

Connecting Strengthening Families and Home Visiting

Introduction

Across the country there is expanded interest and investment in home visiting programs. The federal Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting program has provided new funds for every state to invest in home visiting services. These resources, combined with recent research demonstrating the impact of home visiting programs and an increased interest in investments in young children has led to a great expansion in home visiting programs. The challenge, however, is coordinating and aligning work both across the many different models and between home visiting and the many other services and supports families need. Many states across the country are using Strengthening Families™ as a framework for doing exactly this. This brief articulates why and how Strengthening Families can contribute to home visiting efforts and provides examples from some of the states actively working in this way.

What Strengthening Families Can Offer to Home Visiting

In more than 20 states across the country, Strengthening Families is being integrated into home visiting activities. This widespread interest demonstrates the power of Strengthening Families to contribute to a larger home visiting framework.

✓ **A platform for linking and aligning home visiting with other strategies for improving child and family well-being**

Strengthening Families is being used in states and communities across the country as a platform for interagency collaboration. The five protective factors at the core of the Strengthening Families approach are fundamental building blocks for supporting strong and stable families across multiple agencies as well as in communities. Across the country more than 20 states are using Strengthening Families as a framework for early childhood programming, 13 states are using it as part of child welfare services and more than 20 states are using it to shape their Requests for Proposals (RFP) for child abuse and neglect prevention programs. There may be early childhood programs, family support programs, child abuse and neglect prevention programs and other program models on the ground already using a Protective Factors Framework and speaking the Strengthening Families language. These programs will be important allies for home visiting programs on the ground. They can also serve as an important resource for referrals to the home visiting program and for home visiting programs to refer families to when they need additional supports and services. A common framework will not only help home visiting programs connect to other services, but make the experience for families more continuous and supportive.

✓ **Common language that can unite home visiting programs**

One challenge for state home visiting plans is the many different program models each focused on its own set of outcomes. Some programs are focused on child abuse and neglect prevention, others on health and developmental outcomes, others on reading and school readiness. In Florida, the state home visiting coalition is using the Strengthening Families protective factors as an overarching framework for multiple home visiting models to come together and work together around common outcomes. Similarly, in Shelby County, Tennessee a local home visiting coalition is using the protective factors to frame guiding principles that will align practice not only among different home visiting programs but also with other early childhood partners. In both cases the motivation for using

Strengthening Families was a desire to strengthen the relationships and build commonality of practice across existing programs. In both states, effective model programs such as Parents as Teachers™, Nurse Family Partnership, Early Head Start, Healthy Families America and HIPPY (Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters) are participating in these efforts together.

✓ **An approach that is consistent with the underlying philosophy of the key national models**

Strengthening Families can be used across home visiting programs because most home visiting programs find that Strengthening Families and the protective factors are consistent with and reflective of the way they already practice. Strengthening Families validates their existing practices by showing how they contribute to building protective factors for families. Because of this natural fit a number of home visiting programs are moving toward integrating Strengthening Families into their work. Parents as Teachers, for example, has incorporated the protective factors into their curricula and has made the protective factors a central part of their program logic model. *Partners for a Healthy Baby*, a home visiting curriculum which is used nationally by more than 1,200 home visiting programs—including Healthy Start, Healthy Families and Early Head Start sites—has developed a “cross walk” tool that aligns all of their materials and tools to the protective factors.

✓ **An existing local and state infrastructure**

In states where Strengthening Families has been adopted, there may be trainers with experience in building practitioner skills in applying a protective factors approach to their work, as well as ongoing state level conferences and resources to support program implementation. In most participating states there is a Strengthening Families leadership team that works on cross-system coordination. These serve as an important platform for coordinating the resources and tools that will support implementation across systems. Existing state investments in Strengthening Families reach into the millions of dollars and touch hundreds of programs.

✓ **Tools and language for engaging parents effectively**

One of the most important contributions of Strengthening Families is that it provides an easy, intuitive and strengths-based framework for engaging parents. This has led to the development of strategies for parent engagement, often led by parents themselves. Using the tools, training and self-assessments developed from field research in exemplary early childhood programs, any program can look at its current practice and identify specific ways to more effectively create a climate where parents feel valued and supported. When parents are more deeply connected to home visiting and other programs it has a positive ripple effect on recruitment, retention and the overall engagement of families with services.

Tools to support Strengthening Families Integration into Home Visiting

Strengthening Families is supported by a wealth of tools and resources that can easily be adopted and adapted for home visiting. They include the following:

1. Strengthening Families Program Self-Assessment

The self-assessment tool is based on the initial study of exemplary practice that informs the understanding of programmatic implementation of Strengthening Families. The Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) is currently working to validate a version of the self-assessment that is specific to home visiting practice, building off of work done in Florida. Once the tool is validated, CSSP hopes to offer a national version of it to support the integration of Strengthening Families into home visiting.

2. Strengthening Families Online Data System

CSSP partnered with Mosiac Network, Inc. to develop the [Strengthening Families Online Data System](#). The data system includes:

- An online version of the Strengthening Families self-assessment with a tool to help programs turn self-assessment results into simple action plans
- An online version of the [Protective Factors Survey](#) tool developed by the FRIENDS National Resource Center to reliably and validly measure changes in parental protective factors
- An online staff survey tool
- Pre-designed reports to help programs and states access data easily

The online tools also enable state-level administrators to view aggregated data to identify trends and inform decisions about training, technical assistance and other forms of program support. More information is available in the CSSP fact sheet, [Using the Online Self-Assessment to Improve Practice](#).

3. The National Alliance of Children’s Trust and Prevention Funds (Alliance) Online Protective Factors Training Courses

The Alliance’s [free online training curriculum](#) includes seven courses: an overview of the framework, one on each protective factor and a wrap-up “knowledge to action” session. Each course includes quizzes, activities and reflective questions. An online forum allows learners to interact, ask questions about what they are learning and respond to others’ questions. Users can print a portfolio of their work and an Individualized Action Plan. Each protective factor course links directly to the [Strengthening Families Online Data System](#).

State Approaches to Integrating Strengthening Families in Home Visiting

States use a variety of methods to encourage home visiting services and programs to incorporate the Strengthening Families Protective Factors Framework into their work. Numerous states now require all applicants for home visitation program funding to address how proposed services will work to promote one or more of the protective factors.

- ✓ The **Kansas** Children’s Cabinet and Trust Fund annually incorporates the state’s Strengthening Families Plan into Community-based Child Abuse Prevention (CBCAP) and Early Childhood (EC) Block Grant RFPs. CBCAP and EC Block Grant recipients provide home visiting services and programs to Kansas families. Proposals are required to describe how programs will strengthen families by using the guiding principles of the plan. Kansas is utilizing the Protective Factors Survey to measure protective factors in families. Home visitation programs, including Early Head Start, Healthy Families and Parents as Teachers began utilizing the Protective Factors Survey in 2011. Training on the protective factors and on implementation of the Protective Factors Survey have been provided to home visiting staff throughout Kansas. Practitioners and direct service staff have also incorporated the protective factors into their

“Lessons learned [from this experience] include being intentional at all levels about the incorporation of protective factors language. Not only do funders understand and utilize the language, administrators, supervisors, and direct service staff also have training in the protective factors and the Protective Factors Survey.”

- Mary Hess, Community-Based Child Abuse Prevention Coordinator at the Institute for Educational Research and Public Service, University of Kansas

work with families through group activities such as Parent Cafés. These gatherings have been hosted throughout the state with participant recruitment coming largely from home visiting staff who escort families to the events with the intention of building social supports and creating peer-to-peer community for families, and providing opportunities for families learn about the protective factors.

- ✓ In **New Jersey**, the state's Department of Children and Families, Division of Family and Community Partnerships (DFCP) has incorporated the Strengthening Families Protective Factors Framework and the New Jersey Standards of Prevention into their Evidence-Based Home Visitation (EBHV) model selections. All potential grantees must demonstrate in the Request for Proposals (RFP) process their knowledge and ability to incorporate the protective factors and Standards of Prevention in their program design for prevention services. Finally, DFCP has provided mandatory training to all of their grantees, as well as DFCP staff, on the Protective Factors Framework and the New Jersey Standards of Prevention.
- ✓ **Connecticut's** Children Trust Fund has woven the protective factors into training and credentialing requirements for home visitors. The state's Parents as Teachers training reviews the Personal Visit Planning Guide and explains how the plan aligns with the Strengthening Families approach. The training also reviews a toolkit, which incorporates the protective factors, which parent educators can use during home visits. In addition, Connecticut offers a five-day core home visitor training for practitioners. The training focuses on the protective factors, the cultural broker model and the role of a home visitor, strengths-based principles and engaging parents and the social and emotional development of children, as well as understanding the components involved in scheduling, preparing, conducting and documenting home visits.
- ✓ **Florida's** Home Visiting Coalition created a Home Visiting Protective Factors Workgroup comprised of representatives from 37 different programs, including statewide leaders and local program managers and directors. The large, geographically-dispersed group utilized web-based technology to assist in the planning and implementation of this work. The workgroup developed and field-tested a Strengthening Families self-assessment tool and action planning template specific to home visiting programs, as well as an online reporting system to collect aggregate data from these tools.
- ✓ **Strengthening Families West Virginia** has developed a technical assistance booklet titled [*Strengthening Families through In-Home Family Education*](#) that explores the many ways that evidence-based early childhood home visitation (In-Home Family Education) programs can build protective factors and implement the Strengthening Families approach. The 20-page booklet provides an overview of the Strengthening Families Protective Factors Framework and includes activities and approaches that home visitors can utilize to build protective factors with the families that they serve. The booklet also notes implementation of the "Help Me Grow" initiative to connect families with available services and the West Virginia Family Survey, which measures changes in protective factors for families served by home visiting programs in West Virginia. Trainings and other resources that are available from the Alliance and other Strengthening Families national partner organizations are also described.
- ✓ In **Tennessee**, a statewide home visiting network is coordinated through the Department of Health and through grants from the Tennessee Children's Trust Fund. All of these agencies infuse the Protective Factors Framework when planning and delivering services and programs. The active implementation of the protective factors in evidence-based home visiting programs is a direct result of the network's participation in the Strengthening Families Steering Committee, as well as collaboration with Strengthening Families efforts through the state's Children's Trust Fund, the Department of Human Services, the Department of Health and Prevent Child Abuse Tennessee.

What it Looks Like on the Ground: Florida

When Florida developed its five-year prevention plan, they set a goal to infuse the Strengthening Families protective factors into all the systems that serve parents and children. As one step, they called on the statewide home visiting coalition to ensure that the Protective Factors Framework serves as a foundation for Florida's home visiting programs. The workgroup that spearheads these efforts brings together more than 30 home visiting programs or those with a component of home visiting including Healthy Families, Early Head Start, Parents As Teachers, the Nurse Family Partnership and HIPPY (Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youth).

In April 2011, the workgroup hosted a web event that included "Protective Factors 101 for Home Visiting Services" to more than 150 people representing more than 60 different programs statewide. Following this event, 74 programs submitted their self-assessment results using the online reporting system. In September 2011, the workgroup hosted a technical assistance webcast for action planning based on self-assessment results. Six panelists from around the state provided ideas and strategies to more than 180 individuals. By January 2012, 37 action plans had been developed by programs providing home visiting services in various communities in Florida and then shared through the online reporting system. These plans contain more than 92 action steps that programs are in the process of implementing to ensure the protective factors are incorporated into the foundation of home visiting services in Florida.

More plans continue to be developed with a goal that all plans will be fully implemented by the end of 2014. The workgroup continues to guide this process and identify opportunities for collaboration, including shared training such as Parent Leadership Ambassador Training with support from the Family Resource Information, Education and Network Development Services (FRIENDS) National Resource Center on Community-Based Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention, the Florida Department of Children & Families and the Ounce of Prevention Fund of Florida. Future collaboration in the areas of father engagement, trauma-informed care and transition to the K-12 school system are underway.

Tips for Getting Started

To take the first steps to integrate Strengthening Families, state home visiting leaders can:

- Reach out to their state Strengthening Families leadership team for more information about programs and communities implementing the approach
- Review the Strengthening Families resources, tools and self-assessment items
- Review other states' efforts to integrate Strengthening Families into home visiting and talk with other states about their decisions
- Request technical assistance from the Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP)

To support state home visiting leaders in this process, Strengthening Families leadership teams can:

- Share information about Strengthening Families with their state home visiting leaders and suggest options for using the approach to bridge multiple models, frame common outcomes and engage parents
- Share programs' experiences implementing Strengthening Families
- Encourage programs to communicate their support for Strengthening Families directly to home visiting leaders
- Contact CSSP for technical assistance

Strengthening Families™ is a research-based, cost-effective approach to increase family stability, enhance child development and reduce child abuse and neglect. It builds five protective factors:

- *Parental resilience*
- *Social connections*
- *Knowledge of parenting and child development*
- *Concrete support in times of need*
- *Social and emotional competence of children*

Through the Strengthening Families Initiative, more than thirty states are shifting policy, funding and training to help programs that serve children and families build these protective factors with the children and families they serve. Many states are also integrating the Strengthening Families approach into state prevention strategies, home visiting programs and child welfare systems.

Nationally, the Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) coordinates Strengthening Families and works with more than a dozen national partner organizations as well as federal and state partners to create a new vision in which communities, families, institutions, service systems and organizations:

- *focus on building protective and promotive factors*
- *recognize and support parents as decision-makers and leaders*
- *value the culture and unique assets of each family*
- *are mutually responsible for better outcomes for children and families*

For more information, visit www.strengtheningfamilies.net