



Nourishing Mothers from a Strength-Based Approach

What is a Strength-Based Approach?

In the context of the PEACE Program, embracing a strength-based approach includes seeing, acting, and believing that mothers and their children have strengths, resources, and the ability to recover from adversity (rather than emphasizing problems, vulnerabilities, and deficits). Simply put, the strength-based approach takes on the perspective of the cup being half-full, as opposed to half empty, when approaching events, experiences, and education in our clients' lives. This section will share specific methods of a strength-based approach to enhance the PEACE Programs' ways of nourishing the mother-child relationship.

To be clear, a strength-based approach does not attempt to ignore the challenges and difficulties a mother may be experiencing. A strength-based approach asks, 'what happened to this mother?' and 'what resistance and strengths is this mother utilizing daily to keep her family safe?' instead of 'what is wrong with this mother?'

Furthermore, a strength-based approach avoids the use of stigmatizing, humiliating, and pathologizing language. It provides alternatives to victim identities mothers may be experiencing through the process of identifying her capacity, resiliency, her resistance to violence and her strengths. With the foundational awareness of a mother's resources, resiliency and strengths, PEACE Program counsellors can begin to help children and youth see their mothers' strengths, resources, and resiliency in the context of nourishing the mother-child relationship.



Foundational Principles of a Strength-Based Practice¹

1. An absolute belief that every person has potential, and it is their unique strengths and capabilities that will determine their evolving story as well as define who they are – not their limitations (not, I will believe when I see – rather, I believe, and I will see).
2. What we focus on becomes one’s reality – focus on strength, not labels – seeing challenges as capacity fostering (not something to avoid) creates hope and optimism.
3. The language we use creates our reality – both for the care providers and the children, youth, and their families.
4. Belief that change is inevitable – all individuals have the urge to succeed, to explore the world around them and to make themselves useful to others and their communities.
5. Positive change occurs in the context of authentic relationships – people need to know someone cares and will be there unconditionally for them. It is a transactional and facilitating process of supporting change and capacity building – not fixing.
6. Person’s perspective of reality is primary (their story) – therefore, need to value and start the change process with what is important to the person – their story, not the expert.
7. People have more confidence and comfort to journey to the future (the unknown) when they are invited to start with what they already know.
8. Capacity building is a process and a goal – a lifelong journey that is dynamic as opposed to static.
9. It is important to value differences and the essential need to collaborate – effective change is a collaborative, inclusive and participatory process – ‘it takes a village to raise a child.’

¹ Hammond & Zimmerman (n.d.). *A Strength-Based Perspective*. Retrieved October 18, 2021 from: https://www.esd.ca/Programs/Resiliency/Documents/RSL_STRENGTH_BASED_PERSPECTIVE.pdf

More information about a strength-based approach is available on page 276 of the [PEACE Program Toolkit](#).



Strategies for Implementing a Strength-Based Approach

The following list shares some practical strategies for implementing a strength-based approach to help nourish the mother-child relationship.

- Mothers in the PEACE Program may find it difficult to identify their strengths. PEACE Program counsellors can help to foster the mother-child relationship by noticing aloud a mother's resources, resilience, and strengths. This may take place with both mother and child present, or individually with a mother. When offering these observations, PEACE Program counsellors can practice being specific, frequent, genuine, and honest with their words. Short conversations or check-ins with the mother, for example before or after a child/youth's individual session, may provide an opportunity for this practice.
- In an individual session with a child/youth, or a shared session with both mother and child or youth, PEACE Program counsellors could create an art project, such as a card, inviting the child or youth to share their mother's strengths, resilience, and resources. This could be done with words or images, or both. If this is challenging for a child or youth, PEACE Program counsellors can begin by helping to verbalize some of the strengths they have witnessed. If done with the child or youth on their own, if the child or youth is ready, the art project could be shared with, or even mailed to, mom as way to remind her of the strengths and resources she carries with her. Additional ideas for simple activities to do with mothers and children together are shared in the text box below.
- Enrolling their child in the PEACE Program, seeking support for themselves, and finding time to attend appointments can be a huge task for mothers who have experienced violence. PEACE Program counsellors can acknowledge this strength every time a mother brings her child to a session, every time she calls to check-in, and every time she shows up for herself.
- Reminding mothers that they are the expert of their own situation and giving them permission to trust themselves is a strategy of a strength-based approach. There may be times when mothers are looking for advice beyond the [PEACE Program's scope of practice](#). In these situations, PEACE Program counsellors can remind the mother that she is the expert of her



story and, through noticing her strengths and resilience, can witness her uncovering her own meaningful solutions as new or existing challenges arise. As a reminder, PEACE Program counsellors should make referrals to appropriate local resources when the support required is beyond their scope of practice.

- Asking questions, making plans, and discussing goals are strategies of a strength-based approach. PEACE Program counsellors can use skillful questions to help mothers identify interests, events and goals they are currently working towards. For example, PEACE Program counsellors may ask mothers *‘what strengths have you used this week?’* This question orients the mother to see how her strengths are supporting her and her child(ren) and encourages her to communicate her strengths. From this place, mothers, children, and youth can begin to articulate ways that their strengths may help them move toward their goals. A few other strength-based questions, which may be relevant to ask here are:
 - *What is working well for you and your children this week?*
 - *What kinds of supports have you used that have been helpful this week?*
 - *What do you like doing? What makes this enjoyable?*
 - *What is it that helps you get by when things are hard?*
- Sharing some background resources to a strength-based approach with mothers who are interested may be a helpful strategy to help mothers understand the intentions of the PEACE Program. It is now understood that a strength-based approach encourages resiliency and resourcefulness in dealing with crises and meeting future challenges¹. Some mothers may feel happy to understand this.
- Paying attention to language and using reframes if necessary to support mothers. For example, mothers may say, *‘I am a bad mother.’* Rather than engaging in that comment, PEACE counsellors can reframe the statement for mothers by saying, *‘you are a good mom and you are having a hard moment/week/day.’* This can transfer to the way mothers speak about their children. Rather than, *‘I have a bad kid,’* we can say, *‘you have a good kid who is having some*

¹ Hammond & Zimmerman (n.d.). *A Strength-Based Perspective*. Retrieved October 18, 2021 from: https://www.esd.ca/Programs/Resiliency/Documents/RSL_STRENGTH_BASED_PERSPECTIVE.pdf



hard feelings.’ The following table is taken from p.24 of the [Trauma-Informed Practice Guide](#) and offers examples to help move from deficit-based to strength-based language.

Table 1: BC Provincial Mental Health and Substance Use, TIP Guide, 2013

FROM (Deficit Perspective)	TO (Trauma-Informed & Strengths-Based)
What is wrong?	What has happened?
Symptoms	Adaptations
Disorder	Response
Attention seeking	The individual is trying to connect in the best way they know how
Borderline	The individual is doing the best they can given their early experiences
Controlling	The individual seems to be trying to assert their power
Manipulative	The individual has difficulty asking directly for what they want
Malingering	Seeking help in a way that feels safer

- If PEACE Program counsellors are navigating challenges in their relationship with mothers, emphasizing the use of a strength-based approach can be an effective way to build trust and encourage healthy dynamics.



Simple Activities to Help Build Connection between Mother and Child.

- Ask mother and child to draw pictures of each other and share three strength-based words about each other.
- Ask the mother to write a letter to her child '*My biggest wish for you*'. They can read this to them as homework during their time in program.
- Play catch with a ball or balloon. See if you can get 10/20/30 in a row without dropping it. If it's too easy, explore ways to let the game expand. For example, you could add a second object to throw or you could try singing a song and throwing a ball at the same time.
- Take off your shoes and go for a short walk inside or outside. Share what you notice together?
- Both mother and child can pick a song to play. Listen to both songs together. Option to dance, sing, or draw while you listen. This activity could grow into mother and child making a playlist together to use at home.
- Take 5 deep breaths together. Option to count, inhale 1-2-3-, pause, exhale 1-2-3, pause. Option to try breathing through only your nose.
- Play 'I Spy with My Little Eye'
- Share one 'rose' and one 'thorn' from your week. Roses are the sweet moments and thorns are the tricky/prickly moments.
- [Hoberman Sphere breathing exercise.](#)



Strength-Based Resources for PEACE Program Counsellors

- BC Provincial Mental Health and Substance Use Planning Council (2013) [Trauma-Informed Practice Guide](#).
- BCSTH Webinar: *Delivering PEACE Program Support Sessions Remotely During Covid-19*. Available in the [BCSTH webinar library](#). At 15:21-21:22 Tracy Myers shares questions to help shine a positive lens on mothers in the PEACE Program.
- [Dr. Catherine Richardson/Kinewesquao – EVA BC 2019 Keynote address](#). Dignity and Recovery Across the Lifespan: Helping Survivors of Gendered Violence Reclaim Their Lives.
- [Neufeld Institute](#): The Neufeld Institute offers parenting support and resources through an attachment-based developmental approach. For the purposes of this guide, we have linked to the ‘free resource’ section of the Neufeld Institute website.
- [Dr. Deborah MacNamara](#): Developmental Science translated into Practical Love. A wealth of articles to support parents and PEACE Program counsellors with the wisdom of developmental science combined with a strength-based relational approach.
- [Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs Chart](#) by Tim’s Printables.
- Popov, L.K. (1997) *The Family Virtues Guide: Simple Ways to Bring Out the Best in Our Children and Ourselves*. Plume.

Strength-Based Resources for Mothers

- [Good Inside Podcast](#): Join clinical psychologist Dr. Becky Kennedy on her weekly podcast. Each episode is less than 30 minutes and delivers actionable guidance for parents from a strength-based approach.
- [More parenting tips from Barbara Coloroso. \(Video\)](#).
- PEACE Toolkit Handout: [Supporting Children and Youth with Experiences of Violence](#)
- PEACE Toolkit Handout: [A Nurturing Environment for Children](#)
- PEACE Toolkit Handout: [The Power of Words](#)
- Knost, L.R. (2013) *The Gentle Parent: Positive, Practical, Effective Discipline*. Little Hearts Books LLC.



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This document was published March 2022.

