

# The Power of Greatness Sticks

Tammi Van Hollander

Who would guess that a simple intervention of placing words on a popsicle stick could have taken off into an intervention that is being used all over the world in so many different ways? It started with a blog I wrote in 2016 and people started to take notice. I received messages from clinicians from all over the world sharing their inspirational stories. Then, the Greatness Stick intervention was published in Clair Mellenthin's book among a plethora of other wonderful interventions (Mellenthin, C (2018). *Play Therapy: Engaging & Powerful Techniques for Treatment of Childhood Disorders*. 107-109. Eau Claire, WI: PESI Publishing).

As a play therapist and international trainer, I use Greatness Sticks in my private practice, during my presentations, and with family members. Since Greatness Sticks were introduced, they are being used in classrooms, supervision, organizations, and other events. Typically, negative qualities come to mind more easily than positive ones when thinking about ourselves, resulting in low self-esteem, adaptability, and motivation. These sticks can be used in many settings with a variety of populations.

## **What are Greatness Sticks?**

Greatness sticks started as popsicles that are filled with words of positive qualities such as BRAVE, MOTIVATED, KIND, PROBLEM SOLVER, PATIENT, GENEROUS, THANKFUL. I have the greatness sticks out in my office (in a bowl) and they are used in many different ways. As of May 2019, the Greatness Sticks are now made, packaged and sold. The basic kit has small pawns with greatness words and words can be added to it. Kids love these pawns because they create their own greatness games. Greatness Sticks offer an engaging way to positively affirm students in the classroom, clients in therapy sessions, and family members at home.

**How did Greatness Sticks come about?** After I took a training to be a Nurtured Heart Approach® trainer, my practice began to change and I saw a new way of building children's inner wealth™. The Nurtured Heart Approach® is a method that recognizes and celebrates greatness. I was looking for a new way to work with parents and teachers to build success. I couldn't bare to do another behavioral chart or token jar. NHA® came along just in time.

Now, the Nurtured Heart Approach® is part of my life. I breath it, I dream it, I teach it, I live it. I have always been a positive person and would be the first one to see the greatness in every individual, but I recognized I was not putting energy into what was needed. I put energy into the negativity, with a compassionate heart and a zest to heal the pain of my clients. I thought that the more I could comfort those in need, the better

they would feel. I realized that I was energizing children's negative behaviors by giving attention to it, which gave them incentives to continue these behaviors. When challenging behaviors arise, many will join in the chaos and give negative energy to the child. Energy is energy, negative or positive. If children are getting energized by their behaviors, they will continue to do it. Howard Glasser, creator of The Nurtured Heart Approach® states "Children read energy like braille." We need to energize the positive behaviors and recognize that children are successful much of the time. For more information on The Nurtured Heart Approach®, visit [www.childrensuccessfoundation.com](http://www.childrensuccessfoundation.com).

I realized how rarely children hear positive recognitions from their parents and when asking children about their strengths, they would normally be at a loss for words. When I would meet with parents, I would only hear what their child was doing wrong. When doing school observations, the teachers would also have a negative lens. No wonder these kids were down on themselves. When I would meet them in session, their light would shine and within ten seconds, I could name 5 greatness qualities. Still, every time I go to a school to do an observation, I see a child who is doing so much more right than wrong. I would want to shout out to the teacher, "Recognize them for sitting in their seat when sitting is hard;" "Acknowledge how kind they were to their peer and how they are a good role model;" "Celebrate their flexibility and self-control when they didn't hit their peer or have a tantrum when you needed them to transition and transitions are challenging." Teachers could benefit from using Greatness Sticks and so can families.

**With a child and family member:** Place greatness sticks in a bowl in front of child and parent and ask the parent to pick a pawn and say how their child possesses this quality. A parent may ask, "Are there any negative qualities?" Can we talk about the tantrums and how rude my child is to me?" The reply is "There are no negative qualities in this activity. It is about the strengths your child possesses." As an added component to the activity, the parent can then draw a picture that represents the child and place it next to the pawns. Once the Greatness Sticks are selected, the client draws a picture of how this activity made them feel and the Greatness Sticks surround the picture. Always have empty sticks and invite clients to add positive qualities to the collection. They can write on the stick (pawn) with marker or sharpie. Clients then make their own stick to take home as a transitional object. I had one young child make greatness sticks and wrap them in a bow to give to herself on her birthday.

**Individuals:** Set up the pawns and ask them to pick the qualities they possess. One teen was really stuck and didn't think she possessed any of these qualities, and asked for her mother to come in. Her mother was able to show her that she had many of these qualities and more. Sometimes it is difficult to acknowledge these qualities and it is

powerful when a parent, sibling, teacher or clinician can help them see their true greatness. The child will put them out on the table so all the qualities can be seen together. To expand on this, I then ask them to pick the qualities that they see in their parents and siblings. Having children, teens and adults pick positive qualities in their siblings can be challenging but it is amazing how many they add. As a way of processing this activity, less is more. I may say, "Wow, how do you feel when you look at all these amazing qualities that you and your family possess?" The answer is always one of surprise, filled with proud and happy feelings. One 8 year old said, "I feel fantastic!" Another child welled up with tears and said "I had no idea I had so much greatness."

**With groups: classroom, family session, group work or workshop:** I love to use Greatness Sticks with families and in my workshops. If it is a workshop or a classroom, they select the Greatness Stick and are asked "When you think of this greatness quality, who does it remind you of? Share about how this person possesses this quality." The second prompt is to pick another stick and say how they possess this quality and why. This is a powerful activity and a great way to get to know others. They are able to see the beauty in others and themselves. This is also a great ice breaker activity and wonderful to use in a staff training to recognize the greatness within the group/company. Greatness Sticks can be used with popsicle sticks and words can be typed and glued on or you can write directly on the stick. Greatness words can be written on anything from shells, to stones, to cutout hearts, to anything you choose.

Last summer, I had the opportunity to introduce Greatness Sticks to a women's empowerment group while volunteering in Darmashala, India. We had the Greatness Sticks translated into Hindi. It was important to be aware that some of the women could not read and we would need to find a way to adapt this activity for them. We needed to get translators to understand words that were commonly used within the culture. We found out that the women would frequently use negative words to describe each other. Words used to describe the other women were dishonest, one who gossips, tricky, and dirty. The women rarely heard positive things about themselves. The women sat in a circle and the Greatness Sticks were on the table. One woman would come to the table and pick a stick, say the word aloud and give it to another woman. Then, the qualities were called out and the women were asked to stand up if they believed they had that quality. Once the women stood up, they would all get a round of applause as we cheered and celebrated their greatness. At the end, the women held hands and I had them all say a positive affirmation together in Hindi: "I am strong and I am beautiful." Seeing the unity and community was an honor to witness. Doing volunteer work in India was a life changing experience that I hold dear to my heart.

The power of witnessing those who believe they have no positive qualities and then seeing their abundance of greatness is truly an amazing and inspiring gift for the soul. There is a void in so many who feel empty inside. Filling the void and building what the Nurtured Heart Approach® calls inner wealth is a powerful, healing experience, building confidence and resilience from a deep place.

The children's book "Casey's Greatness Wings: Teaching Mindfulness, Connection, and Courage to Children" is a beautiful compliment to this activity. The book is a multi-sensory story that is told on the child's back, inspiring greatness, self-love, compassion, and resilience. For more information visit:  
<https://www.mainlineplaytherapy.com/children-s-book> .

**Tammi Van Hollander, LCSW, RPT**, is a licensed clinical social worker and registered play therapist. She is the owner of Main Line Play Therapy in Bryn Mawr, PA, where she works with children and families and consults with local schools and community members. She is a certified Trainer for the Nurtured Heart Approach®, a certified FirstPlay® practitioner, trained in level one Theraplay® & AutPlay®. Tammi's work and creative interventions in the field of play therapy have been published and internationally recognized. Tammi is the author of a multi-sensory, attachment-based children's book titled, *Casey's Greatness Wings: Teaching Mindfulness, Connection, and Courage to Children*. She specializes in attachment, sand tray play therapy & sensory integration working with infants, children, families, and adults of all ages. She is regular faculty member at The Expressive Therapies Summit in NYC and LA. She is a sought-after expert for speaking engagements, podcasts and webinars. For more information on Tammi's publications and work, visit her website at [www.mainlineplaytherapy.com](http://www.mainlineplaytherapy.com).