

Soaring With Strengths

“I like being the way I am, being more reserved and quiet than most. I feel like I can think more clearly than many of my friends.”—Blake, Age 17

The last two chapters outlined the biological and resultant behavioral differences between extroverts and introverts, highlighting both the positive and negative attributes. After going through them, it is clear that our Western cultural ideals lean more toward the extrovert. We set up our businesses and educational systems to function in groups, celebrating statements like “none of us are as good as all of us” and pushing “professional communities” as the axiom we should all embrace. We teach to the middle, insisting that in doing so we can pull everyone up to a certain level of achievement. We push aside creativity for more in-the-box, group thinking.

At the same time, our dichotomous Western culture also celebrates the individual. But only a particu-

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lar type of individual—the outgoing, charismatic speaker that can charm his or her way through life with ease. We celebrate those who have physical prowess, take risks, and embrace life fully. We are drawn to those who know how to make small talk, have lots of friends, and are comfortable in the crowd.

Most of what is described above is well-suited for the extrovert. But where does that leave the introvert? Should the introvert try to be more extroverted? I would argue no, absolutely not. But before I get into that, I want to spend a little time talking about how our culture thinks about attributes typically associated with introversion.

The numbered descriptions in the worksheet on p. 31 are all things that I have heard in workshops, while coaching parents, and as part of my work as a school psychologist. As you consider each one, I want you to decide whether or not you agree with each statement or scenario.

I've done this exercise with hundreds of other educators, parents, and students over the past 15 years. It is clear as we work through each statement that our culture has done a disservice to our introverts, instilling a level of shame in those who demonstrate attributes of inversion. We tend to label deep thinkers as aloof and rude when they are young and odd when they are older. People who shy away from friends and social obligations will never make it to the top in the business world, and children who withdraw from others are labeled as socially disabled in some way.

The truth is, introversion is neither the narcissism described in Freud's day, nor is it something that needs to be "fixed" as it is often portrayed in our modern world.

In order to help introverts move past the shame of a culture that has not typically embraced them, it is important to first understand the positive aspects of introversion.

Many introverted children develop deep beliefs at an early age that guide them throughout their lives. This is related to their tendency to seek answers from within. As a result, they are often less dependent on external validation and more reliant on their inner strengths.

Additionally, many introverts are divergent thinkers, analyzing the world from a highly creative point of view. The solitude inherent with introversion is something typically connected to creativity (Cameron, 1992). This innate creativity sets the stage for the development of strong

WORKSHEET 3

Looking at My Beliefs (for Parents)

Directions: Read each of the 9 statements and determine if you agree or disagree with the statement.

	I agree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree
1. Introverted people are shy.			
2. Introverted people appear lonely and have few friends.			
3. Introverted people are more self-centered than others.			
4. Introverted people appear to get depressed more often.			
5. Introverted people have a hard time making friends.			
6. Introverted people need to learn social skills.			
7. Introverted people appear aloof.			
8. Introverted people are hindered by their shyness.			
9. Introverted people need to become more outgoing.			

Take a look at your answers and reflect on your beliefs. What are your feelings about introversion? Do you feel that being introverted is a disadvantage in our culture, something that needs to be changed? What are the drawbacks of introversion? The benefits? Use this information to help you understand your underlying feelings about temperament.

and diverse problem-solving skills, as well as the innovative thinking that is highly sought after in our modern world.

In addition to the internally driven thought process and creative thinking previously discussed, most introverts are born with a natural propensity toward well-developed emotional intelligence. Defined as the ability to acquire and apply emotional information, Daniel Goleman (1998) considered emotional intelligence to be at least as important as cognitive development. He postulated that emotional intelligence relied on the development of competency in five areas: Self-awareness, or the ability to recognize one's emotions; self-monitoring, or the ability to manage one's emotions from moment to moment; self-motivation, or the ability to act appropriately upon the emotions, which includes the development of self-discipline; empathy, or the ability to understand another person's emotions; and relationships, or the ability to develop intimate relationships with others (Goleman, 1998). These domains are all areas that come naturally to introverts, as they tend to reflect inward and process deep emotions and feelings internally.

As I mentioned above, the ability to form close relationships is one of the attributes of emotional intelligence. At first glance, it may seem that an introvert, with his tendency to shy away from people, may struggle in this domain. Actually, many introverts have a keen interest in the way the world works, including what motivates people. This gives an introvert the potential to develop strong connections with others, as his need to understand may drive him to delve more deeply into conversations.

Deep thinking, innovation, emotional intelligence, and the building of meaningful relationships—these are some of the most common gifts introverts have to share with the world. I will mention additional ones through the upcoming chapters. For a complete list of attributes, as well as the strengths and potential pitfalls in each area, refer to Figure 4: The Attributes of Introversion discussed in the Q&A section later in this chapter.

Class Notes: Enhancing the Positive Aspects of Introversion in Class

As mentioned earlier in the chapter, introverts clearly have many attributes that can translate to positive things in the classroom. Thinking deeply about information presented in classes, approaching tasks from a creative point of view, having empathy for others, developing intrinsic motivation, and demonstrating the capacity to develop deep, meaningful relationships are all attributes that an introvert brings to school. Unfortunately, not all classrooms support introverted students. Sometimes the setting is loud and overstimulating. Sometimes there is too much focus on group activities too early in the school year, preventing the introverted student from feeling comfortable. And sometimes the curriculum itself is focused on the type of mental processes that favor extroverted neurobiology.

Classrooms that enhance the positive aspects of introversion are places that feel calm, but not sterile. They allow some amount of freedom in how work is completed, do not demand that students constantly work in groups, and are a balanced mix of fast-paced and deeply engaging tasks. Teachers in these classrooms take time to get to know their students, provide a safe place in which taking academic risks is a natural part of learning, and understand that the introverted student often knows more than he or she appears to know.

Section three of this book, *Introverted Kids at School*, will cover many ways in which introverts learn, as well as specific strategies to enhance the many strengths of introversion. For now, it is important to focus on redefining introversion for yourself as an educator and embracing the many gifts introverts potentially bring to your classroom.

QUIET STRENGTH Q & A

We may live in a culture that supports and exalts extroversion as the ideal, but our introverts have a lot to offer the world as well. The following questions and answers address the strengths offered by introverts, even in a culture that is often noisy and chaotic.

What are some of the strengths and problems with introversion?

Throughout the chapter, I've explored the nuances of being introverted, looking at both the more typical strengths and some of the challenges. Figure 4 is a list that summarizes some of the attributes of introversion, including the negative and positive aspects of each one.

As you can see in Figure 4, introverts bring a lot of positives to light. The ability to think creatively, pursue interests with passion, and gain a deep meaning out of life are all attributes that can lead to an intense level of satisfaction with life when nurtured. This is what introverts have to offer when they are allowed to develop their skills to their fullest.

Is there anything wrong with being an introvert?

This is sort of like asking if there is anything wrong with being blonde. Or if there is anything wrong with having difficulty keeping things organized. It simply is what it is—it is how a person is hardwired. That said, there are some aspects of introversion that can be more problematic than others. For example, having difficulties interacting with peers, something that can be typical in younger introverts, can be a problem in a school setting in which there are a lot of group activities or limited places for the introvert to get away from the crowd at lunch. Likewise, some introverts can struggle with too much visual, auditory, or emotional input, resulting in some problem behaviors. This can be a problem in very public places like the mall or amusement parks. These difficulties need not prevent the introvert from interacting with the world, however. The upcoming chapters will focus on several strategies that can help introverted children

<i>Strengths</i>	<i>Potential Problems</i>
Deep thinkers	May overthink simple things
Highly creative and innovative	Takes a long time to complete tasks
Works well independently	May struggle with collaboration
Curious	May resist transitioning to new things
Thinks before taking action	Overly cautious
Builds deep connections and relationships	May struggle to form friendships initially

Figure 4. The attributes of introversion.

and their parents learn to cope with some of the difficulties introverts may face.

What advice can you give introverts to capitalize on their strengths?

I think the most important thing is for the introvert to gain awareness of how her introversion impacts her, both positively and negatively, as well as developing coping strategies for the aspects of introversion that are a problem. The worksheet on page 36 will assist the introverted child and his or her parents in identifying some of the impacts, positive and negative, of introversion.

Once this information is ascertained, appropriate strategies are found in the later chapters of this book that can be helpful in teaching introverts how to capitalize on their many strengths.

What is the difference between introversion and shyness?

This is probably the most frequent question I am asked on the topic of temperament. As I stated earlier in the book, shyness refers to behaviors including being withdrawn, suspicious, timid, or reluctant. It can be a situation-specific behavior or something that is exhibited in multiple settings. And, unlike introversion, it is something that is highly dependent on context and environment.

Introversion, on the other hand, is not dependent on environmental factors. Introverts are not wary or suspicious by definition, but can behave in that way if the environment is new to them. Furthermore,

WORKSHEET 4

The Positive Aspects of My Introversion

Directions: Read the attribute and decide if it is true for you and how you feel about it. Be sure to indicate those things that present a problem or a concern for you:

Attribute	This Is True for Me. (Y/N)	My Feelings About This:
Deep thinker		
Highly creative and innovative		
Works well independently		
Curious		
Thinks before taking action		
Builds deep connections and relationships		
May overthink simple things		
Takes a long time to complete tasks		
May struggle with collaboration		
May resist transitioning to new things		
Overly cautious		
May struggle to form friendships initially		

many shy individuals may be reluctant to interact socially, while introverts may enjoy social connections, but become fatigued by too many of them.

For me, the easiest way to remember the difference is to remember that shyness is a behavior that can be exhibited by both introverts and extroverts and is generally influenced by the person's reactions to his or her environment.

As an educator, I see my introverted children struggling related to the attributes you've described. How can I help them to see some of their difficulties as potential strengths?

This is a great question. Like the earlier question, focusing on how introversion impacts a student in both positive and negative ways is a great first step in working with the introverted student. Use Worksheet 4 on page 36 with the introverted student and assist the student in determining what introversion means to her. Then, help the child reframe the aspects of temperament she has identified as being problematic in a new, positive light. For example, if the student has identified her reluctance to participate in a group as a source of distress, help her both reframe the attribute as the ability to function well independently and develop a strategy to deal with working in a group. Assisting the student in this way will have her embracing her unique strengths in no time.

In a Nutshell . . .

Big Ideas

- ❖ Introverts have positive qualities or gifts.
- ❖ The Western cultural often misunderstands the attributes of introversion, labeling it with terms including narcissism, being rude, and being aloof.
- ❖ Introverts are deep thinkers and enjoy learning new things.
- ❖ Introverts have a natural tendency to think in creative and innovative ways.

- ❖ Introverts have a natural ability to develop strong emotional intelligence related to the depths of their internal thought processes.
- ❖ Introverts are capable of developing deep and meaningful relationships with others.

Supplemental Pages

- ❖ Worksheet 3: Looking at My Beliefs (for Parents)—page 31
- ❖ Figure 4: The Attributes of Introverts—page 35
- ❖ Worksheet 4: The Positive Aspects of My Introversion—page 36