



Every Child a Super Reader: Seven Strengths to Open a World of Possible

We can create this world for our children. Every Child a Super Reader provides a blueprint for nurturing the engaged and fluent readers we want all our children to be. In the process, we will transform children's lives and life chances.

—Marian Wright Edelman



LITERACY CHAMPIONS: PAM ALLYN and ERNEST MORRELL, Ph.D.

Pam Allyn is a world-renowned speaker, author, innovator, and leader in the field of education. She is an advocate for children, families, and educators, focusing on equity, social-emotional learning, and the dignity, rights, and interests of children as learners. She is an innovator and business leader, creating and building programs and scaling ideas on child development that reach millions of young people. Pam is the author of 27 books and the founder of the family learning initiative Dewey, centering the wellbeing and growth of every member of every family with equitable, enriching resources and opportunities. She is also the founder and creator of World Read Aloud Day, a movement bringing the power of the read aloud to people of all ages worldwide; LitCamp, a pioneering research-based solution for ending the summer literacy slide that increases children's reading success and their desire for learning; and LitWorld, a literacy nonprofit that operates in a partnership model with women-led, grassroots organizations in the US and around the world. Pam is the recipient of many honors for her work, including the Teachers College Columbia University Distinguished Alumni Award, the NCTE CEL Kent Williamson Exemplary Leadership Award, and The Children's Village Legacy of Service Award.

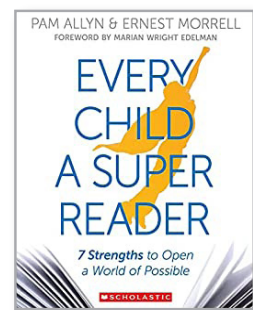
Ernest Morrell, Ph.D., is the Coyle Professor, a member of the faculty in the English, and Africana Studies Departments, and Director of the Center for Literacy Education at the University of Notre Dame. In July 2021, he will become the Associate Dean for the Humanities and Equity in the College of Arts and Letters. Ernest is also director of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) James R. Squire Office for Policy Research in the English

Language Arts. He is an elected Fellow of the American Educational Research Association, a past president of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), and a co-convenor of the African Diaspora International Research Network. From 2015–2021 Ernest has been annually ranked among the top university-based education scholars in the RHSU Edu-Scholar Public Influence Rankings published by *EdWeek*. Ernest is also the recipient of the NCTE Distinguished Service Award, the Kent Williamson Leadership Award from the Conference on English Leadership, and the Divergent Award for Excellence in 21st Century Literacies. His scholarly interests include: Critical Pedagogy, English Education, Literacy Studies, Postcolonial Studies, popular culture and education across the African Diaspora.

Literacy and Social Emotional Strength and Resilience Are Inseparable

Every Child a Super Reader focuses on the confluence of literacy and social-emotional learning, and the enabling teaching structures that inspire agency, choice, and freedom in how children build full, rich learning lives. As Pedro Noguera, Distinguished Professor of Education, UCLA Graduate School of Education & Information Studies, notes:

“This practical guide reminds educators that the most powerful way to promote independent learning, critical thinking, and higher order skills is by helping every child to become an avid reader. Pam and Ernest’s advice is clear and sound, and their insights are illuminating. For educators who want to help children develop a love of learning, this book is an invaluable resource.”



The 7 Strengths: A Unique Model for Literacy Learning and Social-Emotional Growth

Pam and Ernest promote a strength-based model that builds children’s literacy and resilience skills side by side. The core ideas center literacy learning around children’s own stories, and connect reading and writing experiences back to children’s own lives. By valuing and celebrating each child’s own strengths and stories, this model for learning enhances social-emotional development.

When we build on children’s strengths and immerse them in an intellectually invigorating emotionally nurturing, literature-rich community, we grow “super readers”—avid readers who consume texts with passion, understanding, and a critical eye. Pam and Ernest represent social-emotional learning as “the 7 Strengths” and explain how each strength plays a crucial role in helping children develop as confident and capable readers. The 7 Strengths are defined, and their role in literacy learning is described as follows:



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.

References

- Currie, L. (2014, October 17). Why teaching kindness in schools is essential to reduce bullying. [Blog post]. Retrieved from <https://www.edutopia.org/blog/teaching-kindness-essential-reduce-bullying-lisa-currie>
- Diener, E., & Seligman, M. E. P. (2002). Very happy people. *Psychological Science*, 13, 80–83.
- Evans, M., Kelley, J., Sikorac, J., & Treimand, D. (2010). Family scholarly culture and educational success: books and schooling in 27 nations. *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility*, 28, 171–197.
- O'Grady, P. (2012, October 26). Positive psychology in the classroom. friendship: The key to happiness. [Blog post]. Retrieved from <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/positivepsychology-in-the-classroom/201210/friendship-the-key-happiness/>
- Schaps, E. (March/April 2009). Creating caring school communities. *Leadership*, 8–11.