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Channeling Your Child's Strengths

A GUIDING PRINCIPLE

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Lisa and Jose held hands as they drove home from Ayden's school, where their son was enrolled in first grade. Ayden had been diagnosed with autism during the summer. Testing had shown that he was a highly capable child. He had a great sense of humor, which his parents enjoyed. They were disappointed to hear his teacher report that he was having a very difficult time with both peers and adults in school. He wasn't interested in playing with the other children, and he often refused to follow the rules. Despite being very intelligent, he rarely did his work, preferring to draw pictures of his favorite computer game characters. If this pattern continued, he might not be promoted to second grade.

As the car pulled into the driveway, Ayden raced from the house in his socks to embrace his parents and tell them about his most recent achievement in his favorite computer game. Jose looked at his son's smiling face, felt the tenderness in his hug, and experienced the now-familiar pain of knowing that others didn't always see how wonderful his child was. How could he and Lisa help their son take his enthusiasm and passion to school with him? How could they teach Ayden to apply the skills that had made him a neighborhood legend at computer games to math, classroom rules, and friends?

Janine smiled with delight as she opened the wrinkled paper bag that 12-year-old Sameer had just handed her. Sameer rarely commented on her likes and dislikes or on their interactions during their therapy sessions, but obviously he had noticed the type of pen she used, remembered the single occasion she had mentioned her music tastes, and registered which snacks she occasionally left sitting on her desk. There in the bag, which he had taped closed and labeled "JA" in black marker, were her favorite model of pen, filled with ink in her favorite color; a bag of her favorite type of potato chip; and a thumb drive containing her favorite song—recorded 50 times. Sameer's naturally prodigious memory had helped him show Janine how important their relationship was to him, and Janine could see from his beaming face as she thanked him that this was a hugely satisfying accomplishment for this autistic boy.

Ayden and Sameer have many strengths and unique talents, which their parents appreciate and enjoy. However, for children like Ayden and Sameer, everyday activities are often a big challenge. Typical, routine interactions with others can seem difficult. As parents, you can see your child's admirable, endearing qualities, but all too often the world seems blind to them. And because you spend a lot of time and energy helping your child meet the demands of the outside world, you too can end up focusing on difficulties rather than strengths. This chapter presents a distinct mindset: thinking first of your child's strengths and second of their challenges as you help them navigate a confusing world. Chapters 6 through 9 offer a long list of specific strategies for helping your child succeed and enjoy life at home, at school, in the social arena, and, as your child matures, in the workplace and other adult settings. What underlies them all, however, is the simple principle that you can channel your child's unique behaviors and ways of thinking into positive attributes and achievements.

Recognizing and capitalizing on your child's strengths and helping others do so can go a long way toward making up for areas of difficulty. We've found, in fact, that asking yourself how you can take advantage of the gifts associated with autism, or how you can creatively apply the unique ways of thinking or behaving associated with autism, tends to produce many more solutions than strategies that concentrate on addressing areas of difficulty. By consistently calling attention to your child's ability to adapt

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in unique ways, you help others see your child's admirable qualities and also strengthen the positive bonds between parent and child. Perhaps most important, you help build your child's positive sense of identity as an autistic person and foster self-esteem. Success breeds success, and autistic children who are given opportunities to succeed tend to adapt to the nonautistic world more quickly and completely than those who are taught to view life as one problem after another.

In Part I of this book we discussed how and why children with autism are different from nonautistic children and what we do to try to overcome their problems. There is no question that trying to reduce the disability that can be associated with autism is an important aspect of an intervention program. All autistic children can learn and acquire skills that will help them navigate the world. But we urge all parents not to stop there. You can tweak the environment too, in effect making it adapt to what your child has to offer. This is what living with autism is all about, and it is the guiding principle behind all the suggestions we make in the chapters to come.

This chapter describes six strengths commonly seen in autistic children and provides ideas for how to use them to help your child on a daily basis. You'll see them incorporated into our suggestions for living with autism at home, at school, with friends, in jobs, and in adult life in the following chapters, and we hope you'll focus on them whenever you have to come up with creative solutions on your own.

Enough research has been conducted on long-term outcomes for us to know that autistic children can live happy and productive lives. Dr. Temple Grandin, the extremely successful autistic animal scientist, often describes her achievements by highlighting the development of her areas of strength and ability. She believes that, frequently, too much attention is paid to areas where people struggle. Instead, she suggests, autistic individuals should concentrate on finding ways to use their skills and other strengths to help them work around any disabilities. Children who begin early to capitalize on their strengths are laying an important foundation for future success.

Isabella is a 35-year-old autistic woman. Every weekday she takes the bus to the campus of the university in her town and passes through the impressive, vaulted entrance of the library. She spends the day working in the archives department, locating old articles for students and organizing

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the library's collection. Isabella has always been passionate about history, and this job gives her an opportunity to earn a living while keeping close to her intense interests. Her boss says she is the most efficient employee he has ever had, describing her knowledge of the university's archival collection as "remarkable."

Isabella may never have gotten where she is today without the help of her parents. They realized that her interest in history, which often interfered with other aspects of her education, was not going to disappear and was an integral part of who she was. They resolved to stimulate, rather than discourage, her passion for history and make it applicable to the "real world" and future careers whenever they saw the potential to do so. In high school, they successfully worked with her teachers to creatively incorporate history into every class and many assignments. In this way, Isabella broadened her focus a bit, learning not just about world history, but also about the history of science, the history of computers, and the history and evolution of different languages. They enrolled Isabella in a history club, where she met adults with history-related careers such as genealogy. Her parents even read some of the same books Isabella was devouring so that they could chat about history at dinner each evening. When a job counselor mentioned the library archivist position to them, they recognized at once that this was a great opportunity for Isabella to apply her enthusiasm in a productive way. After speaking with Isabella, who was ecstatic about the prospect of working in an archives department, her parents spoke with her potential employer about autism and its special strengths and its challenges. He was open-minded about the idea of employing Isabella, and he hired her. Isabella and her parents helped her employer understand autism, and her employer was willing to accommodate her need for routine and concrete instructions. Although it took some time and effort for her employer and her parents to teach Isabella about the rules of the workplace, she has flourished in the position and was recently named "Employee of the Month" in her department.

Isabella is a good example of how the unique behaviors and special interests associated with autism, considered "symptoms" (according to the diagnostic criteria) by some of the doctors who diagnosed your child, can instead be seen as "strengths" and can be used to help your child succeed

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in life. The six characteristics discussed in this chapter fall into two groups: *true strengths,* abilities that are beneficial in and of themselves; and *unique behaviors* that can be channeled into strengths with a little creativity and a shift of perspective. Your child is unlikely to demonstrate every strength we discuss or to be able to channel all unique behaviors into strengths, but through observation you should be able to determine which ones your own child possesses and which strategies will be most successful for them.

True Strengths and Natural Abilities

Many autistic people with strong cognitive and language skills demonstrate a remarkable capacity for memorization, superior academic skills (particularly in reading and spelling), and/or strong visualization skills. These skills are valuable to school success and future career potential. Whether you are diagnosed with autism or not, it is useful to have a good memory, good reading and spelling skills, and highly developed visual–spatial abilities. Which can you see in your child?

Remarkable Memory

Others often marvel at autistic people's remarkable memories, particularly for details and facts. In some cases, this memory can seem "photographic," enabling perfect recollection after only a single or brief exposure to the information. Other times, it is the sheer volume and precision of the memory that is so impressive.

Eight-year-old Benjamin recently astounded guests at his parents' dinner party when he told them, "The standard spacing of railroad tracks in the United States is based on the original spacing of wheels on an imperial Roman war chariot, which was 4 feet and 8 and one-half inches." Fascinated by the Greco-Roman War, Benjamin spent much of his free time devouring books on the subject rather than playing outside with the neighborhood kids and often regaled his parents at the dinner table with perfectly recalled details about what he had read. As his parents recognized his superior memory capacity, they encouraged him to use this skill in a functional manner whenever possible. They gave him a list of topics that other kids liked

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to talk about (the local professional basketball team, computer games, and so on), which he committed to memory and then used to converse more appropriately with his peers. They entered him in the town spelling bee, in which he placed second. And they encouraged his teachers to begin working on his multiplication tables, which he mastered in a matter of weeks. His parents were pleasantly surprised to find that Benjamin's prodigious memory was not limited to Greco-Roman War facts, but was in fact usable in a variety of other domains.

Superior Academic Skills

Besides having strong memories for facts and other information, many autistic children have stronger than average academic abilities, typically in one or two specific domains. Advanced vocabulary is one example. Learning and using new or sophisticated words comes easily to some autistic children, as we've seen in many examples throughout this book. Spelling is another common strength. And many autistic children can sound out words far beyond their own grade level (although their actual understanding of what they are reading may be more consistent with their grade level or sometimes even lower).

One way to use this strength is to have your child tutor less capable peers in school. For instance, your child could tutor a younger child in math or spelling. This can provide opportunities for structured practice in areas that may be more difficult for your child, such as social interaction with other children (as in by giving them concrete social opportunities with a willing and welcoming younger child), while also improving your child's self-esteem and potentially increasing interest in peers.

Nora had a hard time interacting with the other students in her sixth-grade class. They often teased her, and she frequently thought their interests were silly. However, she was an excellent student, particularly in English. She could sound out and spell any word, even those at the college level. The school psychologist suggested to her teacher that asking Nora to tutor kids who didn't read very well might be a good way to increase her self-esteem. Nora greatly enjoyed her work as a peer tutor. It not only showcased

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her talents and helped her feel valued by her peers, but also allowed her to connect socially in a predictable, structured, and comfortable way.

Visual Thinking

Many autistic people are what we call "visual thinkers," which gives them advanced skills in things like completing puzzles, reading maps, or quickly learning the layout of a building. In her book *Thinking in Pictures,* Dr. Temple Grandin describes translating words automatically into pictures. When someone speaks to her, their words are instantly transformed into a series of images that tell a visual story. She describes her thoughts as visual representations, rather than as the stream of words that make up thoughts for most verbal thinkers.

Much of our world was created *by* verbal thinkers *for* verbal thinkers. News programs and websites rely on words. Instruction manuals usually rely on words, as do job listings. People communicate and interact predominantly with words. This can present some obstacles for people whose minds use a visually based system of thinking, but it also opens up possibilities to excel in ways difficult or impossible for verbal thinkers. Dr. Grandin, for example, describes how she can "test" cow-handling facilities by "operating them" in her mind, actually giving herself a "cow's-eye view" and experiencing firsthand what a cow would see walking through the facility. Verbal thinkers might be able to talk themselves through this type of experience, but they would miss important details.

By no means does everyone with strong visualization skills have autism. Most artists, graphic designers, illustrators, architects, mathematicians, and engineers are visual thinkers. This style is simply a different way of processing information, not a deficit, and it opens up potential career niches not available to most verbal thinkers.

Miguel, an autistic college student, had known for a long time that he was a visual thinker. He had been using his visualization abilities to bolster his performance in school for most of his life. However, he never realized how much of an advantage visual thinking could be until he began the study of architecture. On his first project, he was surprised that many of

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his classmates were unable to detect design flaws until they constructed a mock-up model of the structure. Miguel was able to think of a design and examine it closely in his mind. He could visualize the way it would look from different angles and the difficulties it might present for people using the space. He found that by the time he created a mock-up he had already worked out a viable design. This strength also helped him make social contacts. As his classmates became aware of his natural ability, many approached Miguel to ask for his evaluation of their work.

You can also use your child's visual thinking style to teach concepts, explain rules, organize activities, or anticipate changes in routine. For example, the use of visual graphics or objects rather than verbal explanations or word problems may help your child grasp mathematical concepts more quickly. A fun way to practice math with your child is to use chocolate chips in addition or subtraction problems, allowing them to be eaten when your child provides a correct answer. The same principle could be used with coins (or old baseball cards!): You can allow your child to keep the coins (or cards) earned for correct solutions. Allowing your child to illustrate their work or to find pictures related to the topic they are writing about may enhance their motivation and learning.

For a visual thinker, pictures of things to be done along with pictures of the positive consequences for completing these tasks can be a strong motivator. An example of this system was provided in Chapter 4.

Alice's mother dreaded the daily struggle over homework. Every evening Alice protested doing her assignments because she preferred to sit and draw pictures. When her mother tried to talk to Alice about this issue, it seemed to "go in one ear and out the other." Considering Alice's strength in visualization (as evidenced by her superb drawing skills), her mother decided to ask Alice to help her make a pictorial after-school schedule: snack, homework, video, bedtime. Alice enjoyed making the schedule and seemed less resistant to following it now that she understood what was expected and took ownership of developing it. If she completed all the items on the schedule on time, she could draw a star on a chart that accompanied the schedule. At the end of each week, five stars would be redeemable for a trip to the art supplies store to purchase a new marker or drawing pad. The visual reminder helped Alice be aware that doing her homework each night

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would earn her the right to watch a video before bedtime. It also provided her with a long-range goal to help her maintain motivation throughout the week. Although Alice still preferred drawing to math, the adoption of a visual reminder system greatly reduced the conflict between Alice and her mother over homework.

Unique Behaviors That Can Become Strengths

There are other characteristics associated with autism that can similarly be used to your child's advantage. Unfortunately, however, you may be more used to hearing these positive characteristics identified as deficits. Problems that autistic children have in school and the social world are often related to their inflexibility, single-mindedness, and difficulty relating to peers. But there's another way to look at—and capitalize on—these behaviors and ways of thinking. With a little creativity and thoughtfulness, these too can become strengths.

Recognizing Order and Following Rules

Autistic people often navigate the world by forming explicit "rules" and recognizing patterns in how things work, the ways people interact, and how events typically unfold. Parents are often amazed by their child's ability to analyze information and extract a set of patterns or rules by which something operates. One autistic adolescent girl commented that she noticed that one of us preferred clothing with horizontal stripes, whereas a coworker preferred clothing with vertical stripes. In fact, neither of us had consciously noticed that we had this preference, but when we mentally reviewed our wardrobes, we had to admit that she was right. While we don't know exactly what facility enables autistic people to see certain patterns in behavior and conduct, we do know that this ability can compensate for more limited natural intuition about social situations associated with autism. Rules, patterns, laws, and principles can help a person who doesn't have great "common sense" about how to behave in certain situations feel comfortable and more sure of the appropriate course of action—especially in social settings that are very rules-bound.

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Kimiko is a young autistic adult who graduated from college and works as a medical transcriptionist in a hospital. In explaining her success, she shared that her boss and colleagues taught her the "secret rules" of working in a hospital during her first week. She learned the specific terms ("stat" means "*I need this fast*" was one example) and codes ("Code Blue" means "adult cardiac arrest"), and what to do when she hears them (run if someone says they need something *stat;* stay out of the way and expect a ruckus when she hears *Code Blue*). "This helped me to know what to expect, and to get less overwhelmed when things changed in a hurry at work." She also explained that she became really good at memorizing these rules, and, after only a few months, her colleagues would come to *her* when they were not sure what a specific hospital term or code meant! "I was so proud that I could help others out, especially because learning those rules came really easy to me—I usually only had to hear them once to know what to do," Kimiko explained.

The same tendency can lead many autistic children to enthusiastically embrace existing rules and become great law-abiding citizens. The rules must, however, be clear, explicit, and consistent, or the autistic child is likely to challenge their logic—possibly relentlessly. Ayden, for example, couldn't help questioning why he and his classmates should be limited to walking in the hallways when running would get them where they were supposed to be faster. And why on earth should they share a toy with a peer when they were still having fun playing with it? To an autistic child, these communal rules and social niceties may seem arbitrary and counterintuitive unless the logic behind them is clearly explained. Notably, however, *because* they are often very rules-bound, this also means that, once the rule *is* clear to them, they may be able to adopt it much more quickly than non-autistic children—and to stick to it reliably once they do. One autistic friend of ours compared the experience of a rule suddenly making sense to "a light switch being flicked on" and was confused as to why everyone else does not experience it this way—why should they *not* just follow a rule all the time once it makes sense to them?

The desire for rules and order can be used to enlist your child's help with chores around the home. Taking on household responsibilities can be

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difficult for all children, but if you match the task to your child's natural inclinations, it can be much easier.

Rodney loved things to be in the "correct" place. As a young child, he would become very upset if the salt and pepper shakers were not placed in the middle of the kitchen table, neatly centered on a doily. As a teenager, he spent hours elaborately arranging his collections of rocks and bottle tops in categories according to rules his parents could never quite discern. Since he was so orderly, his parents thought he might be very good at mowing the lawn, but Rodney hated the noise of the lawnmower and got very frustrated because the blades of grass didn't appear to be cut evenly. Instead, his parents asked him to help them clean their home office and organize their files. Once they generated the appropriate filing system, Rodney undertook this task with gusto and performed as well as the best secretary. He later got a job at a local secondhand store, where he organized donated items by category for resale.

You can also use your child's inclination to follow rules to increase their social opportunities. Autistic children are likely to find social interactions that occur in rule-governed contexts more comfortable. A great example of social interaction in a rule-governed context is playing board games. Many board games not only follow a predictable routine but rely on other strengths associated with autism, such as memory and visual thinking. Other examples include trivia games, spelling or word construction games, card games, and chess.

Although bright autistic children can often study others' social behavior and figure out what rules they should use to fit in socially, we recommend caution here. Sometimes the autistic child will use these rules to "camouflage" their true tendencies and traits. In other words, they will hide, mask, or compensate for natural tendencies to fit in even if this is difficult and stressful for them. Examples are forcing themselves to make eye contact or copy another person's gestures or suppressing natural stimming behaviors, such as rocking or fidgeting. Some studies have shown that this type of "overthinking" can lead to burnout, anxiety, depression, and feeling misunderstood. Worse, sometimes these "camouflaging" attempts can backfire, causing the autistic child to seem overly rigid or awkward in their

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adherence to the "rule" they learned was "correct." Help your child monitor how they feel when they are interacting with others and be sure they are not pressuring themselves to camouflage behaviors that might be different from others but are a key part of their identity or way of coping.

Passion and Conviction

Parents of autistic children often lament their child's single-mindedness about certain subjects or interests—usually to the detriment of necessities such as schoolwork, chores, and personal hygiene. But the very same tendency for focus makes these children diligent students of the subjects that intrigue them and very high achievers in those areas.

Nevaeh was diagnosed with autism in preschool after her parents noticed she was exhibiting tendencies similar to those of her older autistic brother. One of Nevaeh's special interests was computer games, which she enjoyed so much that she taught herself how to program her own games, earning her high status among kids in her neighborhood and at school. In junior high, she started a business making personalized screensavers for her parents' friends, earning her some much-desired pocket money. In her sophomore year of high school, Nevaeh volunteered in the computer science department of the large state university in her city, where she distinguished herself so much that she was offered a paying job the next summer. Nevaeh is now enrolled at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, an accomplishment her parents never could have dreamed of when she was an isolated preschooler who spent much of her time reciting dialogue from Disney videos.

Beatrix, who is also autistic, is only in high school, but she's so passionate about chemistry that she's enrolled in college-level courses, where she excels and is a favored participant in class discussions. Her professor was amazed at Beatrix's knowledge of the basic chemical compounds that make up everyday items, like cleanser and antiperspirant, information that she frequently shared with the class. The professor only became aware of Beatrix's diagnosis after the semester ended and Beatrix mentioned it in passing. To Beatrix's professor, her knowledge was highly valued and practical, not a symptom of a disorder.

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The same zeal for specific interests seems to instill in autistic people a strong conviction in their own beliefs. They often appear virtually unwavering in the face of opposing ideas or arguments!

Leilani was fascinated by recycling and the science of conservation. In her free time, she studied ways to reduce waste and increase use of recycled materials. When she first approached her junior high school principal about her ideas, he didn't really pay attention. But after she talked extensively with several teachers and paid a few more visits to the principal's office, he implemented some of the changes Leilani had suggested. Her dedication and her passion had overcome the lack of interest of those around her and contributed to community improvement.

However, as with the rules-bound example above, autistic people can also be especially open-minded to others' positions, so long as they find them to be rational and compelling. And, again, their ability to quickly abandon what previously seemed like a strongly held position can be a bit jarring for nonautistic people. How could this person seem so quickly to give up this belief? This arises in part because nonautistic people view the intensity of someone's nonverbal cues—their tone of voice, their posture, their sense of intensity—to be a proxy for how firm their position is. For autistic people, this is not always the case. In this way, the common autistic traits of having strongly held beliefs *and* being very reason-focused can lead individuals to be functionally *more* flexible than nonautistic people. In other words, if you find your autistic child suddenly decides, midargument, that they agree with you, take heart—you've likely worked hard to earn their agreement, and they are more likely than nonautistic children to stick with it!

Whenever possible, incorporate your child's interests into school-related activities. By doing this often and broadly, you will maximize the likelihood that these interests will someday be channeled in a functional way that leads to a job or a career. For example, reading lessons might focus on topics that intrigue your child. English or writing assignments might be adapted to allow your child to write about their area of interest. Math word problems that incorporate the child's special interest can be devised. Catalogs of favored items (for example, sprinkler system parts) or menus from favorite restaurants can be used to teach your child money concepts. In social studies, your child can construct a timeline of important discoveries

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in the domain of their interest (for example, animals, computers, geography). Other examples of how to use special interests to motivate your child in the classroom are given in Chapter 7. How to find a good match between your child's interests and the workplace will be discussed in Chapter 9.

You can also use your child's special interest in a topic as a reward for completing chores, homework, or any other less preferred routine. An old adage of learning theory is "something of value should never be given freely." In other words, recognize what is reinforcing for and desirable to your child and make them work a bit for access to it. For example, allow your child to watch a favorite train video or read a plumbing fixtures catalog only *after* brushing their teeth and putting on pajamas. If your child loves using the computer, at school the teacher might make computer time contingent on finishing a certain number of math problems. But some caution needs to be exercised in restricting your child's access to their favorite topics or activities. It is very important to make goals realistic and rewards frequent. For some children, like Alice, who preferred drawing to doing her homework, making the reward contingent on completion of a week's worth of homework might be sufficient. For younger children and those with a shorter attention span (or a greater dislike of the task at hand), rewards should be more frequent. It is easier to start with more frequent rewards and space them out as your child adjusts to the idea of working for access to their favorite items or activities.

Another way to use your child's zeal for a topic in a functional way is to find peers who share the interest. This can create new opportunities for social interaction and practice in peer relationship skills.

When Thomas, an autistic teen, was introduced to Diego, a nonautistic boy a few years younger, the two hit it off immediately because both were fascinated by principles of engineering and their applications to environmental problems. The boys spent time together drawing up elaborate designs for machinery that would "save the world," and a genuine friendship blossomed. Because he enjoyed having an audience for his ideas, Thomas learned to become more flexible and less controlling in his interactions with Diego and thus avoided many of the pitfalls that had plagued his previous social relationships (and Diego learned from the more intricate designs that Thomas created!).

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One of the best ways to find peers with common interests is to locate clubs or groups devoted to those interests. An autistic child who has expertise in astronomy or space travel might thrive in a science fiction club or a fan club for television shows dealing with the subject matter. In these settings, a well-developed memory and great store of knowledge about a particular topic is an asset and can earn social status. One child who took great interest in a fantasy-based card game had little desire to socially engage his classmates, and, in fact, this interest frequently interfered with his social interactions. On weekends, however, he looked forward to attending tournaments and playing against and interacting with other children who shared his interest. He described these tournaments as the only time he felt he "really fit in." Another child, who was an avid reader, started his own book club. By having a prearranged topic of discussion, this group helped the child prepare for social interactions and provided him with assurance that he would know what to talk about. More on how to use your child's passionate interests in social situations appears in Chapter 8.

Comfort and Compatibility with Adults

Autistic children often have difficulty getting along with others the same age, whose behavior they may find unpredictable or capricious. Adults are usually more consistent and more accommodating than peers, so many autistic youngsters prefer the company of adults. The fact that autistic children are sophisticated in their language use and interests makes adults enjoy their company as well.

Bryson fastened his top button and smoothed down his hair. He smiled with excitement as he walked downstairs to meet his parents' friends who were coming over for dinner. Bryson loved to talk to people, but he had difficulty interacting with the children at school. They often made jokes that were confusing to him, and sometimes they made fun of his conversation topics. But he always had a great time interacting with his parents' adult friends. They talked about more interesting things and they never made fun of him. His parents had noted this preference when he was younger, so they invited their friends over more often and encouraged Bryson to participate. They found that even though these positive social interactions

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weren't with peers, each occasion seemed to increase Bryson's comfort and interest in just being around others, both adults *and* children. His parents were delighted that his comfort with adults had translated into success with peers during a recent class trip to a nursing home. When students were asked to mingle with the elderly residents, many felt shy or uncertain about what to do. Bryson didn't hesitate to introduce himself to the adults. The residents found him charming and were pleased to have his attention. Bryson's classmates were astounded by the contrast with the hesitancy he showed during interactions with them. They saw a new side of Bryson, and for the remainder of the visit many tagged along with him so that his adeptness with adults could cover for their own discomfort.

Identifying Your Child's Strengths

The six characteristics listed above are a good place to start in identifying your own child's potential strengths. But keep in mind that it's not always easy or simple to identify strengths. Nor is it easy to determine which behaviors that usually manifest themselves as weaknesses can be redirected to make them strengths. When your child's endless discussion of the detailed features of myriad video game characters is getting in the way of social interactions and family plans, it can be a challenge to recognize that this behavior is reflective of a great memory. Observe your child's behavior in a variety of contexts and consider the following questions:

- *What does your child enjoy?* What does your child choose to do with free time? What things does your child ask you about? What things do they tell you about? What kinds of items do they ask you to buy? What school subjects does your child enjoy most? In what types of family activities do they have the most fun?

- *When is your child most successful?* Think about areas in which your child is currently doing well or has succeeded in the past. Are there particular school subjects in which your child gets good grades? Does your child do well at spelling bees or memorizing math facts but have trouble doing word problems or answering questions about what they have read? Does

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your child perform better in certain types of social settings than in others? Can they join a group of kids playing a board game but not ride bikes with the neighborhood kids? Do adults often comment on how charming your child is and appear puzzled at their difficulties with peers?

- *What does your child not mind doing?* Considering what your child least dislikes can also be informative. Does your child willingly go online to look up an unfamiliar word for you when you're listening to a podcast in the car, but asks you to do the simplest arithmetic for them, such as "How many days are left in this month?" A child might refuse to help with mowing the lawn but not mind organizing the bric-a-brac in the living room or putting away the dishes.

It may be helpful to record your observations in a journal. Nothing elaborate is needed: simply make a daily or weekly list of things that your child seemed to enjoy, tolerate, or succeed at and the settings in which the activities took place. Ask your child's teachers or care providers about the activities your child enjoys and excels in during class or after-school care. Compare the answers you get from others to your own ideas to obtain a broader picture of your child's behavior. See if a consistent picture emerges.

Depending on their age and abilities, your child may be able to participate in the process of identifying strengths. An open discussion with your child about their unique characteristics can build self-esteem (some additional resources for doing this informal interview are mentioned at the end of Chapter 8). One psychologist who frequently works with autistic children frames the task as creating an "operating manual" for the child. Explain to your child that you have decided to create such a manual to help the child better understand themselves and to help others better understand them. Make a list of things you have noticed your child enjoys and excels at. Ask if your child agrees with these strengths and can think of any others. If they need help, give some examples of possible strengths ("Are you good at reading?"; "Do you like everything neat and in the right place?"; "Can you tell if I'm going the wrong way to school?").

Finally, examine the observations you have made and look for patterns or themes. Use the list of strengths that we described as a guideline, but

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be open to other possibilities. Do the areas in which you've seen your child succeed have anything in common? Are there shared features in the types of activities your child prefers? During what kinds of activities does your child have the most fun? Do the things your child enjoys or is willing to do reflect strong memory, academic or visual skills, a desire for order and rules, passion for a topic, or a gravitation toward adult company?

Remember that every child is unique and that your child may show strengths different from the most common ones described in this chapter. Perhaps your daughter's verbal skills are extremely advanced, suggesting that explaining something verbally would work better than making a visual list for her. Maybe your son craves quiet and displays a calm, gentle nature that would make him an ideal candidate for a job working with animals. Be open to all possibilities. The main idea is to look for themes and commonalities among your child's preferences, inclinations, strengths, and passions and then to use them on a daily basis to inform all sorts of activities, from chores, discipline, and positive family relationships to school and future jobs.

The way you describe your child to others can either increase or decrease others' expectations about your child. The concept of "asset framing," coined by Trabian Shorters, refers to harnessing the power of describing your child by their strengths or "assets" *before* describing their challenges. The next time you talk to your child about their behavior or to your child's teacher about your child, note whether you start by describing your child's difficulties and challenges or their strengths and talents. Starting with the positive things about your child will naturally change the way your child views their abilities and the way others view your child. It primes the mind to have positive associations and expectations.

There are many practical reasons to take advantage of the unique abilities that are part and parcel of autism. Harnessing your child's natural abilities can make things easier for both you and your child. But again, the most important aspect of focusing on strengths may be the boost it can provide to your child's self-esteem. Many autistic children are painfully aware of their differences. They work overtime at school, at home, and with therapists to try to overcome their difficulties. Often those who interact

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with these special and unique children fail to emphasize the many areas in which they excel. Capitalizing on the things your child does well can help you feel good about yourself and your child. For your child, maintaining a focus on strengths and natural abilities can have long-term positive effects on motivation, self-esteem, and achievement. In the remaining chapters of this book, we give specific guidelines for how to use your child's strengths to overcome the difficulties often associated with autism that arise at home, in school, in the workplace, and with others.

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