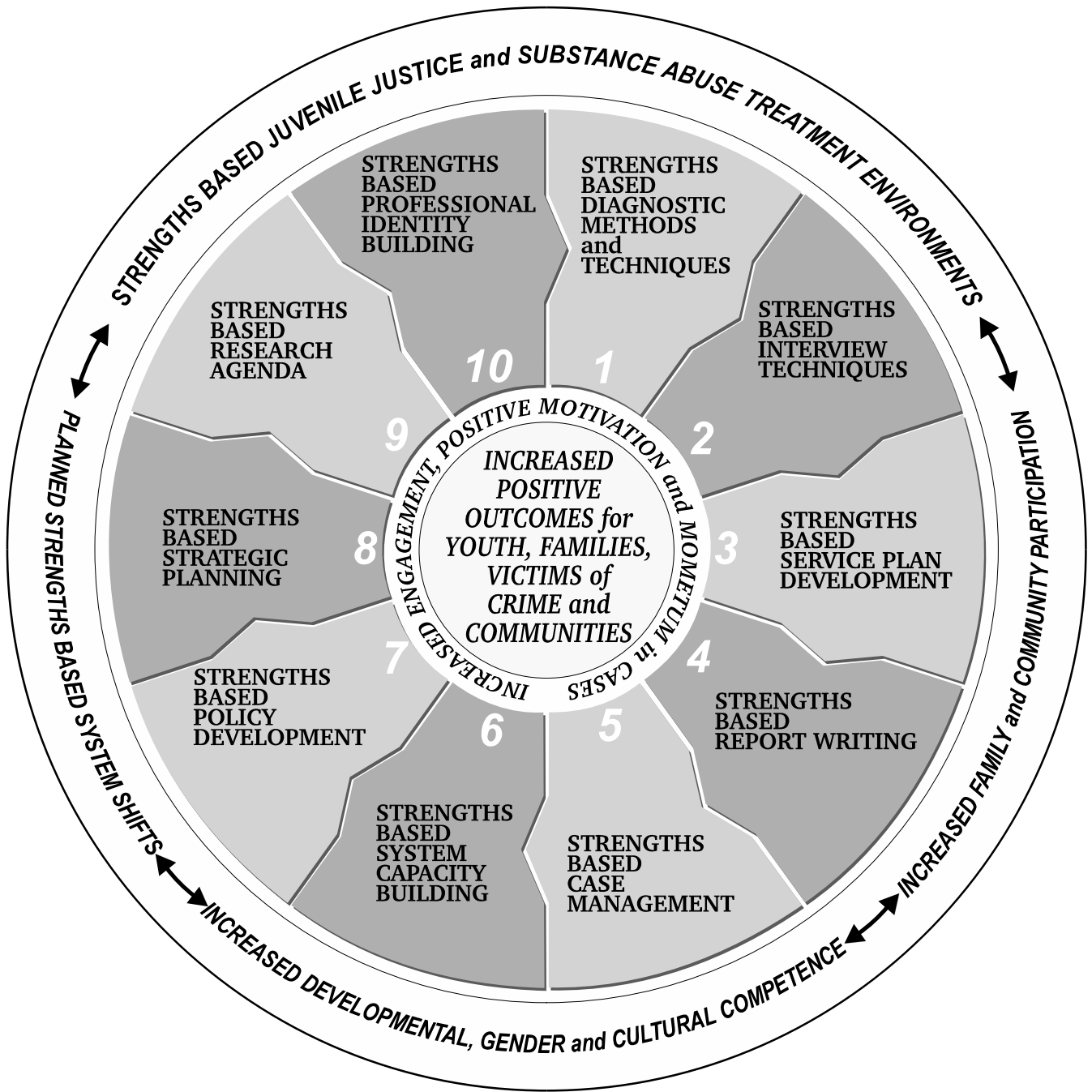


# Focusing On Strengths<sup>1</sup>



<sup>1</sup> This document is derived from: A Taxonomy of Strengths Based Practice Levels for Substance Abusing Youth in the Juvenile Justice System, developed by Laura Burney Nissen, Ph.D., MSW, CAC III, 2001

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Juvenile Departments are expected to respond effectively to delinquent behavior by providing swift and appropriate consequences, protecting the community, addressing issues related to victimization, and using resources wisely. A strengths approach to intervention can balance accountability and skill development with strategies that are more likely to be successful than a traditional corrections approach.

Strengths approaches closely align with, and provide a foundation for, all major juvenile justice innovations. Juvenile drug courts, balanced and restorative juvenile justice projects, integrated juvenile justice substance abuse treatment networks, disproportionate minority confinement reduction efforts, increased gender-specific program efforts, and other innovations are supported and enhanced by a strengths approach.

The strengths approach is a unique way of looking at youth, families, and communities. No matter how stressed or troubled youth appear to be, we are asked to view them in light of their talents, abilities, beliefs and dreams.

This approach allows us to see each youth, his/her family, and her/his community as having strengths that must be used to achieve success.

The strengths approach uses a set of practical skills and approaches that keep the focus of service delivery on solutions and assets.

A strengths approach not only gives clients a real leadership role in creating their case plan, but also in shaping the service system.

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## **Strengths-Based Levels Within Youth Treatment or Justice Service Systems**

A Guide to Thinking About the Multiple Levels of Strengths-Based  
Youth Service Work

### **1. Strengths-Based Diagnostic Methods and Techniques**

- a. Elicit information through questions and approaches that focus on a youth's strengths, capabilities, and ideas about potential solutions.
- b. Use methods and techniques that are strength-based and youth development oriented.
- c. Incorporate gender, cultural, and developmental information to set the stage for optimum engagement, motivation, and investment.
- d. Form a diagnostic impression that authentically and meaningfully includes risk and needs with strengths, challenges with opportunities and aspirations. Standards and regulatory expectations for current practice may not be consistent with the strengths-based approach, and must be addressed.
- e. Use age- and reading-level appropriate written materials to communicate all of the above in writing to the client and family.

### **2. Strengths-Based Interview Techniques**

- a. Use different types of interviewing techniques – solution-focused rather than problem-focused.
- b. Use techniques that open dialogue and gather information about a youth's perception of his/her situation, as well as his/her resources, motivation for, and interest in changing/redirecting his/her life. Also use techniques that invite, rather than disengage or alienate, a youth's cultural values and strengths into the interview.
- c. Focus on "goodness of fit" between a youth's needs and strengths with the environment around him – and seek, through the appropriate services, the chance to improve that fit through fostering meaningful family (where possible) and community relationships.

### **3. Strengths-Based Service Plan Development and Mobilization**

- a. Develop service plans that balance not only the practical, but the visionary – what inspires this youth – what are his/her aspirations in life and how can these be built in a meaningful way into the work during his/her experience in the system? Anchor these aspirations in a culturally relevant context for a youth and his/her family.
- b. Maximize family and youth buy-in through including their voices clearly in planning.
- c. Maximize community-based, non-traditional commitment and investment – seek opportunities to help youth and family experience some neighborhood community building experiences.
- d. Think "out of the box" and work to avoid falling into the trap of the "same old treatment plan goals."

<p><b>4. Strengths-Based Report Writing</b></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Document and clarify/explain a youth from a strengths-based perspective to form a new strengths-based architecture to client services.</li> <li>b. In that professionals across systems share reports regarding a youth’s identity, progress, and overall case summary – shift the focus to reflect, in writing, what is occurring from a strengths-based and solution-focused approach.</li> <li>c. Effectively translate strengths-based practices that are occurring into writing to provide the optimum support for a positive outcome.</li> <li>d. Include new words, new ways of describing challenges, new ways of framing setbacks, and new ways of incorporating motivation and aspiration in reports.</li> </ul>
<p><b>5. Strengths-Based Case Management Across Disciplines</b></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Learn to navigate the variety of strength-based capacities that exist in systems with an eye towards protecting the strengths-foundation and cultural relevance of each case.</li> <li>b. As a strengths-based youth worker, view yourself as an advocate and/or ambassador of strengths-based approaches</li> <li>c. Insist upon, and teach if necessary, what strengths-based approaches mean and how to actualize them across systems.</li> <li>d. Be an effective “boundary spanner” in developing strong skills to work across systems – including in particular the ability to communicate across different systems with different goals, politics, languages, and requirements for service.</li> <li>e. Use properly supported strengths language as an effective interdisciplinary language, because no matter what their orientation, most systems can rally effectively around goals that find a meaningful solution for a youth and family.</li> </ul>
<p><b>6. Strengths-Based Capacity Building Within and Across Systems and in the Community</b></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Prepare and acquaint system leadership with other relevant system membership about strengths-based practice, perspectives and goals.</li> <li>b. Look at individual systems ecologically and develop a capacity not just for one system to progress in adapting to strengths-based approaches – but for all connected systems to as well.</li> <li>c. Cultivate an expectation of strengths-based and culturally competent language and interaction in the life of cases across disciplines and systems.</li> <li>d. Increase the capacity for communities to view youth from a strengths perspective.</li> <li>e. Help communities learn that their role supporting and building healthy and high functioning young adults is valuable so that they will bring their own skills, resources and the power of their relationships to the table.</li> </ul>
<p><b>7. Strengths-Based Policy Development</b></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Revise policies so that they focus on solutions rather than problems.</li> <li>b. Identify and actualize policy shifts and directives that will change the focus from problems to solutions.</li> <li>c. Reward and recognize success and leadership in making advances in strengths-based policy.</li> </ul>

<p><b>8. Strengths-Based Strategic Planning</b></p> <p>a. Identify those in the community who have a vested interest in the success of youth served by community-based treatment and justice systems to involve them in the development of a strategic plan.</p> <p>b. Include all relevant stakeholders in the dialogue to achieve authentic system reform and evolution process.</p> <p>c. Integrate components 1 through 7 together into a revised strengths-based shift or plan.</p> <p>d. Include simultaneous, multi-level, multi-system action to arrive at strengths-based system improvement levels.</p>
<p><b>9. Strengths-Based Research Agenda</b></p> <p>a. Encourage research that clarifies and provides the necessary foundation to begin a more meaningful youth service challenge and dialogue about how and why the shifts to strengths-based approaches are so necessary to overall system reform and improvement.</p> <p>b. Begin an important inclusive shift towards focusing youth service research not only on how to avoid future problems (recidivism and/or treatment setbacks) but how to develop a successful young adult.</p>
<p><b>10. Strengths-Based Professional Identity Building Among Youth Professionals</b></p> <p>a. Support the development of a youth worker's professional identity that includes a belief in the:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Positive nature of youth work.</li> <li>• Capacity for change, growth and success of youth and their families.</li> <li>• Importance of continuing to meaningfully support evolution and reform of the youth services system to an increasingly humane and effective social structure.</li> <li>• Support youth workers' need to develop and invest themselves in community-building locally, nationally and internationally in order to share strategies, gain inspiration, and support one another in the larger goals of improving the chances for all youth and families to find meaning and success in their communities.</li> </ul>