



# Adjusting How We Think About Autism See My Strengths First

By **Karen Kaplan, MS**

## I WAS REMINDED TODAY OF HOW MUCH WE ALL NEED TO “RESHAPE THE NARRATIVE ON AUTISM” AS I READ A WISE ARTICLE IN “PSYCHOLOGY TODAY” WRITTEN BY DR. GERALDINE DAWSON. SHE IS THE DIRECTOR OF THE DUKE UNIVERSITY CENTER FOR AUTISM AND BRAIN DEVELOPMENT.

I have always worked with parents, teachers, therapists, and individuals on the spectrum to instill hope and recognize capabilities and possibilities. This article further reinforced my approach.

When the little engine in *The Little Engine That Could* was able to successfully transport gifts to children on the other side of the mountain, it was because he believed. When Annie Sullivan did not give up on Helen Keller and saw the world from Helen's perspective, she then learned to read, communicate, and lead a meaningful life.

When a mom found out her son with autism loved to make Biscotti, [Smile Biscotti](#) was founded. When a couple realized their son on the spectrum had a passion for vehicle detailing, a unique car washing company was established: [Rising Tide Car Wash](#).

When a nonverbal son on the spectrum showed a love for running, his mother found a way to help him complete marathons, [50-mile races](#), and, recently, [a 100-mile run](#).

These examples show that positive change occurs when we shift away from negative narratives. By looking beyond the definition of autism and genuinely getting to know the person, we see the gifts they offer and can leverage their strengths at home, in school, at work, and within our communities. This, in turn, supports the development of self-awareness and positive self-esteem.

Focusing solely on deficits limits us; it imposes restrictions. Parents, grandparents, caregivers, and teachers might be less inclined to find different ways to expand, nurture, and facilitate growth.

I am not suggesting we ignore learning differences and personal challenges or make light of how anyone with exceptional needs might be affected by their diagnosis. Instead, let us find ways to use strengths to help people feel calmer, safer, and

more engaged. I also suggest we delve deeper than labels to find individual characteristics to see how their uniqueness can positively contribute to relationships, work, and creative endeavors. Among exceptional needs individuals, we now understand there are authors, musicians, basketball players, artists, engineers, scientists, actors, actresses, dog walkers, DJs, Zen meditation practitioners, and more.

So, I say, see the child first, not their differences. Find a way to connect to the child and put on your detective hats to understand how they connect, learn, think, and feel. Accept them for who they are, not what you think they should or will be. Help them bring their strengths to life. Put their well-being first, not their deficits.

So, how do we change the narrative, as Dr. Dawson suggests? How do we start recognizing character strengths? Here are some thoughts of mine on the subject:

1. All evaluators need to stress to parents the child's strengths following evaluations. Ensure there are strong points in the final report that highlight capabilities. Perhaps share stories of people on the spectrum who have leveraged their intense interests and made those their fields of work and socialization. Offer hope.
2. University credentialing programs, please educate teachers that all brains are not the same and that a diverse brain does not make a person incapable of learning.
3. Counselors and behavior specialists help parents and teachers understand how to nurture independence and embrace mentorship and coaching roles.
4. For credentialing programs, please offer all teachers multidisciplinary curricula for teaching reading, spelling, writing, socialization, math, science, and social studies.
5. Credentialing programs, please teach teachers to use creative teaching methods. Encourage them to use art, music, and movement to teach, not just show them how



to pull out the ditto or curriculum book or rely on traditional lectures.

6. Individualized Education Program (IEP) teams need to SHIFT. Show parents how you are going to identify their child's interests and strengths and use them to implement all goals and services.
7. The Individual Transition Plan (ITP) team should prioritize identifying and nurturing interests and strengths. Bring in resources to support and expand those. Train parents to nurture independence. Think outside the box about living sites and working sites.
8. Post-secondary institutions should create an environment where students feel safe expressing their learning differences.
9. Agencies like the Regional Center Services, Department of Development Services, and Department of Rehabilitation should think outside their narrow guidelines and policies. Create new assessment tools to identify possibilities, strengths, and interests. The same assessment tool for Down syndrome may not be great for all those with Down syndrome and is especially not accurate for the autism spectrum or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).
10. Speech therapists leave your therapy room, enter the classroom, and collaborate with educators. Invite the parents to sessions. Teach them.
11. Occupational therapists should bring sensory tools to classrooms, extending learning beyond therapy sessions. Go into the home and help the parents create tools.
12. Human resource specialists, it is time you realized the positive attributes of someone on the spectrum (excellent rote memory, ability to absorb facts wholly, extremely focused, propensity for innovation, rules and

routine-oriented, excellent attention to detail and accuracy, kindhearted, loyal, honest). Adjust your job skill requirements to accommodate different social abilities—design calm environments to interview in. Provide details ahead of time to decrease the anxiety of a potential employee. Not all workers are the same or work the same way, but if they get the job done and have done it well, why not accommodate them too? Shift the narrative at work.

Numerous lists outline character strengths that most individuals possess to some extent. (Gordon, 2022). We can use these to reshape our narrative about those on the spectrum. Early nurturing and awareness-building can amplify these strengths:

- **Creativity:** Thinking of new ways to do things
- **Curiosity:** Taking an interest in diverse topics
- **Open-mindedness:** Examining things from all sides, thinking things through
- **Love of learning:** Mastering new topics, skills, and bodies of research
- **Perspective:** Offering sound advice; looking at the world in a way that makes sense
- **Honesty:** Speaking the truth; authentic communication
- **Bravery:** Embracing challenges, difficulties, or pain; not shrinking from threat
- **Persistence:** Completing tasks
- **Zest:** Approaching life energetically
- **Fairness:** Treating all equitably
- **Leadership:** Organizing group activities and making sure they happen
- **Teamwork:** Collaborating effectively as a group or a team
- **Forgiveness:** Forgiving others



- **Modesty:** Letting one's successes and accomplishments stand on their own while not being too proud or confident of abilities
- **Prudence:** Avoiding doing things they might regret; making wise choices
- **Self-regulation:** Being disciplined, controlling one's appetites and emotions
- **Appreciation of beauty:** Noticing and appreciating beauty and excellence in everything
- **Gratitude:** Expressing thankfulness
- **Hope:** Anticipating and working towards positive outcomes

- **Humor:** Making other people smile or laugh; enjoying jokes
- **Religiousness:** Having a solid belief about a higher purpose and meaning of life

As Dr. Dawson recommends, I hope we can all work together to help change the narrative. I am committed to continuing these efforts.

#### References:

Gordon, S. (2022, May 13). What are the 24 character strengths? Everyone has varying degrees of these positive traits. Verywell Mind. <https://www.verywellmind.com/what-are-character-strengths-4843090>



*Karen Kaplan, MS, is a native San Franciscan. She completed her bachelor's and master's degrees at Arizona State University, Tempe, Arizona, in speech pathology and audiology. She minored in special education and obtained her speech therapist and special education credentials in California. Karen worked as a speech therapist for schools for 20 years before opening her own residential and education program for students with autism. She worked in credential programs at Sacramento State University as well as UC Davis and spent 20 years directing private schools for those with autism and similar learning challenges.*

*Karen founded a non-profit, Offerings, which helps cultures globally to understand those with developmental challenges. For seven years, she founded and facilitated an autism lecture series and resource fair in Northern California. Karen still facilitates an annual Autism Awesomeness event. She is currently consulting, helping families, schools, and centers for children, teens, and adults. Karen has authored three books: Reach Me Teach Me: A Public School Program for the Autistic Child; A Handbook for Teachers and Administrators, On the Yellow Brick Road: My Search for Home and Hope for the Child with Autism, and Typewriting to Heaven... and Back: Conversations with My Dad on Death, Afterlife and Living (which is not about autism but about having important conversations with those we love).*

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