

FAMILIES AND SCHOOLS TOGETHER (FAST®)

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.

WHY FAMILIES AND SCHOOLS TOGETHER (FAST®) AND STRENGTHENING FAMILIES EFFORTS CONNECT

Strengthening Families provides a cross-systems framework for family support and capacity building among the many systems and programs that serve children and families. State and community initiatives are led by cross-system leadership teams, generally representing a diverse set of disciplines, including early care and education, child abuse and neglect prevention, child welfare, home visiting and public health. In most states, Strengthening Families is being implemented broadly in settings as diverse as early childhood centers, family support programs, parenting programs and pediatric clinics. Connecting to these leadership teams provides an opportunity to place the evidence-based family engagement program, FAST® (Families & Schools Together) in the context of broad cross-disciplinary thinking about how to best support families and build parent engagement.

At the programmatic level, Strengthening Families provides a framework and set of tools to help all professionals who serve young children and their families enhance their capacity to build protective factors that promote optimal development and prevent abuse and neglect. For sites implementing FAST, Strengthening Families resources can be used to increase parents' and professionals' understanding of the importance of parent engagement programming that has a focus on building protective factors. Collaboration and cross-education could be beneficial to practitioners implementing FAST and Strengthening Families, as both promote a strengths-based, capacity building approach.

Visit the Strengthening Families website (www.strengtheningfamilies.net) to learn more about efforts going on in specific states, or to download tools and resources to support Strengthening Families implementation within a program.

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ABOUT FAST®

Families & Schools Together, Inc. strives to make a critical difference in the lives of children and families by building stronger relationships at home through its evidence-based program, FAST®. The eight-week multi-family program and subsequent two-year parent-led sessions produce significant improvements in children's behavior, emotional well-being and academic performance.

Parents are supported to think differently about their role in the school and local community. They are empowered as partners in the education process and work closely with teachers to support their children, and are connected to local resources, as needed. More than 20 years of research demonstrates that a family's level of engagement in their child's education is one of the strongest indicators of a child's academic and life achievements. FAST improves school culture by integrating parent voice and increasing family trust in schools. FAST is especially powerful for children from low-income families, who are less likely to receive out-of-school supports that promote learning. FAST has been rigorously tested through multiple Randomized Control Trials, and proven effective in 48 states and 20 countries.

FAST applies tested approaches that have been published by various researchers in academic journals and funded by numerous Federal agencies and programs, such as:

- U.S. Department of Education Investing in Innovation (i3)
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration on Children, Youth and Families
- National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD)
- United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)

HOW FAST® SUPPORTS FAMILIES TO BUILD THE STRENGTHENING FAMILIES PROTECTIVE FACTORS

Building Protective Factors through the FAST® Program

FAST is a prevention and early intervention program built on a foundation of social, behavioral and physiological science. FAST applies research findings to produce statistically significant improvements in children's behavior and academic performance, while building social capital among families, schools and communities. Outcomes of the program focus on strengthening:

- The child's attachment and interpersonal bonds
- The family unit
- Parent-to-parent social networks and supports
- Parent empowerment and self efficacy
- Connections to school personnel
- Connections to community resources

These focus areas translate into an intentional agenda of activities, based on well-functioning family systems, which is structured to increase participant knowledge of parenting and child development through experiential learning in both private and group settings. Activities such as Parent Group and Buddy Time provide opportunities for parents to lead, speak with, listen to and form friendships with other adults, thus building social capital that bolsters families' resilience to stress. With the reduction of social isolation, families learn to connect to supports within the school and community, and build strong social connections within the FAST parent peer network. In addition to these necessary supports, subtle coaching by the FAST Team assists in empowering parents to adopt skills and confidence supportive of personal effectiveness. Strengthening of the parent-child bond is also encouraged through activities such as Special Play and Feeling Charades, during which social and emotional development of children is nurtured by uninterrupted, non-judgmental play and by free expression of feelings in a safe, supportive environment.

FAST delivers consistent, positive outcomes across ethnicity, culture, language and socio-economic status in rural, urban and suburban settings. A number of characteristics make FAST's approach unique among prevention, early intervention and family strengthening programs, including:

- Family-to-family interactions
- Learning by doing with coaching, not lectures
- Parent empowerment to ultimately build parent leaders within the school and community
- Team is culturally representative of participant families
- Program is 60% adaptable to meet the needs of the local community
- Pre- and post-survey assessment

FAST supports systemic change in the family, school and community to promote the full potential of every child.