

STRENGTHS-BASED PRACTICE IN TROUBLED TIMES

Everyone who works with families is dealing with a set of extraordinary challenges. Millions of people have lost their incomes, while others have to go to work afraid of becoming ill and infecting their families. Parents are stressed taking care of little kids, becoming the teachers of school-age kids, and working from home if they still have a job. And our country's long history of racism has led to a radically uneven distribution of risks, as people of color are made ill—and killed—by COVID-19 at rates far higher than White people. We know that when parents and caregivers are under stress, children struggle too—with strained interactions and relationships, not enough attention or resources, and sometimes even abuse and neglect.

What does strengths-based practice look like in the face of all this adversity? This tool is meant to help you stay grounded in family strengths as a way to overcome challenges and help families thrive even when the current crisis is weighing heavily on your mind, and on theirs. The six steps outlined below—three to guide every interaction you have with families, and three more for when you are engaged with a family over a longer period—will help you to keep the focus on strengths.

Supporting Parents

1: Start with Empathy

It's so easy for a parent to feel unseen, unheard, and powerless—just one of the anonymous millions trying to make an unemployment claim, get tested for the virus, or help their children keep up with virtual learning. Everyone you work with is likely to be experiencing very high levels of stress, even those who don't talk about it. Many people are struggling with anxiety and/or depression due to health and financial fears, social isolation, and disruption to routine. And some have extra burdens, such as fear of accessing help because of their immigration status, or fear of experiencing racist abuse because they are Asian-American.

When you ask someone how they're feeling, leave room for them to express their fears and struggles, and empathize with the challenges they are facing, you are not only building your relationship. This type of interaction also provides the other person with the space to slow down, exhale, and calm themselves. People who feel less of a sense of threat can engage the parts of the brain they need to plan and act in goal-directed ways. And those moments of connection are rewarding for workers too, even when you can't provide as much help as you'd like.

2: Ask Strengths-Based Questions

How have you gotten through tough times in the past? This simple question is a way to help parents remember the strengths they've already demonstrated as they confront challenges today—even if their past challenges were very different than those they are facing now. It lets the parent know that you see them as a capable person who can take pride in problem-solving for their family.

Asking good, open-ended questions about their current challenges will also help you avoid giving any advice that wouldn't be relevant for this particular parent or situation—because you will know more about what they've

Strengthening Families

Strengthening Families™ is a research-informed approach to increase family strengths, enhance child development, and reduce the likelihood of child abuse and neglect. It is based on engaging families, programs, and communities in building 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

Using the Strengthening Families framework, more than 30 states are shifting policy and practice to help programs working with children and families focus on protective factors. States apply the Strengthening Families approach in early childhood, child welfare, child abuse prevention, and other child and family serving systems.

For more information, visit
www.strengtheningfamilies.net.

already tried and what works or doesn't work for them. You can follow up by asking parents about their strong points, the people they can rely on, and who or what inspires them when they think about getting through a challenge. All of this will help people to see their own strengths and build their sense of hope.

3: Provide Perspective as Well as Information

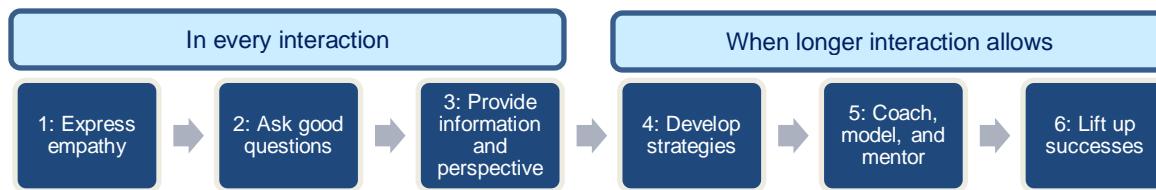
Once you've empathized with the parent and asked questions that help them recall their strengths, you can provide useful information and the concrete assistance they need. Most parents don't know what types of support are available and how to access them—especially at a time when things are changing so rapidly. Be prepared to share up-to-date information, or know where to look for it.

This is also your opportunity to help the parent take a step back and re-gain the perspective that's so hard to hold on to when we feel overwhelmed. Understanding that their child's behavior during this crisis is actually age-appropriate, recognizing that many other families are struggling with the same challenges they are, or remembering that "this too shall pass" can help parents build their resilience. Please share our resource, "Building Resilience in Stressful Times" with parents, and talk through it with them if you have the opportunity. You can go straight to the resource here: <https://cssp.org/building-resilience-in-troubled-times-a-guide-for-parents/> or download it to print and give to parents here: <https://cssp.org/resource/building-resilience-in-troubled-times-a-guide-for-parents>.

4, 5, and 6: Strategize, Coach, and Lift Up Success

If your interaction with parents allows for it, you may also have the opportunity to help them develop strategies to solve whatever challenges they're facing; coach and mentor them as they carry out their strategies, including planning for what they will do if their first efforts don't succeed; and celebrate their successes, no matter how small. Engaging with parents in this way will help them use and build their own strengths and be even better equipped for the next challenge they face, whether you're there with them or not.

Strengths-Based Steps for Engaging with Families



Taking Care of Yourself

On top of trying to support other families in your community, you have your own needs, and those of your loved ones, to worry about. As a worker, and maybe a parent, you're trying to help others while feeling the stress of many of the same challenges yourself.

So, how have *you* gotten through tough times in the past? Now is the time to take note of your own strengths in the same way you help parents do for themselves. Take a step back. We all have good days and bad days. Connect, even when it's hard; ask for help when you need it; hold on to your sense of hope for a better future.

And remember: The work you're doing is critical for the families who are hurting right now, for the children who will grow up in stronger families, and for the strength of your community in the long run. You are one of many people doing this work across the country and around the world as we all find ways through this pandemic. Your work matters, and you can take great pride in that, while also giving yourself a moment to rest and take care of yourself so that you can continue to support other families for many years to come.