

# Chapter 4

## What About Me?

### Recognizing and Building on Each Child's Strengths

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#### **ABSTRACT**

*Children with differences do not need to be fixed or cured or pitied. Children are valuable simply for the person they are and will be. Schools and school districts have sought to remediate the weaknesses of children with disabilities without focusing on or utilizing the strengths and interests of children with disabilities as the basis for individual education programs (IEP). Beginning with a pre-referral process that focuses on parent or teacher concerns for children, driving an evaluation that focuses on a child's weaknesses, leading to an IEP built on remediating weaknesses that often ignore an individual's strengths and interests, the process and end product are focused on deficits in children. This chapter will present an alternative to this model, an alternative focused on identifying and utilizing a child's strengths and interests in the development of IEPs.*

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Parents have so many emotions when they learn that their child has a disability. Certainly, parents may experience fear, sadness, feelings of a loss of control. These are all normal responses. But, as an educator with decades of experiences, it is my hope that parents also have feelings of hope, joy and excitement regarding their children's futures. This chapter is dedicated to helping parents consider a new

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perspective about disabilities and the choice we all have to focus on strengths rather than weaknesses.

*“Disability is a limiting word that classifies a person. We all have deficiencies and limits. I am not a disabled athlete, I am a Paralympic athlete.”* ([arenasports.com.br](http://arenasports.com.br), 03 Apr 2013) – Daniel Dias

Children with differences do not need to be fixed.

Or cured.

Or pitied.

Children are valuable simply for the person she or he is and will be.

Schools and school districts have sought to remediate the weaknesses of children with disabilities, without focusing on, or utilizing the strengths and interests of children with disabilities as the basis for Individual Education Programs (IEP). Beginning with a pre-referral process that focuses on parent or teacher concerns for children, driving an evaluation that focuses on a child’s weaknesses, leading to an IEP built on remediating weaknesses that often ignore an individual’s strengths and interests., the process and end product is one focusing on deficits in children. This chapter will present an alternative to this model, an alternative focused on identifying and utilizing a child’s strengths and interests in the development of IEPs.

## **DEFICIT MODEL**

Since the inception of Special Education with the passage of the Education of the Handicapped Act in 1975, Special Education in public schools has generally been based on a **deficit model** (Appendix: Figure 1 Deficit Model Thinking). Under this model, eligibility is determined by identifying a student’s cognitive, behavioral, and social-emotional deficits, after which, an Individual Education Plan is developed to remediate those deficits (Cox, 2006). Essentially, the model is to identify what a child has trouble doing, and then provide services focused on doing more of what is difficult for the child.

## **CASE STUDY: PART 1**

A fourth-grade student who is well behaved is reading at a low second grade level. The student support, or pre-referral team at his school has been meeting to discuss his reading difficulties and has provided various small group and individual interventions and accommodations for him. His parents are concerned about his self-image and

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