

STRENGTHS ALONGSIDE STRUGGLES

HOW CHILDREN DEVELOP PROBLEM-SOLVING SKILLS AND STRATEGIES IN DISADVANTAGED ENVIRONMENTS



LOOKING BEYOND DEFICITS

A common finding is that children growing up in disadvantaged environments tend to perform less well on certain tests of problem-solving ability. However, that is not the full picture. They may also approach problems differently, in ways that helped them navigate challenges in their environments¹.

IDENTIFYING SKILLS

For example, some children live in a busy environment that needs to be monitored for fleeting threats and opportunities. These children might find it harder to ignore distractions, but easier to switch between tasks². We may use this well-rounded view of skills to better support learning.



UNDERSTANDING STRATEGIES

A child's context also shapes their strategies³. Some children respond quickly and intuitively. Others take more time to carefully weigh their options. Instead of only asking 'Did they get it RIGHT?', we can also ask 'HOW did they get there?' Thus, we can build on their current strategy.

CONTENT MATTERS

The test materials can also make a difference. Sometimes children perform best with materials that are familiar or relevant to them⁴. If tasks use abstract or irrelevant images, these children might not show their true abilities. Knowing this helps to design better tests.



RECOMMENDATIONS

- Build on skills and strategies to help children thrive
- Focus on children's process, not only test outcomes
- Consider how test materials influence performance

References

¹[DeJoseph & Ellwood-Lowe et al., 2024](#); ²[Fields et al., 2021](#); ³[Vermeent et al., 2024](#); ⁴[Young et al., 2022](#)