

CONNECTING STRENGTHENING FAMILIES WITH HOME VISITING STRATEGIES

What is Strengthening Families?

Strengthening Families is a research-based framework in use in more than 30 states across the country. The framework illustrates how existing services for children and families can be linked and supported to build five protective factors shown by existing research to reduce the likelihood of child abuse and neglect and to enhance optimal child development. The five protective factors are:

- Parental resilience
- Social connections
- Knowledge of parenting and child development
- Concrete supports in times of need
- Social and emotional competence of children

State Strengthening Families application is generally led by cross sector leadership teams who work to integrate the use of the protective factors into different child and family serving sectors. Child abuse and neglect prevention and early learning programs have been key targets of the Strengthening Families work in most states, but child welfare, maternal and child health, family resource programs, mental health schools and juvenile justice, are also engaged in some states and counties.

Why is Strengthening Families Relevant for State Home Visiting Plans?

Building blocks that are fundamental to outcomes in multiple domains

Strengthening Families is being used in states and communities across the country as a platform for interagency collaboration. The five protective factors that form the core of the Strengthening Families approach are fundamental building blocks for strong and stable families across multiple agencies and disciplines as well as in communities. Strengthening Families has achieved a broad range of support from partners across different child and family serving systems because the protective factors can help improve family outcomes in many domains. The protective factors framework has been an effective tool not only for bringing together stakeholders within the early childhood sector but also engaging child abuse and neglect prevention stakeholders, child welfare, and in some states, mental health, public health, justice, domestic violence, and business. In Kansas, for example, domestic violence advocates engaged with Strengthening Families because they recognized that addressing social isolation, decreased resilience, and lack of concrete supports was fundamentally tied to the outcomes they cared about for families.

What it looks like on the ground:

When Shelby County Tennessee received an Evidence-Based Home Visiting Grant from the Federal Administration for Children Youth and Families they knew they wanted to do more than just start some new home visiting programs. They wanted to create a “no wrong door” infrastructure where everyone working with children and families was operating collaboratively and using the same framework. A shared framework would facilitate referrals, enhance the effectiveness of individual outreach efforts, and ensure that families were getting what they needed when they needed it. They created the Shelby County Early Success Provider Network (ESPN) which includes multiple home visiting models as well as other child and family serving programs. Each ESPN provider has signed a memorandum of agreement that starts with the adoption and adherence to the five protective factors from the Strengthening Families

Common language that can unite home visiting programs

Strengthening Families has spread quickly because it provides a common language for anyone working directly with children and families to understand how what they already do supports families and to bridge and link their work with others essential services that serve the same families. One of the challenges for state home visiting plans is the many different program models each focused on its own set of outcomes, stated in ways that are unique to the model. Some programs are focused on child abuse and neglect prevention, for example, others on health and developmental outcomes, others on reading and school readiness.

In Florida the state home visiting coalition is using the Strengthening Families protective factors as an overarching framework for multiple home visiting models to come together and work together around common outcomes. Similarly, in Shelby County, TN a local home visiting coalition is using the protective factors to frame guiding principles that will align practice not only among different home visiting programs but also with other early childhood partners. In both states, the motivation for using Strengthening Families was a desire to strengthen the relationships and build commonality of practice across multiple existing programs. In both states, effective model programs such Parents as Teachers, Nurse Family Partnership, Early Head Start, and Healthy Families America and HIPPY are participating in these efforts together.

This unified approach has been successful because most home visiting programs find that Strengthening Families and the protective factors are consistent with and reflective of the way they already practice. In essence Strengthening Families validates their existing practices by showing how they contribute to building protective factors for families. Because of this natural fit a number of home visiting programs are moving toward integrating Strengthening Families into their work nationally. Parents as Teachers, for example, has for the last several years been incorporating the protective factors into their new or updated curricula and has made the protective factors a central part of their program logic model. *Partners for a Healthy Baby*, a home visiting curriculum which is used nationally by more than 1,200 home visiting programs—including Healthy Start, Healthy Families and Early Head Start sites—has developed a cross walk which aligns all of their materials and tools to the protective factors.

An actionable framework that can be applied in multiple contexts

Life course theory is a key new strategic direction for the maternal and child health field and has been lifted up by the Maternal and Child Health Bureau as central to their new strategic plan. Several key aspects of life course theory tie to the Strengthening Families framework:

- A focus on risk *and* protective factors
- A focus on the importance of the early years as a key time to impact an individual's developmental trajectory

What it looks like on the ground:

When Florida developed its five year prevention plan they set a goal to infuse the Strengthening Families Protective Factors into all the systems that serve parents and children. As one step, they called on the statewide home visiting coalition to ensure that the protective factors frameworks serves as a foundation for Florida's home visiting programs. The workgroup that spearheads these efforts brings together over thirty home visiting programs or programs with a component of home visiting including Healthy Families, Early Head Start, Parents As Teachers, the Nurse Family Partnership, and Home Instruction for Preschool Youth (HIPPY). Strengthening Families is a natural fit with these models and will bolster a strength-based approach across programs in the State. For others, the linkages will be accompanied by an educational campaign to illustrate the importance of a common approach to service delivery and suggest low or no costs activities to enhance services for parents and children. The workgroup created a self-assessment tool for use with home visiting programs, or programs with a component of home visiting, to establish a baseline of current status among programs. This tool will be launched in spring 2011 to help guide programs through a service enhancement phase, as appropriate. Field tests have been quite positive as programs report that the self-assessment tool not only validates their existing practice but also provides them with concrete, actionable ideas for enhancing what they do.

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- A focus on how early experience (and particularly early trauma)
- can have negative impacts on a wide variety of long term outcomes including physical and behavioral health
- A focus on the environment (in the case of young children the family and the community) which impacts the context of an individual's health trajectory.
- A recognition of the role that toxic stress can play in undermining an individual's developmental trajectory

Strengthening Families provides a concrete and actionable framework to put life course theory into practice. It supports programs and practitioners in identifying specific ways they can and do build protective factors in their every day interaction with children and families. It focuses on the most important environment surrounding children in their early years—the family—and specifically engages both parents and providers in reducing stress within that environment.

The Strengthening Families framework is supported by concrete tools, developed based on field research and experience in programs across the country, to help programs make “small but significant changes in practice” that enhance their ability to build protective factors. Both written and online versions of a self assessment for programs is available to help all kinds of programs develop action plans based on building protective factors with families.

A New Approach to Engage Parents Effectively

One of the most important contributions of Strengthening Families visits use of strengths-based, non-stigmatizing language in explaining the protective factors and how to build them. This has led to the development of strategies for parent engagement, often led by parents themselves. Using the tools, training and self assessments developed from

A program story:

I was so excited that our facility was drawn out for a pilot program to increase the quality of care in our center. A large part of our pilot was implementing Strengthening Families. As we started to talk and learn about what we would be doing in Strengthening Families I felt overwhelmed and thought it would never work at our large facility. Once we started doing the trainings and the foundation was laid out, our staff was actually starting to get *excited* about implementing some of these ideas.

I watched as my young staff blossomed and took pride in the fact that parents were actually coming to them for help and that they had the skills to guide them in the right direction. We started talking about everything from age appropriate consequences to affordable medical care to healthy lunches and snacks! Now I am watching the staff and parents connecting to discuss everything from behavior plans to their child's upcoming ball games and school programs. I see a sense of pride and enthusiasm in the staff and the children. I see a sense of relief and enjoyment in the parents. For me, I learned that there are many ways to strengthen our relationships. Doing the work has definitely paid off. The staff and parents are more open to information and we are all experiencing more positive and quality interactions with our children. I can feel the energy that we have created between the staff, parents and the children and am looking forward to creating more opportunities to connect as we continue to grow in our efforts to strengthen families!

field research in exemplary early childhood programs, any program can look at its current practice and identify specific ways to more effectively create a climate where parents feel valued and supported. Obviously, when parents are more deeply connected to home visiting and other programs, this has positive rippling effects on recruitment, retention, and the overall engagement of families with services.

An existing local and state infrastructure

In the 30 states across the country already implementing Strengthening Families, it is likely that the communities targeted for home visiting programs already have local programs and practitioners on the ground implementing a Strengthening Families approach. There may be early childhood programs, family support programs, child abuse and neglect prevention programs, and other program models on the ground already using a protective factors framework and speaking the Strengthening Families language. These programs will be important allies for home visiting programs on the ground. They can serve as an important resource for referrals to the home visiting program and for home visiting programs to refer families to. Home visiting is one vehicle for supporting families who may also need additional supports and services between home visits. A common framework will not only help home visiting programs connect to other services, but make the experience for families more continuous and supportive.

At the state level in states where Strengthening Families has been adopted, there may be trainers with experience in building practitioner skills in applying a protective factors approach to their work and ongoing state level conferences and resources to support program implementation. In most participating states there is a Strengthening Families leadership team that works on cross-system coordination. These serve as an important platform for coordinating the resources and tools that will support implementation across systems. Existing state investments in Strengthening Families reach into the millions of dollars and touch hundreds of programs.

At the local level a growing number of communities have taken on Strengthening Families comprehensively at a community-level. These are places where formal and informal services and supports are united by a common vision of building protective factors. There are also cities and counties that have taken the protective factors as a common framework for action. This creates places where understanding the protective factors are becoming part of the way in which everyone does business. As plans for implementing new home visiting programs are developed, the Strengthening Families efforts already in place can be excellent resources for local programs.

How can my state integrate Strengthening Families into its home visiting approach?

Start or join a Strengthening Families Leadership Team at the state level

The Updated State Plan must identify the ways in which State-level staff will be collaborating among all relevant State agencies, as well as with other public- and private-sector partners, to ensure the success of this multi-faceted program that addresses maternal and child health, child development, and the prevention of child maltreatment. (Supplemental Information Request, pg. 7)

Strengthening Families has proven to be an effective platform for cross-systems collaboration. A number of states have used Strengthening Families as a key framework for planning in the Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems program. In most states a cross-cutting state leadership team drives the Strengthening Families work. The size and structure of these leadership teams vary, but they generally include state level leadership from the early childhood and child abuse and neglect prevention sectors. Some include child welfare, mental health and other partners. The largest state leadership team includes 80 individuals representing a variety of child and family serving sectors. If your state already has a leadership team in place it can be valuable to draw this group into your home visiting planning efforts. If your state has not already embarked on Strengthening Families this might be an opportunity to create a leadership team, using the home-visiting planning as a key early task. Because so many states have already formed a leadership team, there are a number of tools and resources available to support development of a new leadership team.

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Write Strengthening Families into your state home visiting plan

The Updated State Plan should also describe how the State Home Visiting Program can contribute to developing a comprehensive, high-quality early childhood system that promotes maternal, infant, and early childhood health, safety, and development and strong parent-child relationships. (Supplemental Information Request pg. 9)

The aim is to develop a comprehensive plan that addresses community risk factors and builds on strengths identified in the targeted community(ies), and that responds to the specific characteristics and needs of families residing there. (SIR, pg. 7)

In addition, the Updated State Plan must include measures that will be taken to support the home visiting model in the targeted community at risk, such as developing community referral systems and service linkages and promoting collaboration among public- and private-sector partners at the local level to support a successful State Home Visiting Program. (SIR, pg. 7)

Some states are considering adopting Strengthening Families and the protective factors framework as a unifying framework and approach for their home visiting plan, connected to other resources and services. This provides an opportunity to frame the specific home visiting activities to be funded within the context of an overarching vision of family strengthening which is concrete, specific and actionable across the early childhood system. In California the state Maternal and Child Health department is considering using the Strengthening Families framework in multiple programs across the division, beginning with home visiting. Their intent is to weave the protective factors throughout the State Home Visiting Plan including: development of best practices for home visiting, training and technical assistance, connecting new and existing home visiting programs with local initiatives currently implementing Strengthening Families, quality improvement and evaluation. In a state like California where family resource centers across the state are already incorporating Strengthening Families into their work and Child Abuse Prevention Councils are using it as a framework for local planning and funding of family support activities adopting the protective factors framework also provides an opportunity to integrate home visiting programs at the local level into a unified system of services and supports with common vision and common language. This will support and strengthen referrals, linkages and continuity between home visiting activities and the other community services children and families may be accessing.

Check with home visiting program models on the connection between their work and Strengthening Families

Many existing home visiting models including some listed as evidence based home visiting programs recommended in the new federal program are already connecting the Strengthening Families framework to the work that they do. In other cases local programs aligned with these models are pioneering connections as they operate as part of home visiting coalitions using the Strengthening Families framework.. Parents as Teachers has for the last several years been incorporating the protective factors into new or updated curricula. Partners for a Healthy Baby, a home visiting curricula which is used nationally by more than 1,200 home visiting program—including Healthy Start, Healthy Families and Early Head Start sites—has developed a cross walk

What it looks like on the ground:

Parents as Teachers is a strong evidence-based home visiting model providing parenting education and family support, especially for those families in vulnerable situations. It has been named eligible for funding through the MIEHVP. At its core, Parents as Teachers is relationship-based and parenting-focused. There is an emphasis on parent-child interaction, development-centered parenting, and family well-being; on strengths, capabilities and skills.

Parents as Teachers serves a range of families – not just first time parents, pregnant parents or teen parents – and offers services throughout the continuum from prenatal to kindergarten entry.

The protective factors are a central part of the Parents As Teachers logic model, and have been thoroughly incorporated into the core PAT curriculum for home visitors and are being added to other PAT curricula as updates and revisions occur.. Parents as Teachers also supports the use of the protective factors as a common framework across the multiple evidence-based home visiting models to encourage active collaboration, shared learning, and the development of a community of practice across home-visiting and other service

which aligns all of their materials and tools to the protective factors. Parents as Teachers, Nurse Family Partnership, Early Head Start, and Healthy Families America programs are all participating in the Florida and Tennessee efforts described above. For those home visiting models that have not already been introduced to Strengthening Families, there is no reason to believe that it would be inconsistent or undermine the fidelity of their approach.

Think about the role that Strengthening Families can play in the architecture your state builds to support its home visiting efforts

Strengthening Families can play a role as your state develops the overall architecture that will support and strengthen the home visiting models each state chooses.

- **Centralized referral resources:** One option some states are exploring is using the United Way 211 systems or other centralized referral methods to support referrals to home visiting programs and as a way for families receiving home visiting to connect to a broader array of services. United Way Worldwide is a Strengthening Families National Partner organization and has been working with local United Ways to use the protective factors framework within 211 referral systems. This provides an opportunity to connect families with specific opportunities to build their protective factors, not only services related to risk.
- **Training and technical assistance:** Some states are exploring cross-training and technical assistance to create a common frame for practice across home visiting models. In many states Strengthening Families training is already available and could be easily adapted to this purpose.
- **Home visiting coalitions:** States like Florida are using Strengthening Families as an organizing framework for their state home visiting coalition. The strengths-based protective factors framework can also be incorporated into messaging campaigns about the importance of home visiting efforts.
- **Messaging:** As your state is developing communication materials around home visiting, the protective factors framework can play a role in this campaign. A number of states have found the protective factors useful language to explain the value of family support programs and activities. Illinois' Strengthening Families initiative, for example, worked with Better World Media to develop an entire campaign called "Love is Not Enough to Keep your Family Strong." Each of the protective factors was adapted to parent friendly language. Parental Resilience, for example, became "Be Strong and Flexible." Attractive public education materials were developed and then parents around the state were trained to serve as hosts and facilitators of parent cafés—parent to parent conversations about the protective factors.

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More about Strengthening Families:

Strengthening Families is coordinated nationally by the Center for the Study of Social Policy and supported by a number of national partner organizations including:

- *The National Alliance of Children's Trust and Prevention Funds*
- *Zero to Three*
- *The FRIENDS National Resource Center*
- *United Way Worldwide*
- *The Child Welfare Information Gateway*

The protective factors framework was developed based on a review of the existing research on reducing child maltreatment as well as consultation with national experts and hundreds of practitioners in the fields of early childhood, child abuse and neglect prevention and child welfare. Program implementation materials, including a self-assessment for programs were developed from a national study of exemplary practices. State implementation tools were developed based on a two-year, seven state pilot. There are currently over 30 states participating in the Strengthening Families National Network. More tools, resources and materials, including profiles of implementing states, the protective factors literature review, and materials and tools are available at: www.strengtheningfamilies.net and through the National Alliance of Children's Trust and Prevention Funds.

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