

# Research in Brief

## Strength Based Practices

Vol. 1 of 4

Source Document: Strength-Based Practice: The ABC's of Working with Adolescents Who Don't Want to Work with You, Michael D. Clark, 1999

Key Words: strengths, solution-focus, juveniles, case plans, case management, behavior change

*Ever frustrated by working with clients who don't want to work with you? Consider a strength-based approach.*

### Summary/Conclusions

Most practitioners were trained in problem solving methods. This has led them to an over-emphasis on what is wrong, not working and negative. The result is often resistance in clients and discouraging results. In 1989 a "strengths perspective" was introduced. This model is a "mindset to approach clients with a greater concern for their strengths and competencies and to mutually discover how these personal resources can be applied to their concerns...combined with the techniques of the solution-focused therapy model." This approach consists of six principles labeled the ABC's: Accountability-Action, Believing-Brief, and Cooperation-Competency.

### Limitations of Information

The focus of this article and the work of the author, Michael Clark, is limited to adolescents. Nonetheless, application to an adult population is possible and Mr. Clark is an experienced juvenile probation officer and clinical social worker. His work provides one perspective of strength-based case management. Other valuable perspectives exist and should be considered.

Caveat: The information presented here is intended to summarize and inform readers of research and information relevant to probation work. It can provide a framework for carrying out the business of probation as well as suggestions for practical application of the material. While it may, in some instances, lead to further exploration and result in *future* decisions, it is not intended to prescribe policy and is not necessarily conclusive in its findings. Some of its limitations are described above.

### Principles

While probation officers are not therapists, they are change agents and they may be more successful with offenders if they use a strength-based approach (SBA) with them. This RIB includes some suggestions for implementing this approach. SBA is not a cure-all. It does not replace other critical responsibilities of probation. Officers must still discover facts, monitor behavior, and impose sanctions.

Although establishing a positive relationship with clients and providing them with compliments is important—it is only appropriate under certain circumstances. It is not beneficial to compliment clients who are involved in wrongdoing.

Consider the following six principles of this approach: **Accountability-Action, Believing-Brief, and Cooperation-Competency.**

✓ **Accountability** occurs when the client admits guilt. It is *necessary but not sufficient* to assume responsibility for one's actions. Admission of guilt does not cure the client. The client must *do* something—exhibit behavioral change—for true accountability to occur.

✓ **Action** is defined as efforts (first steps) that help clients change. The goal is not to garner insight to why the client did what they did, but to determine what the problem behavior is and then do something to change it.

✓ **Believing:** strengths can only be identified and used if probation officers believe that clients have them. Expecting change will influence clients' behavior. Albert Einstein suggested that our theories and beliefs determine what we can see.

✓ **Brief:** Focus on the presenting problem—not every problem and not the causes. Be careful not to set goals that are too difficult; set small achievable goals to build on. Find practical ways to solve the problem. Because a strengths-based focus emphasizes solutions, the future is far more important than the past.

✓ **Cooperation:** "Cooperation is not a characteristic of the client. It is a condition that emanates from the interaction and exchange between the [probation officer and client.]" Cooperation is improved by highlighting the clients' strengths (e.g. competencies, aspirations, and resources) and by discovering the clients' answers to the problem.

✓ **Competence:** Besides believing that clients have strengths officers must also believe that clients possess what they need to reach solutions. Probation officers do not have to work so hard at selling solutions if they allow the client to have more input into them.

### The Advantages

✓ There may be less turnover of competent probation officers and staff will be more motivated if they operate in a way that provides hope and optimism rather than a focus on problems, difficulties and pessimism;

✓ It provides hands-on techniques that probation officers can implement in their daily interactions with clients; and

✓ It aides the [probation officer] in being culturally sensitive because the solutions and path towards them is drawn from the client.