

## Executive Summary: State Approaches to Integrating Strengthening Families into Quality Rating and Improvement Systems

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The Center for the Study of Social Policy's (CSSP) Strengthening Families<sup>™</sup> approach identifies what early care and education programs can do to help parents support their children's development and to build strong relationships between family members and staff. At its core, Strengthening Families is about parent and family engagement. Nearly 20 states have already or are considering integrating the Center for the Study of Social Policy's (CSSP) Strengthening Families<sup>™</sup> approach into their Quality Rating Improvement Systems (QRIS) designs because it offers:

- An intuitive framework for what families need and what programs can do to support them
- A broad range of concrete low- and no-cost actions that programs of all types can implement
- Free and easily accessible tools and resources to support implementation at the program, policy and systems levels

This issue brief seeks to demonstrate the advantage of Strengthening Families, highlight state approaches to integrating Strengthening Families into QRIS and share information about implementation tools available from CSSP and its national partners.

### The Advantage of Using Strengthening Families in a QRIS

There are several advantages for using Strengthening Families to inform the design and implementation of quality standards related to parent, family and community engagement in a QRIS.

✓ **Strengthening Families informs a comprehensive, concrete definition of family engagement**

Strengthening Families helps early childhood programs identify concrete and specific ways to engage and support parents and caregivers. It is framed around five protective factors demonstrated by research to be linked to optimal child development and reduced rates of child abuse and neglect. It is supported by concrete practice tools that help programs to assess and identify concrete changes in practice that will enhance their ability to build protective factors. These tools were developed through a national study of exemplary practice which drew information from close to 100 nominated programs across the country.

✓ **Strengthening Families offers a flexible roadmap for programs to achieve family engagement outcomes**

The Strengthening Families approach offers a high degree of flexibility for deciding how the Protective Factors Framework and program strategies inform quality standards and are reflected and measured across the tiers of a rating system. States are taking a variety of approaches, depending on their existing administrative and support infrastructure and the needs of their programs. Similarly, based on families' unique needs, programs' capacity and available resources in the community, Strengthening Families offers programs a variety of ways to engage and support families.

✓ **Strengthening Families aligns with nationally recognized indicators of quality and family engagement**

CSSP is engaged in efforts to demonstrate the alignment between Strengthening Families and [NAEYC's accreditation standards](#) as well as the [Head Start Parent, Family and Community Engagement \(PFCE\) Framework](#) (see sidebars). Future work will highlight alignment with other nationally recognized quality standards and measurement tools.

✓ **Strengthening Families provides a platform for linking QRIS to broader systems building efforts**

In most states, Strengthening Families is being [implemented broadly across multiple sectors](#), including early childhood, family support, child abuse and neglect prevention, child welfare and children's health and mental health. This provides a unique opportunity for QRIS efforts to be developed in the context of broad shared language around family support and engagement.

## Tools to Support Strengthening Families Integration into QRIS

Strengthening Families is supported by a wealth of tools and resources that a state can easily adopt and adapt into a QRIS. These tools can support programs as they document current status, develop quality improvement plans and work their way up through successive levels of quality in a QRIS. Moreover, they provide an easy way for states to monitor program activity, identify areas for technical assistance and provide low- or no-cost training and support. They include the following:

### 1. Strengthening Families Program Self-Assessment

CSSP compiled the broad range of activities identified in the initiative's foundational field research into a program self-assessment tool, organized by the seven Strengthening Families program strategies, by which programs can ascertain the current status of activities, services and program policies that support families to build protective factors. There are currently two versions of the tool, one for [center-based programs](#) (also available in [Spanish](#)) and the other for [family child care programs](#).

### 2. Strengthening Families Online Data System

More recently, CSSP partnered with Mosaic Network, Inc. to develop the [Strengthening Families Online Data System](#), which includes the self-assessment and other related tools. 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 with each other, ask questions about what they are learning and respond to others’ questions. Users can print a portfolio that includes their responses to all questions 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 QRIS

States are exploring many different approaches to applying Strengthening Families to QRIS standards, accountability mechanisms and program support efforts. See the accompanying document, *Matrix of State Approaches to Integrating Strengthening Families (SF) into Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS)* for details on the state QRIS designs mentioned below.

**Beginning Entry Points: Strengthening Families Training & Self-Assessment Tools**  
[Missouri](#) (pilot), [New York](#), [New Hampshire](#) and [Arkansas](#) demonstrate that perhaps the easiest entry points for any state to integrate Strengthening Families into QRIS include:

- Placing no-cost items from the Strengthening Families self-assessment within the criteria for standards at the lower tiers and adding additional items up the tiers. This helps build providers’ capacity and increases their familiarity with the self-assessment language and tools for use at the higher tiers.
- Using the Strengthening Families self-assessment as an option for programs to use to demonstrate compliance with standards related to family engagement and/or child abuse and neglect prevention.
- Including Strengthening Families trainings as optional or required QRIS professional development criteria.

### Deepening Integration as QRIS Evolves

Many states engage in continual improvement processes to revise and update their QRIS, which offers opportunities to try new approaches or pursue deeper integration of Strengthening Families as the QRIS evolves. [Massachusetts](#), [Washington State](#) and [Wisconsin](#) offer good examples of this approach.

### Comprehensive and Systemic Approaches

Four states offer examples of more comprehensive approaches to integrating Strengthening Families into multiple QRIS elements to support broad and deep implementation. [Idaho](#) and [Massachusetts](#) have achieved statewide QRIS implementation while [Georgia](#) and [Washington State](#) are just beginning to rollout their programs. Though the details differ in many ways, all four have integrated Strengthening Families into their QRIS standards and criteria. Idaho and Massachusetts, with their more fully developed program and practitioner outreach and support systems demonstrate how quality improvement infrastructure can support Strengthening Families implementation at scale within a QRIS.

## Tips for Getting Started

To take the first steps to integrate Strengthening Families, state QRIS designers 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' QRIS designs and standards and talk with other states about their decisions
- Request technical assistance from the Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP), the QRIS National Learning Network or the National Child Care Center on Quality Improvement
- Engage parents along with providers in the process

To support QRIS design teams in this process, Strengthening Families leadership teams can:

- Share information about Strengthening Families with their state QRIS administrators and ask to participate in the QRIS design or revision process
- Share programs' experiences implementing Strengthening Families with the design team
- Encourage programs to communicate their support for Strengthening Families directly to the QRIS designers
- Contact CSSP and the National Alliance of Children's Trust and Prevention Funds for technical assistance

## Conclusion

As CSSP's field study identified, exemplary programs are those that send a clear and consistent message that parent engagement is an essential quality component. Integration of Strengthening Families into QRIS is one example of how this message is echoing across the country. CSSP and its partners are committed to supporting states in this direction. Continuing areas of focus include:

- Demonstrating alignment of Strengthening Families with nationally recognized quality assessment tools
- Using Strengthening Families to promote culturally and linguistically appropriate practice
- Validating Strengthening Families criteria in QRIS

As this work moves forward, CSSP will continue to rely on creative state leaders to test new approaches to implementing Strengthening Families as a strategy to promote better outcomes for children and families.

*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 early care and education programs 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 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](http://www.strengtheningfamilies.net)*