This book sets out a model for strengths-based practice in statutory child protection settings. It is based on research involving 255 frontline workers in a large Canadian child protection agency. The research aimed to grapple with the challenges of being strengths-based in statutory work, via in-depth qualitative exploration of the ways workers interpreted the ideas of strengths-based practice in their relationships with clients.

Many Australian jurisdictions have incorporated strengths-based approaches into their child protection practice frameworks, using “Signs of Safety” (a licensed product) and other solution-focused approaches. For example, the Queensland Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services introduced a new “strengths-based, safety oriented” child protection practice framework in 2015 titled the Strengthening Families Protecting Children Framework for Practice, which aims to improve engagement with children, young people, families, carers, and agencies, both during assessment and within case planning processes.

The research explored in detail how workers applied these principles in their practice, and what helped and hindered them in taking a strengths-based approach with families. One of the starting points for the study was the finding that while workers liked the strengths-based approach, they believed it was not suitable to use when parents were not cooperative or were hostile or when they had to remove a child from parental care. Therefore, the aim was to develop a model of strengths-based practice that was congruent with the mandated role of child protection workers.

The book is structured in four parts: (1) first, it outlines research about strengths-based practice, (2) then it tackles misconceptions about strengths-based practice, (3) the “firm, fair, and friendly” model is presented, (4) and finally, it discusses developing a professional identity as a strengths-based practitioner. The book is aimed squarely at practitioners and the voice of the research participants, who are all practitioners, comes through strongly.

The tenets of the “firm, fair, and friendly” model that were developed from the study and outlined in the book are:

- inviting maximum collaboration
- using authority purposefully
- being transparent
- attending to the interaction
• judging impartially
• seeing clients as human.

In discussing these principles and providing examples, the book fleshes out some of the maxims of strengths-based practice, taking it beyond the superficial. It recognises that in child protection, some decision-making is not collaborative, and it aims to incorporate this reality into the model. It says a generalist model of strengths-based practice is not sufficient for child protection, it needs to be tailored to the setting.

Accepting the need to be authoritative in practice makes the book practical and helpful for practitioners grappling with the pressures of child protection work, and the tendency to fall back on adversarial and deficit approaches at times of difficulty or conflict. Oliver encourages practitioners to reconcile a strengths-based identity with being directive and using their mandated authority when necessary. The emphasis is on identity so as to avoid the idea that being strengths-based is a “soft approach” only suitable for some clients in some situations. Rather, it is argued that the firm, friendly, and fair model of strengths-based practice is applicable in all child protection work.

There is a recognition that child protection workers often feel unprepared to manage angry, aggressive, or volatile clients and it can be hard to search for positives when feeling threatened. It is not just up to workers to be strengths-based, it helps to work in an agency that invests in professional development and supervision, noting that many workers felt their agency only paid lip service to solution-focused models. Agencies must provide a non-blaming climate of encouragement, time to work with clients, and flexibility in responding to client needs.

The book is very relevant to Australia, which has a similar practice context to Canada. Each chapter has a list of reflective questions that could be used in individual or team supervision sessions. At the end of the book are three role-plays that could easily be used in supervision, training, or student learning. It is not well suited as a textbook for students, who generally need to be introduced to a range of practice approaches, but would be an excellent resource for teachers and trainers, as well as for child protection practitioners.