

STRENGTHENING FAMILIES™: AN OVERVIEW

Across the country, people and programs are focusing on protective factors in their work with families. Protective factors are attributes of families that help them to succeed and thrive, even in the face of risk and challenges. A protective factors framework summarizes scientific research and outlines a course of action to help families and youth reduce stress, address risk factors and promote healthy development. The overarching goal of a protective factors framework is the promotion of child, youth and family well-being.

The Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) leads two initiatives based on parallel frameworks of protective factors: Strengthening Families (for families of young children) and [Youth Thrive](#) (for youth and their families and caregivers). Strengthening Families is about protecting and nurturing young children while promoting their development. It's also about providing support to parents so that they can build their protective factors and be the best parents they can be, even in times of stress.

What is Strengthening Families?

Over the last decade, the Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) has built Strengthening Families into one of the most widely recognized approaches to child abuse and neglect prevention in the country. At its heart, Strengthening Families is about how families are supported to build key protective factors that enable children to thrive.

The five protective factors at the foundation of Strengthening Families also offer a framework for changes at the systems, policy and practice level – locally, statewide and nationally. Nationwide, 42 states and two U.S. territories have integrated Strengthening Families into some aspect of their child and family service systems, and 33 states and one territory actively participate in the Strengthening Families National Network.

Programs across the country are using the Strengthening Families self-assessment and other implementation tools to inform practice and adopt small but significant changes that positively impact families. Similarly, thousands of child and family serving professionals have received training on Strengthening Families. For example, between 2011 and 2012, more than 70,000

professionals were reached by state training and professional development activities. In addition, more than 1,000 people completed a seven-module online training course in the first two years it was available.

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:** Managing stress and functioning well even when faced with challenges, adversity and trauma
- **Social connections:** Positive relationships that provide emotional, informational, instrumental and spiritual support
- **Knowledge of parenting and child development:** Understanding child development and parenting strategies that support physical, cognitive, language, social and emotional development
- **Concrete support in times of need:** Access to concrete support and services that address a family's needs and helps minimize stress caused by challenges
- **Social and emotional competence of children:** Family and child interactions that help children develop the ability to communicate clearly, recognize and regulate their emotions, and establish and maintain relationships

For more information, visit
www.strengtheningfamilies.net

States and communities are integrating Strengthening Families into at least one of four key sectors: early care and education; child abuse and neglect prevention; home visiting and child welfare. In each of these fields, Strengthening Families offers:

- An intuitive explanation of what families need to thrive, and what programs can do to support them
- A common framework and a shared set of results for families
- A broad range of concrete, low- and no-cost actions that many types of programs can implement
- Free and easily accessible tools to support implementation at the program, policy and systems levels

Early Care and Education

Across the country, Strengthening Families is being used to reshape how early care and education programs engage parents in their children's development and to help them build strong relationships between family members and staff. Twenty-four states provide training and technical assistance to programs through child care resource and referral agencies. Twenty states have already or are considering integrating Strengthening Families into their Quality Rating Improvement Systems (QRIS) designs.

Child Abuse and Neglect (CAN) Prevention

Strengthening Families is being broadly used in states to reframe and engage partners who previously did not see themselves as having a role to play in child abuse and neglect prevention. More than half of all states train prevention providers using the protective factors framework and have written the protective factors into their RFPs for CAN prevention dollars, 15 states are using the protective factors as a framework for local prevention planning efforts, 16 states have designed public awareness campaigns around the protective factors and eight states have integrated the protective factors into mandated reporter training.

Home Visiting

Strengthening Families is being used in at least 12 states as a framework for coordinating and aligning across different home visiting program models – and as a shared outcomes framework with the many other services and supports families need. In 13 states, Strengthening Families is formally included in plans for implementation of the federal Maternal, Infant and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) program.

Child Welfare

A growing number of states are adopting Strengthening Families as a framework for supporting the well-being of children in child welfare by building the protective factors of their caregivers. Twenty-three states recently reported using strategies such as incorporating the protective factors into training for child welfare workers or their child welfare practice model, using the factors to revise assessment tools and other materials, strengthening partnerships between child welfare and early care and education programs and using the framework to set programmatic and performance expectations. Five states are also using Title IV-E waivers to test various ways of implementing Strengthening Families within their child welfare systems.

Tools and Resources

Strengthening Families is supported by helpful materials that can easily be adopted and adapted for any program or service sector.

Strengthening Families Program Self-Assessment

– exemplary practices identified in the initiative's foundational field research form the basis of a self-assessment for child- and family-serving programs. It helps programs assess how well their activities, services and policies are helping families to build protective factors. <http://www.cssp.org/reform/strengthening-families/resources/changing-programmatic-practice>

Strengthening Families Online Data System

– includes the self-assessment and parent and staff surveys which help programs plan for improvements and provide aggregated data for local or state tracking and decision-making. <http://www.mosaic-network.com/gemslive/cssp/>

The National Alliance of Children's Trust and Prevention Funds offers a free, [online training curriculum](#) and a [training of trainers](#) for an in-person curriculum. <http://trainers.ctfalliance.org/>

CSSP manages the **Strengthening Families National Network** to connect leaders of state and local initiatives, encourage peer sharing, identify trends and key issues and explore innovative approaches to integration. <http://www.cssp.org/reform/strengthening-families/around-the-nation>