



## Principle #5 Focus on Strengths and Assets

Reading this vignette below, see if you can recognize how Muriel, when working with families, does not see their child through a deficit lens. Instead, she sees the ‘whole child’ and names that a challenging behavior in the moment does not define a child or their family. She helps families to feel safe in her presence by communicating that she sees their children as complex people, not defined by their hardest moments of struggle and dysregulation. Muriel acts as a buffer to the stress that comes with parenting every day. Her interactions reduce parents’ stress as you will see in the vignette below:

*Every parent wants to know and feel like you like their child, bottom line. They want to feel like you see their child in a positive light. Even if, especially if, their child has difficulties. And so, the way you talk to parents is huge. Anytime there are kids with behavioral issues, and we have to meet with parents, I’m always included. I’m the buffer. One thing I always try to make sure parents understand is this: **I see your child and this negative thing that your kid is doing is not forever and it is not the sum of who your child is.** A lot of times parents will cry. They feel embarrassed, they feel ashamed. And I respond back in a reassuring way, “We’re just having an experience with your child. This is part of parenthood. Our kids aren’t perfect. I have my own stories.” And sometimes I share personal stories with them. Being a parent is hard. It’s not all joyful and fun. This is hard.*

*I think one way I create good relationships with parents is throwing away the pretense that there is such thing as a perfect parent. I’m a teacher and I don’t have perfect kids. It’s all part of the journey of being human beings. And kids have a wide range of behaviors and personalities just like all humans do. And it’s okay and we are here in partnership to try to help them, support them, redirect them, whatever it is they need, we are a team, and we are invested in this child. And this thing that your kid is doing, that you feel ashamed of and embarrassed about, it is not the sum of who he is. Do you see all this other great stuff that he does? We’re going to work on the biting. It’s not okay, but he’s brilliant. He does all these other things. And so I feel like I really try to just be very frank with them and honor the challenge of parenting. I tell parents all the time, all the parents that you think have perfect kids and you envy, you don’t know what goes on behind their doors. I’m not saying any names about anybody, but every parent has sat where you’re sitting and divulges the same insecurities, the same shame you are feeling. You are thinking you’re doing it so wrong and you see everyone doing it so right. It’s an illusion. Do you think they are going to reveal and tell you their insecurities and what their kids did? Of course, they’re not.*

*When I reveal that these things are happening, my goal is to normalize it. I lay out, “I don’t know if anyone’s told you this or if you realize this, but this is actually normal and common.” I tell parents to forgive themselves. Now what are we going to do? How are we going to problem solve this little issue that Manny’s got? I’ve thought of some strategies. You tell me what strategies you’re using at home. Let’s try it out for a few weeks. And to tell you the truth, something might work for a week and then it won’t work the next week. This is part of parenting.” I’m always preparing them not to feel like it’s a failure if there is regression but instead, that we are working through a process, we are on a journey. I have very comprehensive conversations with parents to make them feel pulled in and embraced. We’re going to problem solve together.”*



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Being trauma-informed and responsive means being aware of your power. When you are in a position of power it can automatically trigger others without you even doing or say anything. Recognizing this power is important. As traumatic experiences involve a loss of power and control resulting in feelings of helplessness, terror and often, hopelessness, trauma-responsive and resilience building practices focus on building relational connections and starting with scanning for strengths, prioritizing connection over content and centering connection over direction. These ideas were highlighted in this vignette.

### **Reflection/Discussion Questions**

- When you have a student who is having challenges, what ways similar to Muriel do you approach a parent to help them feel safe to talk about it with you?
- How do you move yourself from your first reaction of “you need to fix your child’s challenging behavior” to “we are going to solve this problem together?”