



Decoder Report

A Parent's Guide

Introduction

The VIA Me Decoder Report reviews your child's character strengths (identified by his/her responses to the VIA Survey for Youth) and explores ways for your child to keep his/her strengths front-and-center. This *Parent Guide* is designed to help you, the parent, better understand your child's results and the information contained in the Decoder Report. This Guide provides important information about character strengths, tips on how to take a strengths-based approach with your child, strategies for exploring strengths in your child, and guidance in making the most of the graphs in the Decoder Report.

The VIA Survey for Youth measures 24 character strengths found across cultures, nations, religions, and beliefs. All 24 are important and are characteristics in all of us that can be developed. Greater awareness and use of character strengths is associated with:

- Higher levels of happiness
- Better engagement in school
- Stronger relationships
- Improved health
- Greater goal achievement
- Improvements in school performance

Having your child take the VIA Survey for Youth and receive the Decoder Report is a great step toward helping your child build a strengths-based life!

What Does Your Child's Decoder Report Reveal?

Your child has many strengths: some will become more developed with age and maturity and others are already strongly expressed. Your child will not express all of these strengths all the time but the strengths are always within him/her. Here are some key ideas to keep in mind as you look through the Report.

Tips for reviewing the Report:

- Remember: The Decoder Report is all about your child's strengths. It does not report weaknesses or problems. Lesser strengths are still strengths. They are simply strengths that your child is less likely to tap into on a regular basis.
- The Decoder Report reflects your child's view of himself/herself, not objective facts about his/her character.
- The results presented in the Decoder Report do not trump your child's real life experiences and behaviors. If your child is particularly kind in most situations yet kindness emerges low in the results, the life experience should be viewed as more important than the test results.
- Don't get lost in the numbers. These results are broad brushstrokes and should be viewed as general ideas and concepts that can be applied to best help your child.

Character Strengths Profile:

The Character Strengths Profile on page 3 of the Decoder Report lists the many strengths your child has; these are capacities that reside within your child. This is a rank-order graph of your child's strengths from highest to lowest according to how strongly they are represented in your child's thoughts, feeling and actions. These are organized into three categories based on your child's responses to the VIA Survey for Youth – "signature" strengths, "middle" strengths, and "lesser" strengths.

This graph highlights the character strengths your child endorsed most strongly. At the same time, this test (like any test) is not a perfect measure of strengths expression. Sometimes when viewing the results, individuals feel there are additional strengths that are highly reflective of who they are; therefore, it's important to confirm and review all the strengths to see which strengths might be added to their signature strengths.

Signature Strengths:

Starting on page 4, special attention is given to your child's Signature Strengths. These are strengths of character that a person owns, celebrates, and frequently uses. Almost everyone can readily identify a handful of strengths as *very much* their own, typically between four and seven. Signature strengths, individually and in combination, often describe us when we're at our best, when we are the most engaged and energized. They are the core of our *positive identity*.

Begin reviewing this section by confirming the signature strengths with your child. In addition to what the Decoder Report says, it's important to weigh in your observations and your child's thoughts on their highest strengths. Reflect and explore this topic with your child:

- Does this strength reflect who your child really is? Is it core to his/her identity?
- Does this strength come naturally? Is it easy to express?
- Does your child feel more energized when using this strength than when not using it?
- Would other family members and their friends be quick to identify this strength in your child?
- Does your child use this strength frequently at home, school, socially, and in other activities?

The Decoder Report provides additional information on each of your child's signature strengths, including expanded definitions, benefits of exercising the strength, how others view them, movies, book characters and songs that exemplify the strength, and strategies for using the strength. These sections are designed to be interesting and informative as well as to increase self-awareness and provide opportunities for growth.

Middle Strengths:

After each of your child's signature strengths is highlighted, the Decoder Report displays the original graph presented on page 3 but this time it draws the reader's attention to the middle strengths. Middle strengths are those strengths that are probably expressed less frequently than signature strengths but still play an important role in life. They often support and are supported by signature strengths. They form what is best in your child, too. The report offers expanded definitions and strategies for flexing those strengths. You can help your child explore their middle strengths by asking yourself:

- When/where does my child express these strengths?
- How do these strengths support or influence the expression of their signature strengths?
- Which of these strengths "pop up" when my child is in a high stress situation?

Lesser Strengths:

Finally, the Decoder Report presents your child's lesser strengths. Lesser strengths are character strengths that do not occur as naturally as others, and often require a fair amount of effort and energy to use. Again, it is important to remember that these lesser strengths are not weaknesses. Exercising these lesser strengths can often be trying, but well-worth the effort when the situation calls for them. The report concludes with expanded definitions of the lesser strengths, as well as tips for boosting each strength.

Using the Decoder Report to Support Your Child's Strengths

Character strengths are seeds you can nourish in your child.

Character strengths are capacities – or potentials within us – for thinking, feeling, and behaving in positive ways. Each person has inherent tendencies to express certain strengths. For example, some people are naturally creative, some curious, others cautious. Be a keen observer of your child as their strengths unfold. Consider the 24 strengths as seeds within all of us and within your child.

Placing attention on any of these 24 seeds in your child will encourage these seeds to sprout and grow. Perhaps the seed will turn into a tall redwood tree, or maybe a beautiful apple tree. As parents, we cannot know for sure. What we can do is water these seeds and teach our children to water them as well. Point out the strengths you see in your child; encourage all of the strengths. Help your child discover which strengths are easiest to express. When you see your child express kindness, water it. When you see a flash of leadership or a twinge of creativity, water these. Your child will benefit and will be headed toward greater happiness and well-being.

The value of modeling: It begins with you

As a parent, you are one of the most important role models in your child's life. Much of what your child learns will be gained through observation of you, and this occurs far more than we realize! Take time to explore this ripe learning opportunity with your child. If you consistently express several of these character strengths with your child and in your interactions with other family members, you are not only acting as a positive model but you are also creating a good family environment for the strengths use to be valued.

- Use your own signature strengths. Identify your own highest strengths of character (www.viame.org) and use them each day.
 - The more that you are mindful of your own signature strengths, the better you will be at helping your child with their strengths.

Other role models

Consider who are your child's heroes, role models, and mentors? Who are the healthy people your child learns from? What are the character strengths that these individuals embody, embrace, and express? Remember to look far and wide for good, healthy models.

- Which family members and relatives are mentors? What are their highest strengths?
- Which teachers or coaches serve as a role model? What are their highest strengths?
- Which neighbors or friends act as good models for particular strengths?
- What characters from books does your child look up to? What are their highest strengths?
 - Example: Harry Potter for his creativity and hope?
 - Example: Katniss from *The Hunger Games* for her perseverance and love?
- What characters from movies are heroes to your child? What are their highest strengths?
 - Example: Alice from *Alice in Wonderland* (2010) for her curiosity and honesty?
 - Example: Nemo from *Finding Nemo* (2003) for bravery, love, and perseverance?

Practical exercises:

- Put on a positive lens. Look for what is good in your child. It's okay to spot negative qualities as well, but it's highly beneficial for your child if the positives you spot outweigh the negatives.
 - Scientists have found that an optimal positivity ratio is about 3:1 (meaning that for every 1 negative comment or experience there should be 3 positive ones).
- Spot your child's strengths and give a rationale for what you saw.
 - Example: On the basketball court, I observed you use such *great perseverance* because you never gave up, even when the team was losing by 15!
 - Example: When you were playing with your friends the other day, I looked out the window and saw you helping a child who had fallen down. What a great use of *kindness*!
- Reflect on the good. At the end of each day, spend time talking with your child about the good things that happened and how they came to be. Ask your child:
 - What was your favorite thing that happened today? What strengths did you use?
 - What are you most grateful for today?
- Help your child connect character strengths with their learning.
 - Example: If the child is learning a new sport, discuss the value of the strengths of teamwork, leadership, and other character strengths you observe in the experience.

- When your child is struggling, ask them how they might best use their strengths.
 - Example: Suzie, I see that you are having difficulty with this math assignment, which of your best strengths might you use to help you in this situation? Which strengths have helped you deal with challenging math assignments in the past?
- New ways: Encourage your child to use their character strengths in new ways each day. This will help them feel more comfortable “in their own skin” and will likely provide a boost to their well-being.
 - Example: For kindness, look for a new way to help out another person such as holding the door for them or picking up something that has been dropped.
 - Example: For curiosity, ask someone a question or two to discover something new about them.

Appendix: Additional Resources

www.viainstitute.org : This website is stocked full of free resources that includes stories, inspiring videos, and user-friendly research summaries with the latest information on using strengths to improve relationships, performance at work and school, goal setting and much more. Online courses and workshops are also available.

Authentic Happiness (2002) by Martin Seligman. This book is a good introduction to positive psychology and character strengths.

Celebrating Strengths (2008) by Jenny Fox Eades. This book is for teachers and school professionals interested in bringing character strengths into the school culture.

Positive Psychology at the Movies by Ryan M. Niemiec and Danny Wedding. This book reviews each of the 24 character strengths, positive relationships, and the best movies that portray them, including an appendix of movies for youth and families. Useful for practical exercises involving “strengths heroes.”

Smart Strengths (2011) by John Yeager, Sherri Fisher, and David Shearon. This guide-book is for parents, teachers, and coaches interested in building character strengths and resilience in youth.

Strengths Gym (2011) by Carmel Proctor and Jenny Fox Eades. This practical book focuses on various exercises for working with each of the 24 character strengths. It comes with a CD of worksheets and exercises.

Background on the VIA Classification and the VIA Surveys

VIA Institute: The VIA Institute on Character, a non-profit organization in Cincinnati, OH, was created in 2000 by Dr. Neal H. Mayerson, in partnership with Dr. Martin Seligman.

VIA Survey: The VIA Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS), nicknamed the “VIA Survey,” is the scientific tool that measures the 24 character strengths in adults. The VIA Survey for Youth was created for youth ages 10-17. These VIA surveys have been taken by close to 3 million people. These are the *only* strengths survey in the world that are free, online, and psychometrically valid.

VIA Classification: The VIA Classification of six virtues and 24 character strengths is the result of a three-year project reviewing the best thinking on virtue and positive human qualities in philosophy, virtue ethics, moral education, psychology, and theology, spanning 2500 years. The work was conducted under the auspices of the VIA Institute, Seligman, 55 leading scientists, and directed by Professor Chris Peterson. The 24 character strengths have been found to be universal across religions, cultures, nations, and belief systems, and are considered the “basic building blocks” to a flourishing life. This work is reviewed in the scholarly text, *Character Strengths and Virtues* (2004).

The Language of Strengths (VIA Classification)

The virtue of Wisdom:

Creativity: Originality; adaptive; ingenuity

Curiosity: Interest; novelty-seeking; exploration; openness to experience

Judgment: Critical thinking; thinking things through; open-minded

Love of Learning: Mastering new skills & topics; systematically adding to knowledge

Perspective: Wisdom; providing wise counsel; taking the big picture view

The virtue of Courage:

Bravery: Valor; not shrinking from fear; speaking up for what's right

Perseverance: Persistence; industry; finishing what one starts

Honesty: Authenticity; integrity

Zest: Vitality; enthusiasm; vigor; energy; feeling alive and activated

The virtue of Humanity:

Love: Both loving and being loved; valuing close relations with others

Kindness: Generosity; nurturance; care; compassion; altruism; "niceness"

Social Intelligence: Aware of the motives/feelings of self/others, knowing what makes other people tick

The virtue of Justice:

Teamwork: Citizenship; social responsibility; loyalty

Fairness: Just; not letting feelings bias decisions about others

Leadership: Organizing group activities; encouraging a group to get things done

The virtue of Temperance:

Forgiveness: Mercy; accepting others' shortcomings; giving people a second chance

Humility: Modesty; letting one's accomplishments speak for themselves

Prudence: Careful; cautious; not taking undue risks

Self-Regulation: Self-control; disciplined; managing impulses & emotions

The virtue of Transcendence:

Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence: Awe; wonder; elevation

Gratitude: Thankful for the good; expressing thanks; feeling blessed

Hope: Optimism; future-mindedness; future orientation

Humor: Playfulness; bringing smiles to others; lighthearted

Spirituality/Sense of Meaning: Purpose in life; having coherent beliefs about the larger universe

