

PAM ALLYN & ERNEST MORRELL

EVERY
CHILD
A SUPER
READER

*7 Strengths to Open
a World of Possible*

 SCHOLASTIC

*In memory of my father, Bill Krupman.
You are still here with me. This book is for you.*

—P. A.

*To my three super readers, Amani,
Antonio, and Tripp Morrell.*

—E. M.

Credits

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Cover Design: Brian LaRossa

Interior Design: Maria Lilja

Interior photographs and video: Monet Izabeth Eliastam

Interior typeset in Aptifer, designed by Mårten Thavenius

Publisher/Acquiring Editor: Lois Bridges

Editor-in-Chief/Development Editor: Raymond Coutu

Editorial Director: Sarah Longhi

Copy Editor: Danny Miller

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Printed in the U.S.A.

ISBN-13: 978-0-545-94871-5 • ISBN-10: 0-545-94871-1

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CHAPTER 2

THE 7 STRENGTHS MODEL: A NEW WAY TO ENSURE EVERY CHILD'S SUCCESS

“Rather than impose upon your kids or try and steer their lives in a certain direction...recognize what their strengths are and support their strengths and support the development of the things they're passionate about.”

—DR. EDWARD ZUCKERBERG,
father of Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg

This book shines a spotlight on the work we can do as educators, in and out of school, 365 days a year. Time in school and time out of school can build the life of a super reader. Or not, depending on our actions. The 7 Strengths Model is designed to show you the “why” and the “how” of the life of a super reader. It's a flexible, robust, and adaptable model that works during the school day and in any out-of-school experience. The model's social-emotional emphasis ensures children a sense of safety and well-being as readers and access to quality literature that builds lifelong connections to textual experiences and higher-level thinking skills. The 7 Strengths Model connects reading to the inner life of the child, providing a full toolkit for learning to read and reading to learn. The child has to know how reading connects to his deepest experience as a human being. The model starts with what the child brings to school and to out-of-school programs and uses intrinsic human strengths to help that child connect to texts, experience the power of reading, and become confident in taking on everyday challenges as a reader.

In their groundbreaking research, Dick Allington and Anne McGill-Franzen (2013) show that 80 percent of the achievement gap between students of lower- and upper-socioeconomic backgrounds is credited to summer reading loss. By the time a child living in poverty reaches fifth grade, she may have lost the equivalent of three years of education. This in turn affects the entire classroom, as teachers may spend at least a month reteaching students material forgotten over the summer. While the wealthiest strata has recovered from the massive recession of 2008, most of the U.S. hasn't. According to the National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP), nearly half of U.S. school children are low-income, which is defined as those families living within 200 percent of the federal poverty threshold. It is important to understand that this number of poor and low-income children in America has risen dramatically over the past 15 years, and it is expected to continue to rise in the near future. We now find ourselves with many central city and rural schools and districts where the overwhelming majority of students live in poor and low-income homes and communities.

We do not present these numbers because we are pessimistic about the future or because we feel that poverty is a barrier that we cannot overcome. To the contrary, we have both seen and worked with children and families that have created super readers across every social strata. The 7 Strengths Model takes into account the entirety of a child's reading life, from home to school to out of school and home again.

How the Model Came to Be

We, Pam and Ernest, are founding leaders of LitWorld, an organization that provides transformational literacy experiences for children across the United States and in more than 60 countries. Pam is the Founding Director and Ernest is a member of the Executive Board of Directors. We both lead literacy initiatives across the country in many different kinds of schools (urban, rural, suburban, public, charter, private). In leading literacy work on the ground in New York City, Detroit, Chicago, and then, starting in 2007, across the world from Ghana to Kenya to Nepal to the Philippines, we began to realize something exciting. We saw children become empowered as readers because we created safe communities for strength building. We started by creating supportive social-emotional frameworks, and the children began to read more rapidly and fearlessly. Local communities played a vital role in turning children into super readers by valuing oral language, home stories, the children's own perspectives, and community-wide celebrations of reading.



For a video of Pam and Ernest discussing the 7 Strengths Model, visit [scholastic.com/superreaderresources](https://www.scholastic.com/superreaderresources).

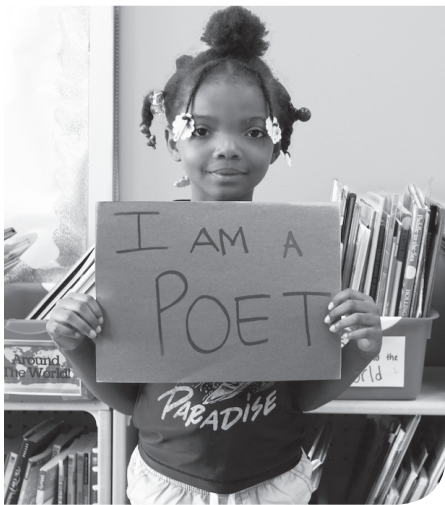


In addition to providing crucial access to books and technology, LitWorld focuses on investing in children, parents, teachers, families, and community-based organizations to build worlds in which reading is deeply valued. Reading and learning to read became all the more possible because everyone is involved, everyone is a leader. As a literacy empowerment tool, the 7 Strengths Model brings a new dimension to the teaching of reading. LitWorld created a foundation upon which to build a whole world for super readers. In this world, we explicitly value the role of the human spirit in the work of learning to read and the role of the community itself in drawing closer together through reading.

We began to identify our social-emotional framework as seven specific strengths the children were returning to again and again, from country to country and city to city and state to state. These seven strengths were referred to over and over as touchstones for learning, for becoming more powerful as readers. We built safe spaces for reading around the 7 Strengths called “LitClubs,” and later, we extended this model to the summer months in “LitCamps,” which are now offered across the United States in a partnership between Scholastic and LitWorld to share the model as widely as possible.

Our first LitClub graduates are leaders in their communities. Some are attending college for the first time, others are taking local civic leadership roles. The safe circles of support and the attention to the strength-building social-emotional empowerment skills were the magical ingredients to make reading lives possible. As longtime literacy experts and advocates, we

have written this book with the urgent awareness that this model needs to be shared widely because these ideas can create change instantly and dramatically. We are now in more than 60 countries and all across the United States, spreading the work of what it means to be a super reader with thousands of children.



The 7 Strengths are, at the core, egalitarian. They help do away with harmful labels—“struggling,” “English language deficit,” “at risk,” and so on. Even “gifted” separates children from one another and may even limit their understanding of one another as readers. The 7 Strengths Model levels the playing field and at the same time raises expectations for every child.

Children need choice and voice in their work as readers. The 7 Strengths provide a framework for super readers that is based on the ideas that the work of childhood is about formulating reading identities and that academic success is more closely built upon social-emotional, character-rich learning than we might have

ever previously thought. 7 Strengths students are actively aware of who they are as readers—their habits, preferences, challenges, and goals—and they understand the importance of each strength in their potential success.

The 7 Strengths Create a Culturally Responsive Reading World

During a global teaching journey to Kisumu, Kenya, that we took, children clamored to see the photos we had taken. But when we turned the screen toward them, they asked us to point out which child they were in the photos. In this community, there were no windows and no mirrors. The children had great difficulty determining their own selves in the images because without the power to make a reflection, they were unable to distinguish themselves from others. The same is true in reading.

Rudine Sims Bishop (1990) described the ways in which literature can serve as windows, sliding glass doors, and mirrors. Books can become windows, offering “views



For a video of Pam and Ernest discussing implementation of the 7 Strengths Model, visit scholastic.com/superreaderresources.

of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange.” Readers can then treat these windows as sliding glass doors by walking through them and into the world created by the author. These same windows can also serve as mirrors, reflecting the readers’ lives and experiences back to them “as part of the larger human experience.” Literature, particularly multicultural literature, can provide both self-affirmation and a way to learn about and appreciate various cultures, dialects, and ways of being in the world. Literature has the power to teach about and honor readers’ differences and similarities.

Whether at home with children or in the classroom, let us prioritize the mirrors and windows library, the mirrors and windows world, the mirrors and windows conversations in which every child can find herself and also see out to the larger world.

To introduce their separate op-eds for *The New York Times*, father-son children’s book authors Walter Dean Myers and Christopher Myers placed this statement: “Of 3,200 children’s books published in 2013, just 93 were about black people, according to a study by the Cooperative Children’s Book Center at the University of Wisconsin.” This dearth of diversity is tragic for all children, but above all for those who look in books, day after day, never seeing themselves reflected back. Christopher Myers describes how this “apartheid of children’s literature” results in children of color who “recognize the boundaries being imposed upon their imaginations, and are certain to imagine themselves well within the borders they are offered, to color themselves inside the lines.”

Sherman Alexie, a Native American author, accepted the National Book Award in 2007. He thanked Ezra Jack Keats, author of *The Snowy Day*: “It was the first time I looked at a book and saw a brown, black, beige character—a character who resembled me physically and resembled me spiritually, in all his gorgeous loneliness and splendid isolation.”

Every child deserves to know she belongs to the world of reading and the world of writing. Whether white or black, Latino or Asian, boy or girl or transgender—everyone and anyone can, will, and should benefit from a library as diverse as the world we live in. The world is stretching its wings and at long last recognizing that the power of story is central to our human experience. Certainly all children can relate to a good story whether or not the character looks like them. (Think *Goodnight Moon* or *Charlotte’s Web*!) But there is no question that we hunger to see ourselves, to have reflections that we can call our own. That a child in the darkest moment finds comfort in a character who “reminds me of me” the way we all do when that pang of recognition makes the journey less lonely.

What Are the 7 Strengths?

The 7 Strengths are habits and feelings that educators and parents must nurture in children to provide them with the foundations they need to become super readers. They are solidly based in the social-emotional research of, among others, Daniel Goleman, an internationally renowned psychologist whose 1995 bestseller *Emotional Intelligence* transformed our understanding of IQ and personal, academic, and workplace success. Lest you think that social-emotional skills like the 7 Strengths are “soft” and can’t compete with such cognitively driven skills as problem solving and critical analysis, consider Goleman’s 2011 book *Leadership: The Power of Emotional Intelligence*. Goleman notes that some of the best leaders in the corporate world owe their success to their ability to identify and monitor emotions—their own and others’—and to manage relationships. In a similar vein, Mark Edmundson’s new book, *Self and Soul: A Defense of Ideals* (2015), asks readers to revisit humanity’s “three great ideals: courage, contemplation, and compassion.” These are the ideals, Edmundson maintains, that give life both value and meaning. Let us turn now to an exploration of the 7 Strengths that frame our work, how we define them, and language with which you can share them.



Belonging: Identifying as a valued, represented member of a larger community

For a child to flourish, she must know that she is a valued member of a community and that her unique voice is respected. When a child feels as though she doesn’t belong, she becomes removed, she disappears from group conversations, she may even act out. Our core sense of belief in ourselves stems from the knowledge that others believe in us, too. Both the classroom and the home can be places for comfort and growth, assuring the child of her value as an individual so that she can go out and affect change in the world.

A child who belongs is known by others. Her reading preferences are known. She knows the reading preferences of others. She is celebrated when she takes a step forward. She celebrates others. Children hunger to belong, to clubs, to groups. Reading is designed to build a social community and super readers are made by building a social community around them.

What you choose to read to children is critical. If a young girl never reads a book with a female main character, how can she take a leading role in her own life? If bilingual children only read books in English, how will they learn that their culture and language are valued? Activities and discussions involving children must reflect their own agency as community

members. Our language as teachers must firmly plant children in their identities as powerful readers and writers.

Children thrive as readers when surrounded by reading material and the language of literacy. Books and talk about books help establish a reading or “scholarly” culture in the home, one that persists from generation to generation, largely independent of education and class. This creates a “taste for books” and promotes the skills and knowledge that foster literacy and numeracy and, thus, lead to lifelong academic advantages (Evans et al., 2010).

Kids in this environment embrace books and the reading life. They self-identify as readers who belong to a larger reading community whose members know books, talk about books, share books, and love books.



Curiosity: *Fostering a willingness to explore new territory and test new theories*

Children who ask questions are proactively engaged in their environments and learn to anticipate both problems and solutions. Building a stance of inquiry is crucial for college, career, and civic engagement.

We must create environments that are open and hospitable to the kinds of unique, interesting responses children have to texts and in conversations. Curiosity is a spark that must be fueled by the affirmation of wonderings.

Reading creates curiosity, and books should be seen as a launching pad for further inquiry. Our conversations around texts must expand beyond character analysis to encourage children to look out into the world around them. Project-based learning allows children to follow lines of inquiry of their own choosing, resulting in higher engagement and stronger results. A focus on asking open-ended questions cultivates children’s curiosity and fosters an attitude of being “forever learners.”



Friendship: *Having close, trusting relationships and personal connections to others—learning to interact in positive, productive ways*

Whether in the home, classroom, or workplace, being able to listen, speak, and connect with others is extremely important. Friendship is a strength that fosters within children a deeper understanding of themselves. Navigating friendships can be difficult, yet it is a powerful and necessary tool that must be cultivated. “Friendship is a highly complex and emotionally

demanding transaction and meeting the challenges of friendship requires emotional awareness and applied strengths” (O’Grady, 2012). Psychologists from the University of Illinois and the University of Pennsylvania found that there is a strong correlation between health, happiness, and friendship (Diener & Seligman, 2002).

Being a super reader should not be lonely. We learn better together than by ourselves (Schaps, 2009). Reading is enhanced when we recommend books to one another, when we trust one another, and when we support one another through the hard parts of reading.

Yet, in the traditional classroom that focuses on individual learning, friendship can too often be seen as a distraction, something that can get you into trouble. Because of this, children have not always been explicitly taught how to engage in friendships. Super readers cultivate relationships around the telling and receiving of story. From great literature, they learn about the imperfections of relationships. They empathize with characters and reflect on their own relationships in light of what they have read.



Kindness: *Being compassionate toward others, expressing tenderness that has an impact, near and far*

Kindness is sometimes underrated as something “soft” in our teaching lives. And yet, it is the heartbeat of our civil society and it is what we remember most in both the challenging and joyous times of our lives. In fact, “...scientific studies prove there are many physical, emotional, and mental health benefits associated with kindness” (Currie, 2014). Kindness prevents bullying, it fortifies every single human being, and it powers us forward when we are faced with adversity.

Children can internalize the lessons of kindness from the books they read. They can learn from these stories that being considerate of others goes much further than simply looking out for yourself. Families, librarians, and teachers must make every effort to choose texts that promote ethics and can be used as platforms to hold discussions about social values. A community *without* kindness will not succeed; it is only by working with one another, instead of against, that we can harness the positive energy of our combined agency.



Confidence: *Thinking independently and expressing ideas with assurance*

Confidence is a garden that must be cultivated consistently through the small challenges and triumphs of each day. Whether it's the envy from browsing a friend's seemingly perfect life on social media or frustration from being unable to sound out a difficult word, teachers and caregivers must be there to remind the child that adults struggle with the same issues and that we all have our own strategies to overcome them.

A super reader is able to approach any situation knowing that she has the tools for success within herself. Let us create a genuinely praise-centric and inclusive environment that allows children to feel confident as readers, thinkers, and learners.



Courage: *Having the strength to do something that you know is right, even though it may be difficult*

The struggles children face, whether they're happening at home or at school, are real and require a good dose of courage. Courage can be practiced, and courage can be learned. It is far different from the popular idea of “grit” which sometimes seems to assume that if only a child is tough, that child can overcome obstacles. But courage is not necessarily about toughness. Courage is more about tapping into one's capacity to do the right thing even when it feels difficult. One may need courage to show kindness. One may need courage to warmly welcome an outsider. One may need courage to stay silent or pay a compliment instead of criticizing.

By practicing courage and teaching it, we can help children become more courageous readers—readers who push through the hard parts and face reading challenges fearlessly. Children can learn from the difficulties and victories of the characters they encounter in literature. As readers, they can celebrate their triumphs and mourn their losses. Families, teachers, and librarians can help children apply those lessons from literature to their own lives, showing them that if they have the courage to take risks, to make themselves vulnerable, it will pay off in positive results. To facilitate this learning, children need access to books that reflect the complex nature of courage, which often has little to do with success or failure and everything to do with trying your best and persevering when faced with adversity. These types of stories are chock full of teachable moments that can be expanded into larger discussions around our multifaceted understanding of courage.



Hope: *Thinking optimistically and believing that today's efforts will produce good things in the future for yourself and the world*

Perhaps the most important quality that a child can possess is hope. A child who has hope believes in herself and her capacity to make good things happen in her life. She is ready to recognize the advantages that literacy brings. She will be willing to pursue the knowledge and engage in activities that help her grow as a reader and writer. She is able to envision a future where she is secure and successful. A wise teacher realizes that before building skills and teaching strategies, he must help a child find reasons to be hopeful.

Literature has the power to give wings to our dreams, introducing us to possibilities for the future, reinterpretations of the past, and alternates to the present. Through exposure to books, children are able to read about a female president of the United States, or they can

imagine living on Mars or having superpowers. They can travel to the edge of the galaxy or the top of Mount Everest, they can swim with dolphins or multiply with microbes. Transformational stories allow super readers the empowerment of a flexible frame of mind, one that can grow with their dreams. And super readers are big dreamers—they are eager to play their role in making the impossible possible.

The 7 Strengths

BELONGING: Identifying as a valued, represented member of a larger community

CURIOSITY: Fostering a willingness to explore new territory and test new theories

FRIENDSHIP: Having close, trusting relationships and personal connections to others—learning to interact in positive, productive ways

KINDNESS: Being compassionate toward others, expressing tenderness that has an impact, near and far

CONFIDENCE: Thinking independently and expressing ideas with assurance

COURAGE: Having the strength to do something that you know is right, even though it may be difficult

HOPE: Thinking optimistically and believing that today's efforts will produce good things in the future for yourself and the world