



# A Teacher's Guide to the



# Decoder Report





# Introduction

The VIA Me Decoder Report is an optional purchase that accompanies the VIA Survey for Youth. The VIA Survey for Youth is a self-report measure of perceived character strengths. The survey offers a rank-ordering of strengths based on the child's responses to the questions. The VIA Me Decoder Report reviews the student's top character strengths and explores ways to keep those strengths front-and-center. Additionally middle and lower strengths are identified with suggestions for understanding the use of these strengths and how they contribute to well-being. The VIA Me Decoder Report is written directly to the child.

This *Teacher Guide* is designed to help you better understand this child's results. It contains important information about character strengths, strategies for exploring strengths, implementing strengths in the classroom, and guidance for making the most of the graphs in the report.

You may be wondering how this differs from other positive/character education approaches in schools? The approach is significantly different. Traditionally, character has been discussed in schools with a limited scope. Programs are implemented that focus on a handful of specific strengths. These programs tend to approach all students in the same way, for example, telling the students to focus on "respect" this week and "responsibility" next week.

The approach discussed in this report is distinct from most of these approaches. It comes from a new science of character that has emerged in the last decade and a half. Scientists have found that each person has a unique constellation of many character strengths and that 24 strengths in particular are found across cultures, nations, religions, and beliefs.

The emphasis of this approach is exploration and self-discovery. Each child is viewed as having many strengths of character and the teachers and school community can create a climate that is open to allowing strengths to naturally unfold. Children are encouraged to discover their unique grouping of core strengths and explore their strengths use in the classroom.

It's also important to note that the approach discussed here is meant to *complement* what you are already doing. A focus on character strengths can be embedded into the classroom, into the school culture, and into lesson plans. Research suggests that a focus on character strengths greatly enhances student learning and engagement, and may re-invigorate the joy of teaching.

This VIA Survey for Youth measures 24 character strengths. All 24 are important and exist to varying degrees, within each of us. Greater awareness and use of character strengths is associated with:

- Improved school performance
- Engaged learning
- Increased happiness
- Stronger relationships
- Improved health
- Greater goal achievement

# What Does This Report Reveal?

Every child has many strengths: some are strongly expressed in childhood and some become stronger with age and maturity. Also, some strengths are expressed in context. It's important to develop an "eye" for noticing *when students use strengths* and *how the use of strengths impacts students*. Here are some key ideas to keep in mind as you look through the report.

*Tips for reviewing the report:*

- Remember: This report is all about this child's strengths. The VIA Survey for Youth does *not* measure weaknesses or problems. So, lesser strengths are still strengths.
- The VIA Survey for Youth measures the child's *view of himself/herself*, not facts about his/her character.
- These results do *not* trump real life experiences. If this child is particularly kind in most situations yet kindness emerges low in the results, the life experience should be given greater emphasis than the test results.
- Don't get lost in the numbers. These results are broad brushstrokes and should be viewed as

In the first graph, you will see a listing of the child's many strengths; each of these capacities resides in the student. The strengths are listed in rank order from highest (most endorsed strength) to lowest (least endorsed strength). Based upon student responses to the survey items, each strength is categorized as either a *signature strength*, *middle strength*, or *lesser strength*.

*Signature strengths:*

These are strengths of character that a person owns and frequently uses. Almost everyone can readily identify a handful of strengths – typically 4-7 – as *very much* their own. Signature strengths, individually and in combination, often describe us when we are at our best, when we are highly engaged and energized.

The second graph in this report highlights the character strengths the child endorsed most strongly. Many teachers find it useful to reflect upon and explore the following signature strength questions with the children in their classroom:

- Does this strength reflect who they really are?
- Does this strength come naturally? Is it easy to express?
- Do they feel more energized when using this strength than when not using it?
- Would their family members and friends be quick to identify this strength in them?
- Do they seem to use this strength frequently at home, school, socially, and in other activities?

The report provides the following information on each of this child's signature strengths: expanded definitions, benefits of exercising the strength, how others perceive them based on their strengths, movies, book characters and songs that exemplify the strength, and strategies for using the strength. These sections are designed to engage and inform students, increase self-awareness, and provide opportunities for growth.

### *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. Like signature strengths, middle strengths help to define who the child is at his or her best. The report offers expanded definitions and strategies for flexing those strengths. You can help students explore their middle strengths by asking:

- When/where do they express these strengths?
- How do these strengths work in combination with (or otherwise relate to) their signature strengths?
- Which of these strengths “pop up” when they are in high stress situations?

### *Lesser strengths:*

Lesser strengths are character strengths that may not occur as naturally as others, and often require a fair amount of effort and energy to use. Exercising these strengths can often be trying, but well-worth the effort when the situation calls for them. The report contains expanded definitions of the lower strengths and tips for boosting each strength.

## **Supporting the Child’s Strengths**

### *Character strengths are seeds you can nourish:*

Character strengths are capacities – or potentials within us – for thinking, feeling, and behaving in positive ways. The 24 strengths can be thought of as seeds that exist within each of us. When we attend to these “seeds” within students, we may provide opportunities for the seeds to “germinate”. Perhaps a given seed will one day be a tall redwood tree, or a beautiful apple tree? We cannot know for sure. What we *can do* is tend to these seeds and help children to tend to them as well. When we acknowledge the strengths that we see in students, we help them to see their own strengths (and those of their peers). When we acknowledge a student’s act of kindness, or a show of leadership, we reinforce the strength within the student. When that acknowledgment is public, we reinforce the strength within the group. Such acknowledgments – whether private or public – will lead to greater self-awareness and a heightened sense of well-being.

How might you begin nourishing a student’s strengths?

### *The value of modeling:*

Children learn an enormous amount simply through observation. You are an important role model for the students you teach. Take time to explore this ripe learning opportunity. If you consistently express certain character strengths in the classroom, you are acting as a positive model that children can imitate.

- Not sure where to start? Consider your own signature strengths. Identify your own core strengths of character ([www.viame.org](http://www.viame.org)) and use them each day in the classroom. You may be surprised at how the use of your signature strengths adds to your energy and enthusiasm. Talk about your strengths with your students, and point out when you are using them. The more that you are mindful of your own signature strengths, the better you will be at helping children to connect with their strengths.

### *Shifting from a problem focus to a strengths focus:*

It's easy to let our attention be drawn to deficits when working with kids. We often hone in on what needs to be "fixed" and fail to recognize what's working well. Shifting to a more balanced approach requires that we pay attention to what's already working. When we view a child through the lens of character strengths, we understand and embrace *who that child is at his or her core*.

Children (and adults) are frequently blind to their own strengths. This is especially true when dealing with difficult or challenging situations. Holding up a mirror for kids to see the good in themselves can go a long way towards promoting a more accurate and positive self awareness

- When a student is struggling, help him or her to use strengths to navigate through challenges and obstacles:
  - If a student has trouble attending to a lesson, how might you encourage greater perseverance?
    - You might point to other times that you have observed them "sticking with" something to completion
    - You might ask when they have persevered in the past.
    - You might ask them how they could use their *signature* strengths to help with the situation.
  - Example: "Suzie, I can see that you are having difficulty with this math assignment, which of your top strengths might you use to help you in this situation? How have you tackled difficult math problems in the past? Which strengths do you think you used?"

### *Strength heroes:*

- You might consider having students thinking about their heroes? Who are their personal heroes? What character strengths can the students identify in their heroes? The VIA Me Decoder Report provides some examples, but having students go through the process of identifying their own heroes' character traits can be an illuminating learning experience. What characters from books does the child look up to? What are their greatest 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 the child? What are their greatest strengths?
  - Example: Alice from *Alice in Wonderland* (2010) for her curiosity and honesty?
  - Example: Nemo from *Finding Nemo* (2003) for bravery, love, and perseverance?

### *Create a classroom culture of strengths:*

- Strengths-spotting: One of the best ways to create a strengths culture is to practice, promote, and model strengths-spotting.
  - When you see a student demonstrating a particular strength, it's useful to name it.
  - Explain to the student what you observed, making clear how what you observed reflects the identified strength(s).
  - If you want to take strengths-spotting to the next level, share your appreciation for the strengths they've displayed.



*Embedding Strengths into the Curriculum:*

- Exploring character strengths enhances learning.
  - Example: If the students are learning a new sport, discuss the value of the strengths of teamwork, leadership, and other character strengths that may be relevant.

*Celebrations:*

- Create celebrations that highlight particular character strengths. Use these as opportunities for self-exploration.

*Using strengths to facilitate growth:*

- Encourage students to use their character strengths in new ways each day. This will help them feel more comfortable “in their own skin” and will likely enhance their well-being.
  - Example: For kindness, look for opportunities 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.

## Conclusion

This report has provided you with the essential ingredients for understanding this child’s VIA Me Decoder Report. In today’s world it is all-too-easy to forget to turn to strengths or to become overwhelmed or distracted by the situation at hand in the classroom. However, becoming versatile in knowing, discussing, and working with the character strengths of the children in your class will help you at those moments of highest need. Remember that this character strengths work is an ongoing process in which new insights and ideas will pop up, even daily. Be sure to review the Decoder Report periodically to help you keep the intention of working with character strengths top-of-mind.

The VIA Institute on Character wishes you well on this journey.

## Appendix: Additional Strengths Resources

[www.youtube.com/user/VIAStrengths?feature=mhw5](http://www.youtube.com/user/VIAStrengths?feature=mhw5): These videos document strengths-based practices in classrooms and schools. Videos includes testimonial responses from students, teachers, and parents. Search for the following videos: “Positive Education with Character Strengths”, “Character Strengths Classroom Connection in Shanghai,” and “Newark Boys Chorus School.”

[www.viapro.org](http://www.viapro.org): This website is stocked full of free resources that includes stories, practitioners sharing their strength practices, inspiring videos, and user-friendly research summaries. There are also online courses and workshops people can take to learn all they would ever want to know about applying character strengths.

*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 a school culture.

*Positive Psychology at the Movies* (2013) 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 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 nearly 2 million people. This survey is the *only* strengths survey in the world that is 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: Strengths involving the acquisition and use of knowledge***

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: Strengths involving the exercise of will to accomplish goals***

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: Strengths involving tending and befriending others***

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: Strengths that underlie healthy community life***

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: Strengths that protect against excess***

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: Strengths that forge connections to the larger universe and provide meaning***

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: Religiousness; faith; purpose; meaning