

Scripted Curriculum Module:

**The Research Behind Strengthening Families**

<b>TIME</b>	45 minutes
<b>PURPOSE</b>	To obtain a broader understanding of the research behind the Strengthening Families approach.
<b>LEARNING OBJECTIVES</b>	Upon completion of this module, the participant will understand: <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. That Strengthening Families is an evidence-informed approach.</li><li>2. The knowledge building process behind Strengthening Families.</li><li>3. How Strengthening Families continues to grow, adapt, and incorporate new knowledge.</li></ol>
<b>INSTRUCTIONAL METHOD</b>	Lecture
<b>MATERIALS</b>	n/a
<b>ACTIVITY</b>	n/a

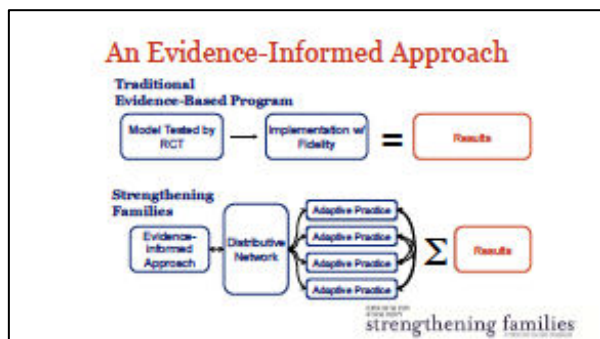
# The Research Behind Strengthening Families

## SHOW SLIDE 1



**INTRODUCE:** Welcome back! As we discussed previously, Strengthening Families is an evidence-informed approach to shifting program and worker practices and is used to help families build protective factors. Now, we are going to take an in-depth look at the research behind the Strengthening Families approach.

## SHOW SLIDE 2



**STATE:** To get started, let's first be clear about what we mean when we say Strengthening Families is an evidence-informed approach – and how that is different from an evidence-based program.

**ASK:** How many of you are familiar with evidence-based programs? How many of you perceive some pressure – whether from your agency's leadership, funders, or others – to use evidence-based programs?

## FACILITATE BRIEF CONVERSATION, IF ANYTHING BEYOND A SHOW OF HANDS

**STATE:** As an approach, Strengthening Families does not fit the traditional "evidence-based program" model illustrated in the top part of this slide. An evidence-based program is:

- Tested through randomized controlled trial,
- Rigorously evaluated to monitor and assess results, and

- Implemented according to developer-defined criteria for fidelity (so, for example, following a set curriculum, delivering a specific number of sessions, or being staffed to a certain level).

**EXPLAIN:** The Strengthening Families approach is intentionally different from an evidence-based program, for several reasons:

- Strengthening Families builds from what existing research tells us. Every day, universities and researchers are completing studies on human behavior, child development, family interactions and so on. Strengthening Families seeks to synthesize and make this knowledge actionable for those on the ground. By basing our work in existing research, the initiative seeks to develop an approach that is informed by the best existing evidence.
- The framework is used by a wide variety of programs and systems, with leaders and workers finding ways to help families build protective factors within multiple contexts. As such, Strengthening Families seeks to support diverse applications of the framework through the development of tools to support adaptive implementations.
- Strengthening Families is implemented based on guidance from CSSP and practice knowledge derived from others who have used it. We consistently seek to understand how larger contexts will influence implementation efforts. Too often, program models are developed without a clear understanding of the environment in which programs operate. By explicitly looking at the context of state implementation, Strengthening Families avoids this pitfall.
- From day one, we have aimed to strategically identify levers that can be used to support underlying fidelity in the framework. Programs using Strengthening Families evaluate the effectiveness of their efforts through a variety of methods and report back to CSSP and others in the field with their findings.
- Strengthening Families supports continuous learning loops with implementers on the ground. As the work moves into new environments, it is often shaped by the experiences of early adapters, as well as by structured efforts at the national level.
- This distributive approach leads to better results across a **variety** of systems and programs over time.

**STATE:** Let's go on to start looking in depth at the research behind Strengthening Families.

## SHOW SLIDE 3

### The Knowledge Building Process

- **Phase 1:** Search the evidence to find out what factors really reduce child abuse and neglect
- **Phase 2:** Explore the connection between factors that prevent child abuse and neglect and what quality early childhood programs do to build them
- **Phase 3:** Learn about policy and practice changes needed to infuse the model statewide through a partnership with 7 pilot states
- **Phase 4:** Create a structure for continuous learning with a network of implementing states
- **Phase 5:** Support investments in continued research and knowledge development

CSPP  
strengthening families

**STATE:** Strengthening Families is deeply informed by existing research and knowledge gained from practice experience.

**EXPLAIN:** The research behind Strengthening Families can be divided into five specific phases.

1. The first phase involved searching out evidence to discover what factors really reduce child maltreatment.
2. The second phase was all about exploring connections between identified protective factors and ways that quality early childhood programs help to build family strengths. Through a one-year field study of exemplary programs, the Center for the Study of Social Policy was able to understand what kinds of changes can and should be made in programmatic practice.
3. Phase 3 was learning how policy and practice models should best support the implementation of Strengthening Families. Over a two-year period, Strengthening Families worked with seven pilot states to learn about how state policy and infrastructure can support a comprehensive adoption of Strengthening Families.
4. Phase 4 involved creating a structure for continuous learning across a network of participating state. This involved setting up a collaborative network between the 30 states implementing Strengthening Families.
5. Finally, Phase 5—the current phase—is based on supporting investments in continued research and knowledge development. For Strengthening Families, this means supporting investments in knowledge-building research.

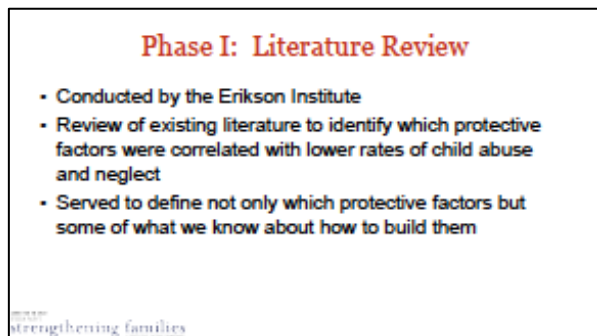
**ASK:** Before I go into more detail about each phase, are there any questions?

## SHOW SLIDE 4



**STATE:** Now, if we look more specifically at Phase 1, you can see that it was comprised of three parts: a literature review, dialogue sessions, and consultation with the National Advisory Committee. Data and knowledge gathered through each of these three components was used to inform the identification of family protective factors and development of the Strengthening Families Protective Factors Framework.

## SHOW SLIDE 5



**EXPLAIN:** Through a literature review conducted by the Erikson Institute at the University of Chicago, researchers were able to determine which protective factors really correlate with lower rates of child maltreatment. Further, the review helped to define ways to build these protective factors with parents, children and families.

**STATE:** The original literature review has been updated with a foundational paper about the Strengthening Families approach. Both of these documents are available online at [strengtheningfamilies.net](http://strengtheningfamilies.net).

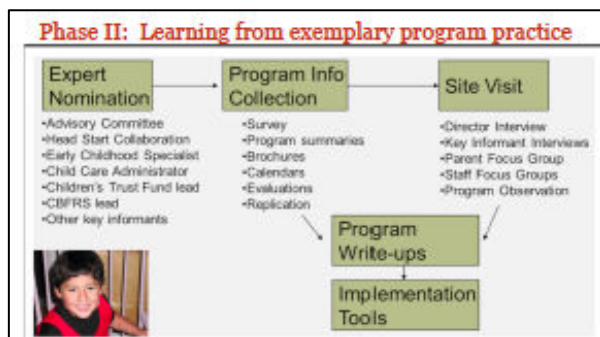
## SHOW SLIDE 6



**EXPLAIN:** In addition to the literature review, CSSP wanted to make sure that the approach was informed by practice experience. To make sure that Strengthening Families incorporated the knowledge and values of workers across the country, CSSP hosted dialogue sessions with key partners nationwide. The dialogue sessions with these partners took place within the context of conferences and conventions. Workers and administrators involved in the fields of child abuse and neglect prevention, early childhood care and child welfare were all represented. These dialogue sessions offered a unique opportunity to gather field-based input and feedback on the evolving development of the protective factors framework. All in all, more than 300 individuals from across the country participated in more than 15 dialogue sessions.

**SUMMARIZE:** These dialogue sessions, coupled with the Erikson Institute literature review and input from the National Advisory Committee, were used to inform and develop the understanding of the five protective factors.

## SHOW SLIDE 7



**STATE:** The goal of Phase 2 was to understand how to implement this new approach in practice. This phase was informed by a review of exemplary programs with effective strategies for promoting protective factors.

**EXPLAIN:** To do this, CSSP first asked 500 national supporters from across the country to nominate programs that they felt built the protective factors through their day-to-day work. Each nominated program was then asked to complete an extensive survey about how they succeeded in building

the protective factors. 100 programs completed these surveys and sent in additional background information, materials, and tools to be included in the study.

**ASK:** Are there any questions about this process?

**STATE:** Next, we organized site visits to see firsthand how 26 exemplary programs were able to so successfully build protective factors. Site visits lasted two days each and included:

- A review of program materials
- Structured observations
- Interviews with parents, program leadership and staff
- Focus groups with staff, community partners and parents

**EXPLAIN:** Over 300 parents participated in the parent focus groups. These groups provided incredibly valuable insight as to how an environment that builds protective factors can impact both parents and parenting practices.

**WRAP UP:** Through the use of these nomination surveys, program surveys, site visit questions and parent focus groups, CSSP was able to revise and further develop programmatic implementation tools for Strengthening Families—including a self-assessment to help programs identify specific changes they can make to better support and strengthen families.

## SHOW SLIDE 8



**STATE:** During Phase 3, we selected seven partner states to test out Strengthening Families. The states, selected from a pool of 27 applicants, were:

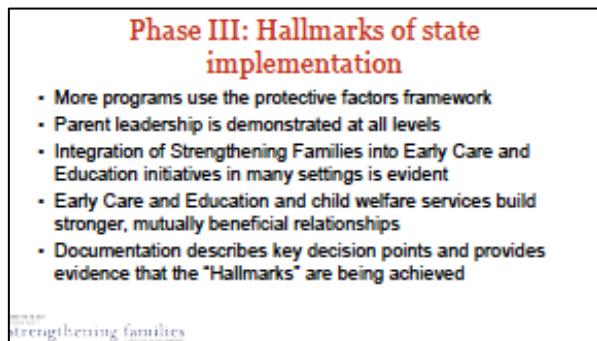
- Alaska
- Arkansas
- Illinois
- Missouri
- New Hampshire
- Rhode Island
- Wisconsin

**EXPLAIN:** Between 2005 and 2007, CSSP worked with these states to identify policy and practice changes that were needed to take the Strengthening Families approach statewide. During this time, the states:

- Examined changes in state policy,
- Looked at new linkages between early childhood and child welfare systems, and
- Worked to enhance training and support for programs looking to implement Strengthening Families.

**STATE:** While planning, technical assistance and training were provided by CSSP, the states funded their own implementation. As a result, states chose to use a wide variety of implementation strategies, but remained united by a consistent set of hallmarks for statewide implementation.

## SHOW SLIDE 9



**STATE:** The creation of a strong learning network between implementing states helped to ensure that effective strategies spread quickly between states. The state pilots were invaluable in providing information about how to best implement the initiative, and you can see here many of the key elements that define the Strengthening Families approach today.

**EXPLAIN:** Specifically, CSSP learned from the state pilots that:

- Many, diverse strategies and tools can be used to implement Strengthening Families at a state level.
- Organizations, providers and workers were extremely engaged and excited about the process of implementing Strengthening Families, despite the fact that this was an unfunded initiative.
- Cross-sector leadership was a crucial tool for both gathering traction for the work and ensuring longer-term sustainability.

**TRANSITION:** That early work with states also helped us to identify important barriers to implementation. In particular, we learned that:

- While things like pilot programs and mini-grants can have significant short-term impacts, they are hard to sustain over time.



- Building relationships across sectors—particularly between early childhood providers and child welfare workers—takes time and can be a difficult process to facilitate.

## SHOW SLIDE 10

### Phase IV: Continuous Learning with a National Network

Member States and National Partner Organizations	CSSP
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create new tools</li> <li>• Test strategies</li> <li>• Share their knowledge with others through a learning network</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provides technical assistance</li> <li>• Coordinates cross-site learning</li> <li>• Captures lessons learned</li> <li>• Creates new tools</li> </ul>

strengthening families

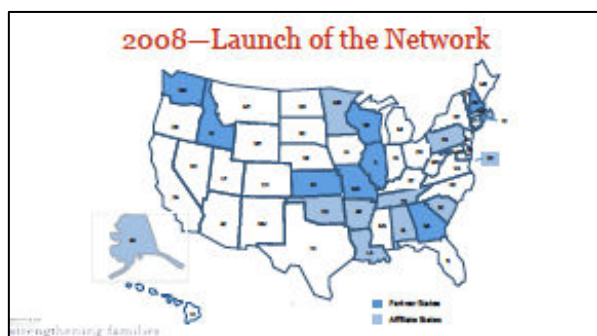
**STATE:** Despite the challenges, implementing Strengthening Families was extremely successful. In order to continue this success, we established a collaborative National Network among our state partners. The purpose of this National Network is to facilitate ongoing dialogue between states and CSSP in regards to new tools, strategies, lessons, and knowledge—thereby creating a continuous learning loop with implementers on the ground.

**EXPAND:** At the heart of the network is a circle of over 30 states that are implementing Strengthening Families. In most of these states, an interdisciplinary leadership team leads Strengthening Families work.

**EXPLAIN:** Every state in the network reports annually on their progress, thereby providing an important common understanding as to the scope and scale of continued state work. In addition, regular networking webinars and quarterly national partner meetings help to ensure that learning flows between states and can be harvested through regular conversation.

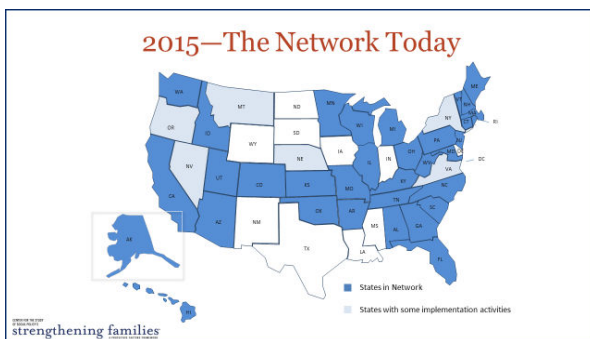
**SUMMARIZE:** In sum, this network helps to facilitate and encourage regular conversation between states to ensure that everyone stays up to date on progresses being made in everyday practice.

## SHOW SLIDE 11



**STATE:** In 2008, when CSSP officially launched the Strengthening Families Network, it consisted of eight official partner states (Washington, Idaho, Kansas, Missouri, Illinois, Wisconsin, Georgia and New Hampshire) as well as twelve other affiliates (Alaska, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Minnesota, Louisiana, Alabama, Tennessee, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, South Carolina and Washington, D.C.).

## SHOW SLIDE 12



**STATE:** As you can see, the network has grown by leaps and bounds over the last six years. 35 states have active cross-systems Strengthening Families initiatives as of 2015, and additional states have county and city plans to create a statewide initiative. Strengthening Families is now being used in systems as diverse as child welfare, early care and education, home visiting, prevention, education, corrections, mental health and health care.

**EXPLAIN:** It's important to note that within this context of rapid growth, Strengthening Families continues to develop and support meaningful parent partnerships, involving parents in leadership and decision making at all levels of implementation. CSSP recognizes that parents are our greatest asset in working to strengthen families and communities; they will continue to be the leading source of new ideas for Strengthening Families growth and development.

## SHOW SLIDE 13

**Phase V: Continued Knowledge Building**

- Continue to ensure that the initiative is informed by the most relevant and up-to-date research on protective factors
- Lay the foundation for the expansion of the initiative into new areas and disciplines
- Capture in a structured way the learning from Strengthening Families implementation across the country

strengthening families

**STATE:** CSSP believes that it is important for Strengthening Families to continue to adapt and grow. To maintain credibility and fidelity, however, it is important to ensure that all developments remain deeply grounded in on-going research.

**EXPAND:** As Strengthening Families continues to be implemented more deeply in its core fields and in new fields, it is critical to capture lessons learned along the way – at the national level, at the state and community level and at the program level. CSSP continues this work in several ways.

## SHOW SLIDE 14

**Phase V: Continued Knowledge Building**

- Conducting and supporting research
  - QIC-EC, Youth Thrive, Home Based Child Care Study, A Look at Strengthening Families in the States
- Intensive knowledge building with states and jurisdictions
  - Child welfare, AIM states, peer working groups
- Facilitating collection of meaningful data in the field
  - Online tools including Protective Factors Survey, Parent's Assessment of Protective Factors

CSSP  
strengthening families

**STATE:** CSSP's continued knowledge building falls into three areas. First, CSSP continues to conduct research on how to best promote protective factors in families, as well as how to strengthen the network's implementation on a national level. CSSP has engaged in and supported a variety of research methods on specific topics related to protective factors for children, youth and families.

**STATE:** The second area of continued knowledge building takes place through work with states and jurisdictions using the Protective Factors Framework. In addition to information sharing and light-touch technical assistance to all members of the Strengthening Families National Network, CSSP works intensively with smaller groups of states and jurisdictions to explore specific areas of Strengthening Families implementation, advance the work in a particular direction and develop new tools together that are then shared with the rest of the network.

**STATE:** Finally, CSSP works to ensure that programs are supported in collecting meaningful data to drive growth. Programs and states need support to collect meaningful data related to their implementation of Strengthening Families. CSSP has developed tools and systems to support that data collection as well as supported national partners in developing and making tools available.

**SUMMARIZE:** We are committed to continuously building knowledge and providing innovative tools and resources. For more details about CSSP's ongoing knowledge building efforts, see "The Research Behind Strengthening Families" at [www.strengtheningfamilies.net](http://www.strengtheningfamilies.net). New developments are consistently updated on our website in order to ensure that all our partners are able to stay up-to-date.