

The strength-based approach has its roots in social work. Dennis Saleebey of the University of Kansas described this approach in great detail as an alternative to the deficit-based model that was (and continues to be) predominant in the field.

Strength-Based Practice Values (Saleebey, 1997):

1. Despite life's struggles, all persons possess strengths that one can marshal to improve the quality of their lives.
2. We can increase client motivation by placing a consistent emphasis on client-defined strengths.
3. Discovering strengths requires cooperative exploration between clients and helpers.
4. Focusing on strengths turns practitioners toward discovering how clients managed to survive vs. judging or blaming.
5. All environments – even the most bleak – contain resources.

Saleebey, D. (Ed.). (1997). *The strengths perspective in social work practice*. New York: Longman.

Saleebey suggested five types of questions for social workers to ask in order to assess strengths in their clients: survival, support, exception, possibility, and esteem questions. The questions on the following pages were adapted from his suggestions, to be used by service providers across fields when talking with parents.

Use these questions as a guide and a source for ideas. Depending on the circumstances of your conversation with a given parent, some of these questions will be more appropriate than others.

Survival Questions

- How have you managed to survive (or thrive) thus far, given the challenges you have had to contend with?
- How have you been able to rise to the challenges put before you?
- What was your mind-set as you faced these difficulties?
- What have you learned about yourself and your world during your most difficult times?
- Which of these difficulties have given you special strength, insight, or skill?
- What are the special qualities on which you can rely?

Support Questions

- What people have given you special understanding, support, and guidance?
- Who are the special people on whom you can depend?
- What is it that these people give you that is exceptional?
- How did you find them or how did they come to you?
- What did they respond to in you?
- What associations, organizations, or groups have been especially helpful to you in the past?

Exception Questions

Note that these questions are more appropriate for parents going through a difficult time.

- When things were going well in life, what was different?
- In the past, when you felt that your life was better, more interesting, or more stable, what about your world, your relationships, your thinking was special or different?
- What parts of your world and your being would you like to recapture, reinvent, or relive?
- What moments or incidents in your life have given you special understanding, resilience, and guidance?

Possibility Questions

- What do you want out of life – for yourself and for your children?
- What are your hopes, visions, and aspirations?
- How far along are you toward achieving these?
- What people or personal qualities are helping you move in these directions?
- What do you like to do?
- What are your special talents and abilities?
- What fantasies and dreams have given you special hope and guidance?
- How can I help you achieve your goals or recover those special abilities and times that you have had in the past?

Esteem Questions

- When people say good things about you, what are they likely to say?
- What is it about your life, yourself, and your accomplishments that give you real pride?
- How will you know when things are going well in your life—what will you be doing, who will you be with, how will you be feeling, thinking, and acting?
- What gives you genuine pleasure in life?
- When was it that you began to believe that you might achieve some of the things you wanted in life?
- What people, events, and ideas were involved?

Resources for more information

Saleebey, D. (2000). Power in the People: Strengths and Hope. *Advances in Social Work*, 1(2), 127-136. Full text available [here](#).

Rudolph, S.M., & Epstein, M.H. (2000). Empowering children and families through strength-based assessment. *Reclaiming Children and Youth*, 8(4), 207-209. Full text available [here](#).