

Parenting for Strong Minds:

3 Keys to Healthy Child Development



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The Power of Story: Building Strong Minds

Nurturing relationships and environments are essential to healthy brain development for children and set the stage for all future learning, health, and behavior in children (www.developingchild.harvard.edu “Five numbers to remember about early childhood development”). We can make a difference in our homes, schools and communities by promoting the value of nurturing environments for children and families and developing programs that move us in the direction of our shared values. We all want the same thing: safe, healthy families and communities for our children.

The field of developmental social neuroscience is the science that looks into the neurobiology of parenting. Growing research has been shedding more light on the fact that early childhood “experiences literally ‘build’ a child’s brain” (Hughes & Baylin, 2012, p. 3). Parenting in particular has long-lasting effects on brain development as well as ongoing emotion regulation skills and relationship patterns. For better or worse, early environments can sculpt the development of the stress response system that can last a lifetime and determine the degree to which children will have the skills of resilience, emotional intelligence, problem solving, social competence, and secure attachment.

Chronic stress in early environments and relationships can lead to a stress response system characterized by defensiveness, emotion regulation problems, relationship difficulties, and insecure attachment. Toxic stress can also increase risk of cognitive and developmental delays, physical health problems (e.g., diabetes, heart disease), substance abuse, and mental health problems later in life. Caring, responsive home and community environments can buffer children from the effects of toxic stress.

So what can parents do to protect their children from stress and help them thrive? To begin to answer this question and continue this discussion, let us share a story.

The Brave Little Boat

There once was a little brave boat, who was born in a port quite remote. He started off small but determined was he, to grow and become, like his dad and his mum, quite big as a boat could be.

So once he learned how to float, in the tide pools that little bold boat, would dash and he’d splash without care in the world, and without slicker or coat.

At times sneaker waves would come from the deep and bruise the small boat to the sand. In panic and fright with all of his might he’d scurry to mum and dad’s hand.

When the storm of fear had subsided again, he sped through the pools out farther and then to currents beyond in the sun. Each day and then year saw him stronger, less fear, as his parents encouraged his flight.

They were there a safe port, if need be, from the storm, then blessed each journey in magnificent form. Available, interested, responsive were they, and thus the tall boat stayed secure in the fray.

Upon final christening, the launch of his life, the great daring ship accepted all strife. For his parents had taught him in obstacles hide, open vistas to find on the other side.

This is a story about growth and development that draws our minds to the importance and power of parents to shape the minds and lives of their children. The story for this little boat (or child) ends nicely and he is well prepared for life ahead. Unfortunately, the story does not always end so well for many children. Why is this the case? Most parents deeply love their children and want good futures for them. They work hard to give them the best shot at life and often provide better environments than those the parents grew up in. Parenting is likely the most difficult and most rewarding calling in life. It can shake us to our core and require the wisdom of Solomon and the compassion of Mother Teresa. But, the good news is, there are clear, time-tested truths that can be applied to make this daunting task more manageable.

In this booklet, you will discover 3 principles for approaching the parenting journey. It is a journey that will take some soul searching and story-telling of your own in order to empower the life story of your children. Life is like an ocean and children need the skills to navigate well. With hard work and loving support from others, parents can be empowered to provide nurturing environments that build amazing strengths in children in the areas of executive functioning, self-regulation, and learning. There are 3 main characters that need developed and strengthened in your child's story to help guide them on their life journey: the Captain, the Lookout, and the Storyteller. Each character represents a set of skills that children can learn from parents that will help strengthen their minds and broaden their insight into building healthy relationships, solving problems, facing challenges, learning new things, and pursuing their dreams.

The CAPTAIN

“A good captain is not made from calm seas.” Proverb

Imagine a ship without a captain. The crew and all the supplies are present, but there is no courageous leader to guide the ship toward its destination. Without a Captain or “executive” in charge, there is little chance of all the parts working together effectively. The Captain is the one who directs all the pieces like the conductor of an orchestra, getting all the players to work together in harmony. A ship without a Captain is like a child without executive functioning skills.

Executive functioning skills refer to a child's “capacity to meet challenges and accomplish goals” (Dawson and Guare, 2018, p. 3). Executive skills help children better manage thoughts and feelings as they direct their actions toward accomplishing goals and solving problems. Just like a ship's captain, children need to be able to adapt to changing situations and storms in life. They need courage and flexibility to sail successfully on the “ocean of emotion” we call life. These “life navigation” skills help us decide which activities we focus on, which ones we will do, and how we manage our emotions to get them done.

Parents can have a huge impact on how well children develop these “Captain Skills.” Many helpful resources can be found in books and online to inform parents how to better build these brain-based skills. Harvard's Center on the Developing Child website has a wealth of information for parents and educators. One example is their article “Enhancing and practicing executive functioning skills with children from infancy to adolescence” (www.developingchild.harvard.edu). This article describes 3 basic aspects of executive functioning:

- Working memory: The ability to hold information in mind and use it to complete tasks. It is like our mental chalk board.
- Inhibitory control: The ability to master thoughts and impulses in order to resist temptations, distractions, and habits, and to pause and think before acting.
- Cognitive flexibility: The capacity to switch gears and adjust to changing demands, priorities, or perspectives.

These 3 mental tools can be slowly improved in meaningful social interaction and fun activities that encourage gradually more demanding self-regulation skills. During infancy, parent-child interaction helps infants focus their attention, build working memory, and manage responses to various experiences. During childhood, creative play, games, and schoolwork offer opportunities for children to practice their attention skills, working memory, and self-control to help them plan activities and flexibly problem solve. By high school, adolescents are expected to organize their time as well as manage assignments and larger projects. Initially, parents help children face and overcome challenges, but then gradually let children take more and more ownership of problem solving as they are able to more independently sail their own ship. Executive skills have their start in infancy and toddlerhood, continue to grow in the preschool and school years, and become more fully developed in early adulthood.

Executive functioning and self-regulation are essential brain resources that must be nurtured in children to optimize healthy development. With the consistent, engaged, and loving support of parents and other caregivers, children grow from brave little boats into great daring ships. Then children are better able to

manage strong emotions, focus on valued goals, and make positive choices. As children learn to be captains of their own lives, everyone benefits. To help remember some essential factors of executive functioning, just consider the acronym CAPTAIN:

- **Concentration/Attention:** The ability to sustain one's attention and complete tasks (*see website: learningworksforkids.com*). Attentional Control: Sustaining focus to complete tasks, remember, and follow instruction.
- **Problem-Solving:** Flexibly planning, organizing, and managing tasks. This also involves working memory which is the ability to hold and manage information for short periods.
- **Tolerance of Stress:** Regulation of emotional responses (Emotional Control). Emotion regulation falls on a continuum from the extreme of chaotic over-reactivity to the other extreme of rigid/non-emotional under-reactivity. (e.g., "Am I able to calm down when upset?" or "Am I able to experience positive emotions and feel connected with others?") This also involves revising plans in response to obstacles, setbacks, or mistakes. In order to adjust to obstacles and solve problems effectively, we need to be able to calm our nerves and look for hidden opportunities.
- **Attunement:** Awareness of the impact of our behavior on others. Self-regulation involves self-observation and monitoring (e.g., "What am I doing and is it appropriate for the social setting?"). This is also called "Metacognition:" the ability to "think about your thinking," to be an observer of your thoughts and actions, to assess how well your actions are moving you toward your goals.
- **Initiate:** Ability to independently get started on tasks and find solutions.
- **iNhibit:** Managing impulses (Behavioral Control). This is the most basic form of self-control that allows us and our children to delay or stop behaviors, think before action, and choose responses rather than reacting.

The infant brain is ready to engage with the environment and build early executive skills that lay the foundation for more and more complex mental processes in childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. At 6 months of age, response initiation is seen when infants reach out and grab objects. They can also focus on objects and ignore distractions (Garon, Bryson, & Smith, 2008). Working memory for objects, people, and locations starts to develop as well as emotional responsiveness (e.g., happiness and fear). These 4 early executive functioning skills help infants begin to learn how to be captains as they direct their attention and behavior toward or away from the important people, places, or objects in their environment. When loving and interactive parents are "tuned in" to their child's early verbal and nonverbal communication, a child's capacity for healthy social connection and problem solving gets stronger.

Poor executive functioning is associated with difficulties such as depression, ADHD, substance abuse, and antisocial behavior (Tang, Yang, Leve, & Harold, 2012). Executive functions can be improved by activities such as interactive games and songs, conversations and storytelling, matching and sorting, imaginary play, puzzles, memory games, music education, complicated clapping rhythms, card games, board games, reading, physical activities, organized sports, aerobics, martial arts, yoga, dance, acting, mindfulness, goal setting, planning, monitoring progress, and school curricula. Key to all of these is repeated practice and progressively increased challenge. The earlier we intervene, the stronger their minds will be to navigate through life.

The LOOKOUT

An "obstacle as opportunity" perspective flows from a deeply anchored soul.

In addition to the character of the Captain, your children need a 2nd character: The Lookout. Just like a ship's lookout who climbs high on the mast to get a better view, your child needs the calm observation skills of mindfulness. On a ship, the lookout is in charge of searching for obstacles, other ships, or land. When the character of the Lookout is strengthened in your child, a deeply anchored "core of calm" can empower them to stay cool in hot situations and find hidden opportunities in life's challenges.

Mindfulness is nonjudgmental attention to and awareness of the present moment. It is "the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding

of experience moment by moment” (Kabat-Zinn, 2003, pp. 145-146). In his book *Mindfulness and Character Strengths* (2014), Ryan Niemiec says that mindfulness is “paying attention to the present moment without judgement.” He talks about a continuum of awareness that ranges from “Autopilot” (mindless, distracted, reactive, going through the motions, “doing” mode) to “Mindfulness” (awareness, presence, tuned in, here and now, responding, “being” mode). When we are mindless, our ship is on autopilot and we are less aware of what is going on inside ourselves and in the surrounding environment. We are also less tuned into the positive details in life and are not aware of opportunities to grow and face challenges.

Dr. Niemiec describes how mindfulness opens doors of opportunity and is associated with many benefits such as a greater sense of well-being, better management of medical and psychological problems, and increases in certain character strengths. Character strengths are positive trait-like competencies for thinking, feeling, and behaving in ways that help encourage the best in ourselves and others. You can take a free character strengths survey at www.viacharacter.org and begin to mindfully notice when you and your children use these strengths. You can build courage and confidence in your children when you are on the “lookout” and regularly point out when you see them using these strengths (i.e., “strength spotting”). When we are mindful, we focus our attention to what is going on in the present moment with an attitude of curiosity, openness, and acceptance. Dr. Niemiec gives a great description of how mindfulness is practiced (p.139-140):

Anytime you bring your attention to the present moment with curiosity, openness, and/or acceptance, you are practicing mindfulness. This can occur “any” time, whether you bring your attention to how you are sitting, your movement as you walk, your breathing as you work, the road and landscape while you are driving, the food you are eating, the smile on the person’s face you are talking with, etc. Here are three ways to practice:

Formal

Some people practice mindfulness meditation for a certain amount of time each day. It is a “formal” practice when you carve out part of your daily living to practice mindfulness, for example, 2x/day for 10-15 minutes each or every morning from 9:00-9:30 a.m. The most common form is concentrating on following your breathing while you sit.

Informal

Informal practice means to “use it when you need it.” When you are feeling stressed, anxious, depressed, overwhelmed, or helpless, take a moment to slow down, pause, and “just be.” Breathe. Become aware of your body, your thoughts, your emotions (feelings), your behavior, and your environment. What is your body saying to you right now? What are you thinking about? What emotions are you present to right now? What do you need? What would “self-care” look like for you in this moment?

In-the-Moment

1. Practice returning to the present moment whenever your mind wanders off.
2. Whenever possible, do one thing at a time (multi-tasking can lead to mindlessness).
3. Pay full attention (all five senses, when possible) to what you are doing right now.
4. Practice “being” while you are... eating, driving, talking, listening, working, praying.

Mindful awareness “may directly shape the activity and growth of the parts of the brain responsible for our relationships, our emotional life, and our physiological response to stress” (Siegel, 2007, p. 6). Mindfulness-based interventions have been shown to improve executive functioning such as attention, cognitive control, and emotion regulation due to positive impact on the child’s nervous system. Research strongly suggests that mindfulness can also strengthen the brain processes that are important to parenting. For kids to learn calm observing skills, parents first need to develop it in themselves. “The capacity of the mother to observe her own difficult experiences and sooth her own frustration, confusion, or disappointment may mean the difference between her navigating the challenging times or distancing herself from her child unconsciously” (Shaddix & Duncan, 2016, p. 60).

Why is mindfulness so important? An essential task of parenting is regulating the infant's or child's emotions and this depends largely on the emotional capacities of the parent. Children are able to find their own sense of security if their parents have it first. Children whose parents practice mindfulness can benefit greatly. If early environments are nurturing, children learn that emotions can be experienced, expressed, tolerated, and transformed. The ability to manage our emotions and behaviors is called "self-regulation." Self-regulatory skills are learned in early attachment relationships with caregivers and support both social-emotional development and school readiness (Zelazo 2012). Mindfulness training may help build self-regulation skills and decrease anxiety and stress. By working on non-judgmental awareness of the present moment, children can improve self-reflection during creative play as well as problem solving. Any time children can learn to pause between stimulus and response, they have more options and opportunities for positive growth, creativity, and social connection.

Becoming an observant Lookout is so important because mindfulness can help parents regulate their own emotions, improve their ability to recognize emotions in their children, and increase their compassion and empathy for themselves and their children. Compassion can help parents and children weather the emotional storms of life as well as the challenges in close relationships. When parents are more regulated and responsive, the child's emotions are better regulated and they are able to return to a state of feeling secure and playful. The child learns to expect that their needs will be reasonably met and that they can handle challenging situations.

As this cycle of "soothing the daily storms" is repeated, the child is protected from chronic stress, they are able to make more positive connections, and they strengthen their "self-soothing" system. The Lookout, therefore, develops a growing internal anchor that enhances emotional intelligence in children and parents.

Mindfulness resources:

- headspace.com
- marc.ucla.edu
- Calm app (on app store)
- viacharacter.org (Free character strengths surveys for kids age 10-17 and adults)
- mindfulnessstapes.com
- iamhome.org (Thich Nhat Hanh & The Mindfulness Bell)
- tcme.org (mindful eating)
- mbct.com (for depression)

The STORYTELLER

"All sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story."
Sam Keen, *The Passionate Life: Stages of Loving* (1983).

Every ship has a logbook that tells the daily story of the journey. A child's journey begins as the blending of the unique stories of each parent. To be able to know and tell their own life story, to become a Storyteller, children need help from loving adults to build early vocabulary and literacy skills that set the stage for future learning and healthy relationships. Children can start developing language skills during the later parts of pregnancy, as newborns, and beyond when surrounded by nurturing, interactive people. Parents, grandparents, caregivers, and teachers can foster the character of the Storyteller in children by speaking, reading, drawing, and journaling with them regularly.

The whole brain is involved in building the architecture of neural connections that enable a child to learn to read. Exposure to early language-rich and literacy-rich environments helps expand infant's and toddler's vocabulary and provides building blocks for later reading skills. Young children who hear fewer words and have less interactive conversations on a daily basis with their parents are at risk for lower academic performance at age 9 or 10 on measures of vocabulary, language development, and reading comprehension (known as the 30-Million Word Gap by age 4). Children born into poor language environments have half of the vocabulary at age 3 than those from language rich environments (Suskind,

2015). Exposure to language impacts a broad range of skills: vocabulary and cognitive development, pre-literacy and literacy skills, math and spatial ability, executive function and self-regulation, and perseverance and grit.

In her book *Thirty Million Words*, Dr. Dana Suskind emphasizes the 3 T's as a way that parents can enrich their child's language environment and get them on the right academic trajectory years before they enter school. She emphasizes that intelligence is not set at birth and parents are the main builders of their children's intellectual growth. Her 3 T's are:

- Tune in to what your child is doing
- Talk more with your child using descriptive words
- Take turns with your child as you engage in conversation

Do not underestimate the impact of your words on the development of your child. Your consistent and loving talk helps build your child's brain and will strengthen their vocabulary, future school skills, problem solving ability, and capacity for healthy relationships. In addition to increasing the quality and quantity of your interactive speech, as a parent you can also help your children by coming to terms with your life story.

How you were parented is not the full story. The health of your connections with your children is not determined by how you were raised. The keys are: how you have "made sense" of your childhood experience and how sensitive you are to your children. If you do not examine your story and make sense of it, you are at risk for parenting how you were parented or going to the opposite extreme. The pain from the past does not have to be passed down repeatedly. By coming to terms with your history, you can be free to parent in a manner consistent with your values.

When we "make sense" of the whole story of our lives, we are able to find what is called a "Coherent Narrative." When we put the structure of a story around our lives, we can find meaning. When we share our story, we make connections and find that we are not alone. It can be helpful to answer the following questions: Are both negative and positive aspects of your family of origin acknowledged? Are you able to make sense of what happened in your life? Can you share your story in a cooperative way with another person and be helped in calming the storms that come with the telling of that story? Talk about who you are and how you got here. Talk about your feelings about your past. How do you talk about your understanding of significant others in your childhood, their behavior, and awareness of the impact on your development?

Even if you did not have a secure bond or connection with your parents, you can come to find what is called "Earned Security." Earned Security is "the capacity of certain individuals to regard their early life experiences in a way that is balanced and objective, even if they are negative, especially when the nature of their early experiences would normally have created a pathway to an insecurely attached state of mind" (Shaddix & Duncan, 2016).

Alan Sroufe from the Institute of Child Development at the University of Minnesota has suggested that "individuals who have come to make sense of their lives in the face of adversity have had a supportive relationship-such as a relative, caregiver, teacher, or friend-that has served as a source of resilience. These findings reinforced the view that attachment is open to change and ongoing development" (Siegel & Hartzell, 2003).

With hard work, introspection, mindfulness, and positive connection with others, parents can find this earned security. Finding a "Coherent Narrative" (i.e., coming to terms with your story) will help parents and children make sense of their lives, develop strong self-regulation skills, and have more emotionally connected and flexible relationships with each other.

Your Story

“It is not so much about how the story starts, but how it ends.”

If you have not done so in the past, take time to share your story with a trusted friend, family member, spiritual leader, or counselor. Or you can write down your story first and then schedule time to share it with someone who can help you come to terms with it. The following questions have been adapted from the *Adult Attachment Interview Protocol* which is often used in attachment research. This is just a starting point. Feel free to include any other details of your story or answer other questions that are important to you.

Tell where you were born, whether you moved around much, and what your family did for a living.

Who raised you, were your grandparents involved, and were there siblings in or out of the home?

Describe your relationship with your parents as a young child.

Choose 5 adjectives or words to reflect your relationship with your mother (or mother figure) and what memories can you think of that show why you chose these words.

Choose 5 adjectives or words to reflect your relationship with your father (or father figure) and what memories can you think of that show why you chose these words.

To which parent did you feel the closest and why?

When you were upset as a child, what would you do? Was there a difference in what you would do when you were upset emotionally compared to hurt physically, or physically ill? When upset, hurt, or ill, do you remember being held by a parent?

What was the first time you remember being separated from your parents? How did you and your parents respond? Are there other separations that stand out in your mind?

Did you ever feel rejected as a young child? Looking back on it now, you may realize that it was not really rejection, but did you ever feel that way?

Were your parents ever threatening with you?

How has your overall experience with your parents affected you and your relationships as an adult?

Why do you think your parents behaved as they did during your childhood?

Were there any other adults who were especially important to you as a child?

Did you experience the loss of a parent or other important person while you were a young child? If so, what was this like for you at the time and how has your feelings about this loss changed over time? Have there been other losses as an adult?

Were there any changes in the relationship with your parents after childhood (i.e., during the transition time between childhood and adulthood)?

What would you say the relationship with your parents (or remaining parent) is like currently?

How do you respond and feel currently when you separate from your child/children?

If you had 3 wishes for your child 20 years from now, what would they be? What kind of future would you like to see for them?

Is there any particular thing which you feel you learned above all from your own childhood experiences? In other words, is there something you feel you have gained from the kind of childhood you had?

Looking into the future, what would you hope your child might have learned from his/her experiences of being parented by you?

What are your goals or values as a parent? What kind of parent do you want to be?

Describe the person (it can be a real person, historical figure, or fictional character in a movie or book) who had the most positive impact on your life. List the qualities you admire in them.

In the book *The Healing Heart~Communities: Storytelling to Build Strong and Healthy Communities* (2003), Cathryn Wellner speaks about lessons she has learned about storytelling:

- Embracing the mystery is as invigorating as finding solutions
- We are strangers only until we hear each other's stories
- Healing begins with speaking the pain
- The act of storytelling can change our lives
- When we find our stories, we find our path
- "Stories are valuable precisely to the degree that they are for the moment useful in our ongoing task of finding coherency in the world." William Kittredge, *Owning It All: Essays* (1988).

Thank you for sharing your story. This process of storytelling is lifelong. As we become better able to make sense of our story and share it in a clear and truthful way with a trusted friend or counselor, we benefit and our children benefit. Children learn more from stories that are coherent (i.e., clear, logical, consistent) and children benefit more in many ways if their parent's story is coherent! Therefore it is all about the story. The parent's story, which is the basis of earned security, helps parents provide nurturing homes for children. Loving interactive talk with children builds their vocabulary, language, reading, cognitive and self-regulation skills. If the parent's story makes sense, they are better equipped to provide the environments that children need in order to more fully grow into the potential of their life story. Be the Captain, the Lookout, and the Storyteller. As you do so, your children will learn how to more confidently and courageously navigate on the ocean of life. Bon voyage!

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Additional Resources

- *Smart but Scattered: The Revolutionary "Executive Skills" Approach to Helping Kids Reach Their Potential* by Peg Dawson and Richard Guare.
- *Late, Lost, and Unprepared: A Parent's Guide to Helping Children with Executive Functioning* by Joyce, Cooper-Kahn, Ph.D. and Laurie Dietzel, Ph.D.
- *Overcoming Dyslexia: A New and Complete Science Based Program for Reading Problems at Any Level* by S. Shaywitz.
- *Educational Care: A System for Understanding and Helping Children with Learning Problems at Home and in School* by M. Levine.
- *Attachment-Focused Parenting: Effective Strategies to Care for Children* by Daniel Hughes.

Developmental Milestones Record Form

(See more at medlineplus.gov)

Have fun keeping track of your child's progress. Constantly engage in "back-and-forth" talk with them, tell them the names of objects, count things with them, talk about shapes/colors/emotions. Help them with physical activity. Gradually increase the challenge level of tasks and enjoy quality time together.

Birth to 1 year

- 1st smile:
- Sits up alone:
- Plays peek-a-boo:
- Pulls self to stand:
- Rolls over:
- 1st words:
- 1st tooth:
- Responds to own name:
- Uses "mama" or "dada" correctly:
- Walks with support:
- Walks by self:
- Develops a sense of trust in responsive and loving caregivers:

Toddler: 1 to 3 years

- Feeds self:
- Draws a line when shown one:
- Runs, pivots, and walks backwards:
- Says first and last name:
- Walks up and down stairs:
- Begins pedaling tricycle:
- Names pictures of common objects:
- Points to body parts:
- Dresses self with only a little help:
- Imitates speech of others, "echoes" word back:
- Learns to share toys (without adult direction):
- Learns to take turns (if directed) while playing with other children:
- Masters walking:
- Gains confidence when given suitable opportunities for increased independence:
- Recognizes and labels colors appropriately:
- Recognizes differences between males and females:
- Uses more words and understands simple commands:
- Uses spoon to feed self:

Preschooler: 3 to 6 years

- Draws a circle and square:
- Draws stick figures with two to three features for people:
- Able to skip:
- Balances better, may begin to ride a bicycle:
- Begins to recognize written words, reading skills start:
- Catches a bounced ball:
- Shows concern for others:
- Plays cooperatively with other kids:
- Enjoys doing most things independently, without help:
- Plans and reaches goals while interacting with others:
- Enjoys rhymes and word play:
- Hops on one foot:
- Rides tricycle well:
- Understands size concepts:
- Understands time concepts:

School-age child: 6 to 12 years

- Begins gaining skills for team sports such as soccer, T-ball, or other physical activities:
- Begins to lose "baby" teeth and get permanent teeth:
- Peer recognition begins to become important:
- Reading skills develop further:
- Routines important for daytime activities:
- Understands and is able to follow several directions in a row:
- Enjoys building skills and accomplishing goals:

Teenager: 12 to 18 years

- Peer acceptance and recognition is of vital importance:
- Understands abstract concepts:
- Working to come to terms with big questions such as who they are and future goals:
- Discovering how to live consistent with their values in the face of adversity:

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