

Book explains how focus on strengths, not failures, helps teens succeed in school

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The best way to help teenagers who are struggling in school is put aside their academic problems and focus on what they're doing right, according to a family research scientist who has put this theory to practice.

Nearly every family with a teen who has problems in school is told what they're doing wrong. But knowing what's wrong won't fix anything, said Stephen Gavazzi, professor of education and human ecology at Ohio State University.

"Your problems won't solve your problems, but your strengths will. That's why we focus on assets," he said.

Gavazzi describes his strength-based approach in a new book *Strong Families, Successful Students: Helping [Teenagers](#) Reach Their Full Academic Potential* (BookSurge).

In the book, Gavazzi lists traits that strong families have in common and then shows how they can be used to help teenagers in school, and in other parts of their lives as well.

Gavazzi's prescription for helping teens is based on a program he helped developed in the 1990s called "Growing Up FAST." This family-strengthening program was originally designed to help families of all youth, but evolved into a delinquency prevention program for youth and their families.

Growing Up FAST was very successful. Studies showed that about three times fewer youth who went through the program committed new crimes in the next nine months when compared to those teens who didn't take part (18 percent of participating youth versus 60 percent of others).

Gavazzi said he wrote this book because he believes the same principles that worked to help troubled youth can be applied to any family.

"There's a firm research basis for this, and thousands of families have already gone through this program. The studies say that this program works for families," he said. The research that underlies the Strong Families book will be published separately, this fall, in the book Families With [Adolescents](#): Theory, Research and Prevention and Intervention Applications (Springer).

The focus in Strong Families is helping to boost academics, because doing well in school is the main duty of teenagers in our society, Gavazzi explained. But helping teens in school should also be beneficial in all parts of their lives.

Gavazzi said the book is based on the principle that the family is a system, of which the teenager is just one part.

"There isn't just a teenager who is having problems in school - there is a family where some things aren't working well. A teenager's school problems are just part of a larger constellation of factors. There is shared responsibility," Gavazzi said.

But in helping families, Gavazzi said the key is not to focus on the problems, at least at first. He encourages families to "park" their problems - not ignore them, or pretend they are not there, but set them aside while they build on strengths.

"We have to get away from the shame and blame focus. We're empowering families, helping them to remember that there are some good things that they can build on."

Some people may think this approach is Pollyannaish, and ignores the real problems families face, Gavazzi said. Nothing could be further from the truth.

First of all, the strength-based approach is not easy. It is often harder to stay focused on strengths than it is to lapse into shame and blame.

More importantly, Gavazzi said a strength-based approach is often the only way to reach teenagers.

"As soon as teenagers hear you say something negative about them, the light switch goes off. They are not going to hear anything else you have to say and you're not going to reach them," Gavazzi said.

That's the reason Gavazzi focuses on what he calls the five facts about strong families: they have a shared positive identity about themselves; they understand their members' talents and abilities; they are patient and kind; they are able to find and use resources; and they can work together.

In the book, Gavazzi devotes a chapter to each strength, using each as a step towards achieving the goal of having a successful student. Each chapter has an exercise for the family to do together to build on that strength.

The exercises involve agreeing on definitions of success, identifying what both teens and parents are already doing that qualifies as success, and then exploring what small things parents and teens can do to improve on those successes.

"Your strengths become your vehicle for solving problems," Gavazzi said. "If you start building on strengths, you start to get clues as to how to solve your problems."

The exercises are a vital part of the book, Gavazzi said.

"I don't want parents to read the book and just be filled with good ideas. The exercises make the ideas come alive and actually help families, and that's the whole point," he said.

One of the key lessons of the book, Gavazzi said, is that families are the real experts at what works for them and what doesn't.

"I don't think it helps families to look for an expert to solve their problems. Every family knows what works and doesn't work for them. And that's the key point in becoming a strength-based family."

Provided by The Ohio State University

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