

Chapter One

Finding the spark: Understanding your child's strengths

Every child holds a spark of brilliance—our role isn't to fix what's missing, but to fan the flames of what's already there.

Research and anecdotal evidence suggests Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is not a 'disorder' and can be a strength. Dr Ned Hallowell reframes ADHD as VAST—*Variable Attention Stimulus Trait*—to highlight that ADHD is not a deficit of attention but a unique way of experiencing an overwhelming flood of stimuli.

Traits often viewed as problematic in structured environments such as school or traditional workplaces, for example, risk-taking, hyperfocus and impulsivity, can play a valuable role in the right setting, especially in creative, entrepreneurial and leadership roles. Many people with ADHD bring energy, creativity and the drive to challenge the status quo.¹

High-profile entrepreneurs such as Richard Branson (founder/CEO, Virgin Group) and David Neeleman (founder, JetBlue Airways) have openly discussed their ADHD, crediting it with helping them think creatively, take risks and bounce back from failure. Studies report that people with

ADHD traits are more likely to start their own business, and the ability to think differently and tolerate uncertainty can provide business leaders and entrepreneurs with a competitive edge.²

Many inspiring figures have spoken publicly about having ADHD and how not only does it not limit success but it can be a part of it. When talking to your child about ADHD, let them know people can and do succeed when they have ADHD, and give examples of those sharing their talent or interest to inspire them! Some inspiring role models include:

- ▶ Simone Biles, Olympic gold medallist: Simone Biles has discussed her ADHD and how she manages it, especially in high-pressure environments. As the most decorated gymnast in history, her focus and determination has led to extraordinary achievements.
- ▶ Michael Phelps, Olympic gold medallist: Michael Phelps has shared how when his ADHD impacted his school experience, he channelled his energy into swimming, becoming the most decorated Olympian in history with 28 medals.
- ▶ Michael Jordan, former NBA basketballer: Michael Jordan is considered the greatest basketball player of all time and someone who has made basketball what it is today. Diagnosed with ADHD as a child, he struggled to focus in the classroom, but on the basketball court he learned to channel his energy and focus to his advantage.
- ▶ Will.i.am, musician and producer: Will.i.am says his ADHD helps him think outside the box, helping his creativity and focus. He sees ADHD as his 'passion point', something that helps him find inventive solutions, saying one thing about ADHD is '...it's hard to keep your attention and you can't sit still and you're always moving and thinking about a whole bunch of things. But those traits work well for me in studios and in meetings about creative ideas.'³
- ▶ Jamie Oliver, celebrity chef: Jamie Oliver left school with no qualifications, but after studying at Catering College, he nurtured his passion for healthy cooking. Diagnosed with ADHD and dyslexia as a child, he now advocates for a healthy diet to help ease ADHD symptoms.

This isn't about calling ADHD a superpower, it's about seeing your whole child and helping them harness their traits in ways that empower rather than limit them. Seeing what is possible for people with ADHD can help children feel empowered to build on their strengths and pursue their dreams. It's important to remember that ADHD—despite the challenges it can bring—does not have to be a roadblock. It can be a different path to success, especially when your child is given the right understanding, encouragement and support to work *with* their brain, not against it.

What is neurodiversity?

Neurodiversity celebrates and supports unique ways of thinking, learning and being that are shaped by neurological differences. It recognises that the different ways people experience, process and interact with the world are something to be valued and included, not disorders needing to be 'fixed'.

Neurodiversity simply means that all our brains work in different ways. Just like we celebrate diversity in culture, personality or appearance, neurodiversity reminds us that differences in how people think, learn, feel and process the world are a natural part of being human. Conditions like ADHD, autism or dyslexia aren't flaws to be 'fixed', but unique ways of experiencing and interacting with life. Embracing neurodiversity helps us see the strengths and gifts that come with these differences, while also recognising the challenges. It encourages us to create environments where every kind of mind can flourish.

In the past, neurodivergent individuals were often encouraged to conform to neurotypical standards in environments not designed for their unique ways of thinking and learning. Their differences were described as a long list of difficulties to 'overcome' rather than strengths to be understood and supported. For many people with ADHD, this constant mismatch can take a toll on self-esteem in the early years, which, in turn, can affect confidence, opportunities and, ultimately, their chances of success later in life.

ADHD is a matter of brain wiring. If a neurotypical brain is like an automatic car with motion sensors helping it slow down when needed, an ADHD brain might be a manual with a supercharged engine. Sometimes

you struggle to slow down or switch gears at the right time, which can make it harder to follow the road rules and get where you're going safely.

You might feel like your child isn't listening, can't sit still or constantly jumps from one thing to another and mistake these things for laziness, defiance or bad behaviour. But look under the hood and you'll find a different story: the right type of oil and some tender love and care can help your child tap into that roaring enthusiasm for the things they're passionate about.

Grounded in the broader neurodiversity movement, this book advocates for a neuro-affirming parenting approach: the idea that when you understand the neuroscience of ADHD, you're better able to parent with greater empathy, clarity and connection. When you understand your child's brain, you move away from punitive, outdated models of parenting that overlook the neurological drivers of ADHD affecting self-regulation, working memory, time awareness and emotional control.⁴

Understanding ADHD as differences in how the brain handles focus, motivation and self-regulation can help your child figure out how to harness their supercharged engine in the right ways. With effective support, strategies and understanding, your child can thrive, drawing on creativity, energy and unique problem-solving abilities to succeed in their own way.

Do these common myths and misconceptions about ADHD sound familiar? Table 1.1 gives a reality check based on neuroscience.

Table 1.1 ADHD — Myths vs facts

Myth	Reality
ADHD is just about being hyper or distracted.	ADHD affects executive function, emotional regulation and impulse control.
ADHD only affects children.	ADHD persists into adulthood, though symptoms may change over time.
People with ADHD are lazy or unmotivated.	ADHD brains process motivation and focus differently, often thriving in areas of strong interest.
ADHD is caused by bad parenting.	ADHD is a brain-based condition with genetic and neurological factors.

The importance of a strengths-based approach

Every child with ADHD is a unique mix of strengths and challenges shaping how they learn, interact and navigate the world. Some of their strengths may lie outside of traditional measures of success or development, but this doesn't make them any less valuable.

Psychologist and leading parenting expert Dr Robert Brooks, together with Dr Sam Goldstein, emphasises the importance of a strengths-based parenting approach for children with ADHD. In their book *Raising Resilient Children: Fostering strength, hope, and optimism in your child* (2002), they explain that children thrive when they feel capable, valued and connected. Rather than focusing primarily on weaknesses or behaviours that need 'fixing', they recommend identifying and nurturing a child's strengths as the foundation for resilience and growth.⁵ This might mean emphasising strengths such as creativity, humour, kindness, persistence or a strong sense of fairness—traits that aren't always easily recognisable or positively regarded in structured settings like schools. By highlighting and building on these qualities, you help improve your child's self-esteem and develop their motivation to overcome challenges that arise.

Embedding a strengths-based approach

When parenting a child with ADHD, it can sometimes feel like the challenges are front and centre. A strengths-based approach helps you step back and celebrate who your child is—focusing on their gifts, interests and potential. This doesn't mean ignoring the struggles, it means approaching them in a way that highlights your child's abilities and reframes obstacles as opportunities for growth.

Let go of expectations

Your child's unique blend of gifts, talents and interests may not fit the traditional mould, and that's okay. Letting go of rigid expectations, often based on neurotypical standards of behaviour, and pursuing traditional pathways is one of the most freeing things you can do.

Meet your child where they're at rather than comparing them with their same-age peers. Celebrate their progress without the pressure of conventional milestones. It creates space for more of the good things such as compassion, respect, acceptance and hope, and enables you to advocate for them more confidently.

Identify strengths and interests

Pay attention to what excites and engages your child, whether it's a creative pursuit, physical activity or deep interest in a particular topic. Genuine curiosity about their world can bring deeper connection and empathy, and provide strong foundations for both their growth and your relationship. Encourage growth by providing opportunities aligned with their strengths and use tools and approaches that suit their interests and needs.

Reframe challenges

A strengths-based approach doesn't mean ignoring things your child finds difficult or distressing. It focuses on finding the hidden potential in these challenges, and reframing them so your child sees themselves in a more positive light. For example:

- ▶ While impulsivity and risk-taking can be disruptive or reckless in some settings, in others it can manifest as quick thinking, creativity and a willingness to take action when others hesitate.
- ▶ Hyperfocus (including on niche interests) can be harnessed for deep learning and expertise.
- ▶ The boundless energy frustrating teachers in class can also fuel your child's passion and persistence in other pursuits that capture their interest.
- ▶ Emotional sensitivity, though sometimes overwhelming, can also bring deep empathy and compassion.

As your mindset shifts, blame and frustration give way to empathy and curiosity. You begin asking, 'What's getting in their way?' instead of 'What's wrong with them?' By recognising potential in every aspect of your child, you help them turn obstacles into stepping stones for success.

Practical strategies

Focusing on strengths while addressing challenges helps your child develop resilience, self-awareness and the confidence to navigate their life with ADHD.

- Observe when your child is most engaged. Do they thrive in hands-on activities, creative projects or social interactions?
- Keep a strengths and challenges journal, noting moments of success and frustration.
- Ask your child what they enjoy or struggle with.
- Ask others in your child's network (e.g., teachers, therapists, friends and family) for their perspectives.
- Tailor their environment using this knowledge; for example, incorporate movement breaks for focus, provide visual schedules for organisation, or explore interest-based learning to enhance motivation.

Try the following quizzes to better understand your child's strengths, interests and needs.

Discovering your child's strength profile

I believe Howard Gardner's idea of multiple intelligences provides a powerful way to understand your child's unique strengths. While not all researchers agree on the science, I find it a helpful framework for parents because it reminds us that there are many ways to be 'smart'. When you combine this with an awareness of your child's learning preferences (e.g., some children learn best by seeing, others by listening, reading/writing or hands-on doing), we begin to see a bigger picture.

Creating a strengths profile for your child helps you celebrate how your child's mind works and guides you in supporting both their learning and confidence.

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Quiz: Your child's strength profile

For each statement, rate how strongly you agree on a scale of 1 (not at all true) to 5 (very true).

Linguistic/verbal

1. My child enjoys reading, writing or creating stories.

1 2 3 4 5

2. My child expresses themselves well through words, jokes or conversations.

1 2 3 4 5

Logical/mathematical

1. My child enjoys problem-solving, puzzles, patterns or strategic thinking.

1 2 3 4 5

2. My child asks thoughtful 'why' questions and likes to make sense of how things work.

1 2 3 4 5

Musical/rhythmic

1. My child shows enthusiasm for music, rhythm or singing.

1 2 3 4 5

2. My child remembers tunes easily or makes up their own songs or beats.

1 2 3 4 5

Bodily/kinaesthetic

1. My child enjoys and excels at hands-on activities such as building, creating or experimenting.

1 2 3 4 5

2. My child is highly energetic and thrives in movement-based activities like sports or dance.

1 2 3 4 5

Interpersonal

1. My child shows empathy and emotional intelligence with people or animals.

1 2 3 4 5

2. My child is a natural leader and enjoys guiding or helping others.

1 2 3 4 5

Intrapersonal

1. My child demonstrates deep knowledge and enthusiasm for specific personal interests.

1 2 3 4 5

2. My child reflects on their feelings, goals or challenges with some awareness.

1 2 3 4 5

Naturalistic

1. My child shows curiosity about nature, animals, plants or the environment.

1 2 3 4 5

2. My child feels calm and connected when outdoors.

1 2 3 4 5

Learning preferences (VARK)

1. My child understands best with pictures, diagrams or visual aids (visual).

1 2 3 4 5

(continued)

2. My child learns best by listening, singing or discussing ideas (auditory).

1 2 3 4 5

3. My child prefers written instructions, lists or note-taking (reading/writing).

1 2 3 4 5

4. My child learns best through touching, building, moving or role-playing (kinaesthetic).

1 2 3 4 5

How to interpret the quiz

Scores of 4–5 = clear strengths: areas where your child naturally shines.

Scores of 2–3 = emerging strengths: may grow with encouragement or opportunity.

Scores of 1 = less of a preference: not every child enjoys every activity, and that's okay.

Look for patterns — which intelligences scored highest? Which learning preferences stood out? Together, these give you your child's strength profile.

Reflection exercise

- Which strengths stood out the most for my child?
- Which learning preferences seem strongest?
- Did any of the results surprise me?
- How do these strengths show up in everyday life (home, school, friendships)?
- How can I nurture these strengths through activities, hobbies or learning opportunities?

- How might these strengths help balance or support areas my child finds harder?
- How might I share this profile with my child's teacher so we can work together to support their learning?

Using the Strengths Profile Wheel

The Strengths Profile Wheel (see figure 1.1) is a simple visual tool to help you map your child's scores. 🌐

Shade each bar from 1 to 5 for each category. When you're finished, you'll see a clear depiction of your child's unique strengths at a glance.

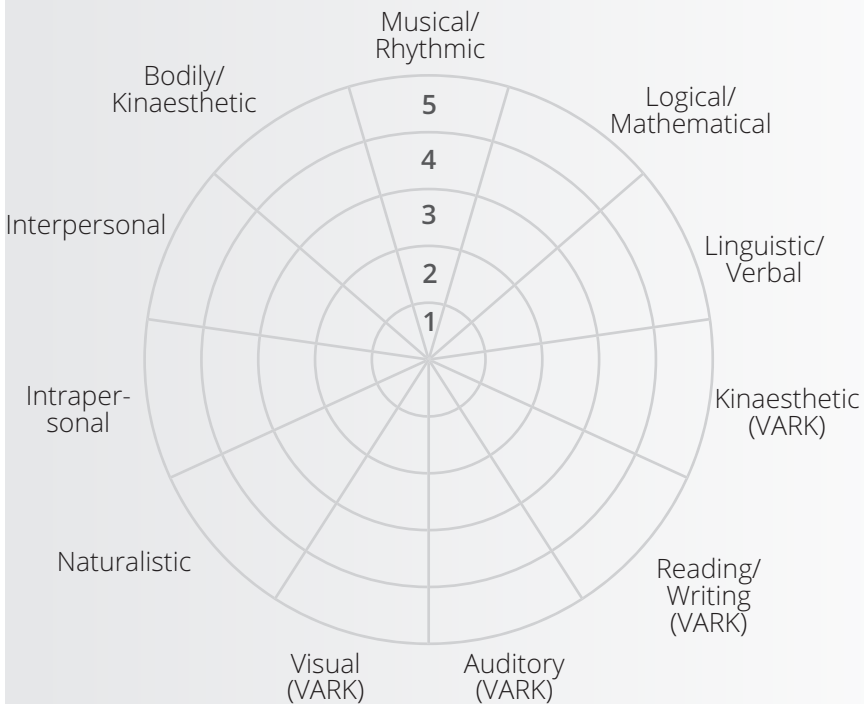


Figure 1.1 *The Strengths Profile Wheel*

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This isn't about comparing your child, it's about recognising and celebrating what makes them capable, valued and connected.

One parent's reflection

When Sarah filled out the strength profile quiz for her nine-year-old son, she was surprised by what stood out. She had always worried about his struggles with spelling tests, but on the quiz, his highest scores were in logical/mathematical and kinaesthetic strengths. He loved solving puzzles, tinkering with Lego and couldn't sit still unless his hands were busy.

On the strength profile wheel, his bars stretched out strongly in those areas, while his reading/writing scores were lower. For the first time, Sarah realised his difficulties with spelling didn't mean he wasn't 'smart'. He simply learned best by building, moving and experimenting.

Reflecting on this, she began to look for ways to bring his strengths into daily life, like letting him use Lego to model concepts in science, or turning spelling practice into movement games. She also reminded herself to praise his problem-solving skills just as much as she would a good grade.

Seeing her son's profile on the wheel helped Sarah shift her focus: instead of worrying about where he struggled, she could now clearly see and nurture the unique abilities that made him thrive.

Every child will have challenges, that's a normal part of growing up. These struggles don't define your child, but how you respond to them can make a world of difference. By reframing difficulties as growth areas and spotting the hidden strengths within them, you give your children the gift of resilience, encouragement and the belief they are capable of learning and thriving. The following quiz invites you to reflect on your child's struggles with curiosity and compassion, while looking for the hidden strengths within them.

Quiz 2: Reframing challenges as growth areas

Instructions: Take a few quiet minutes to reflect on each question. Write down short notes or examples that come to mind. The goal is not to 'fix' your child, but to see their challenges in a new light and discover gentle ways to support their resilience. Look back at your child's strength profile from quiz 1. Use these short questions to see how their strengths can support them when things feel hard.

Reflection questions

- Which strength could help with a current struggle? *Example: My child's energy (strength) can be used in active learning games instead of sitting still.*
- Does their learning style suggest a new approach? *Example: My child struggles with spelling, but as a visual learner, they could try colourful word cards.*
- How can I bring their interests into tricky tasks? *Example: My child loves animals, so I use animal examples when teaching maths.*
- When do I see their strengths shine the most? *Example: They do better with homework in the morning when they're fresh, not at night when tired.*
- What makes them feel proud? How can I use that more? *Example: They feel proud when helping younger siblings — I can give them more 'helper' roles at home.*
- How can I reframe this challenge as a skill in progress? *Example: 'Bossy' with friends → learning to be a leader with kindness.*
- What is one small step I can try this week? *Example: Let them use Lego blocks to practise maths facts instead of worksheets.*

By connecting back to the strengths you've already identified, challenges stop looking like flaws and start looking like opportunities to grow with support.

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Reflection worksheet: Linking strengths to challenges

This worksheet 🌐 helps you connect your child's strengths (from quiz 1) with their challenges (from quiz 2). By linking the two, you can see how strengths can be used to support growth in harder areas.

INSTRUCTIONS

Look back at your child's strength profile (quiz 1) and write one strength in the first column. Write a related challenge in the second column. In the last column, jot down how you could reframe or support the challenge using your child's strength, so it looks something like the example here.

Strength (quiz 1)	Linked challenge (quiz 2)	Reframe/support
Energetic and loves movement	Finds it hard to sit still during homework	Use movement-based learning games or breaks
Empathetic with others	Gets upset easily when friends are unkind	Role-play calming responses and highlight their kindness as a strength
Curious and asks lots of questions	Becomes frustrated when answers aren't clear	Explore answers together using books, videos or experiments
Creative imagination	Daydreams and loses focus in class	Channel imagination into storytelling or creative projects
Strong sense of fairness	Argues with siblings about 'rules'	Encourage leadership roles (e.g., helping set fair family rules)

You don't need to fill every row. Even one or two linked reflections can give you fresh insight into how to turn challenges into growth opportunities.