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A Strengths-Based Approach for Intervention with At-Risk Youth - Author Interview

Dr Kevin M Powell, author of *A Strengths-Based Approach for Intervention with At-Risk Youth*, discusses his new book designed for counselling professionals working with at-risk youth.

Why did you write this book?

Educational and treatment services for at-risk youth have historically focused their attention on disruptive behaviours and other identified problems. This focus can increase defensiveness and lead to negative outcomes. I wrote this book to help counteract this problem-oriented emphasis. Being strengths-based is hands-down the most effective approach I have found for helping youth and their families build strengths and resiliency and promoting positive, psychologically healthy outcomes.

What are the best features of this book?

One of the best features is that it provides a toolbox of specific interventions. Rather than just focus on the theory behind a strengths-based approach, I placed an emphasis on specific interventions. I included many case examples to help illustrate how to implement the interventions.

Another feature I should mention is the user friendly way the interventions are organised. They are broken down into six categories based on what the interventions specifically target. For example, if the reader is interested in interventions that can help establish positive relationships with youth and their family members, there are specific strategies for how to do that in the "Relationship Development" chapter. If the reader is working with a youth struggling with hopelessness, the "Optimistic Attitude Development" chapter provides specific strategies for how to promote hope. The book is set up so the reader does not have to read the book in a linear fashion; instead, it's possible to jump around to the chapters that are most relevant.

Who should read this book?

The target audience for this book is counsellors, teachers, psychologists, psychiatrists, residential staff, caseworkers, probation officers, parole officers, and anybody else who works with youth and families. I also wrote the book specifically for students who are pursuing careers in the human service professions. Having a strengths-based foundation is so important to being effective in this field. The book is also relevant for parents and other caregivers in their quest to raise psychologically healthy, prosocial children and future adults.

What do you see as the main benefit to being strengths-based in youth services?

One of the main benefits is simply how effective this approach is for establishing positive relationships with youth and families. Being strengths-based is the best way I know how to make a positive connection. We know from treatment outcome research that the relationship is a powerful factor. Once a positive relationship has been established, provider effectiveness in treatment and educational settings is much greater.

Another benefit is that being strengths-based decreases the risk of provider burnout. When youth service providers approach life from a deficit-based perspective, they are not only less successful in their interactions with others but also at much higher risk for burning out.

What would you say to people who worry that being "strengths based" means you are ignoring problem behaviours?

Being strengths based is actually a very effective method for addressing problem behaviours. Helping youth to focus on healthy alternative behaviours often reduces problems. In addition, this approach helps create an environment in which youth feel safe to let down their guard and openly address their problem behaviours. Strengths-based providers do address problems: They are just strategic about when and how to broach these topics.

What evidence do you have that strengths-based interventions work?

All of the strengths-based interventions described in the book have been used successfully in educational and clinical settings. In addition to reflecting my clinical experience with these interventions, the book includes a chapter highlighting evidence-based support, and research is also cited throughout the book. All the foundational principles of the strengths-based approach have empirical support, including the power of positive relationships, resiliency protective factors, and solution-focused interventions. One of the true strengths of this approach is that it is not a set curriculum but rather an underlying foundation to guide services. This allows youth service providers flexibility to meet the individualised needs of youth and families.

Do you have any final thoughts about the book?

Using a strengths-based approach in youth services and in life can lead to many positive outcomes. It has kept me energised in this field for three decades. My hope is that this book helps to more clearly define what a strengths-based approach is and shows how it can be implemented in day-to-day work with youth.





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