

# State Leadership, Policy and Practice in 2010



Through the Center for the Study of Social Policy's (CSSP) Strengthening Families Initiative, more than thirty states are working to promote the five Protective Factors that research shows build family strengths, promote optimal child development, and reduce child abuse and neglect. As data from a 2010 survey reflects, many states are shifting policy, funding and practice to integrate the Strengthening Families approach throughout their early childhood development systems, home visiting efforts, child abuse prevention strategies, child welfare services and family support efforts.

## Inspiring Collaborative Leadership

Collaboration across multiple service systems is central to the Strengthening Families approach. State and local leadership teams are made up of multiple agencies and partners, including community and parent leaders. Eighteen states reported on the composition of their state leadership teams. Of these, the majority included representation from child abuse and neglect prevention, early care and education, child welfare/child protective services and health. The median leadership team size was 12, but several state teams involved 20 or more members. Twelve states report having parents and/or community members involved on the state leadership team. Two states also had statewide parent advisory committees.

## Leveraging Investment Opportunities

As an approach, not a program model, Strengthening Families does not necessarily require new funding, but rather can be infused as a common framework around existing investments and implemented through low- and no-cost innovations. In the 14 states who reported on leveraging resources, Strengthening Families has been integrated into programs and services that are funded by state and federal investments totaling \$167 million. Of the total direct dollars impacted, \$114 million were home visiting dollars invested in two states; \$26 million were early care and education dollars invested in six states and \$18 million were traditional child abuse and neglect prevention funding sources in all 14 states.

## Strengthening Program Practice

Strengthening Families, in its original design, sought to support on-the-ground practice in early care and education programs. Field research identified key program strategies that exemplary programs were already engaged in, and CSSP designed the Strengthening Families self-assessment as a tool to help others plan and implement similar program features. The online Strengthening Families data tools capture program-level and aggregated state-level information on how programs are implementing the Strengthening Families Program Strategies. In 2010, 10 states reported serving more than 37,000 children in programs. Eleven states reported that collectively more than 1,000 programs were using the Strengthening Families self-assessment to support continuous improvement in their every day practice.

Strengthening Families seeks to mobilize partners, communities and families to build family strengths, promote optimal development, and reduce child abuse and neglect. It focuses on 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

The Strengthening Families Approach:

- Benefits ALL Families
- Builds on family strengths, buffers risks, and promotes better outcomes
- Can be implemented through small but significant changes in every day actions
- Builds on and can become a part of existing programs, systems and community opportunities
- Is grounded in research, practice and implementation knowledge.

National, state, community and family partners are adopting the Strengthening Families approach to create a "New Normal" in which families and communities, service systems and organizations:

- Focus on building protective and promotive factors to reduce risk and create optimal outcomes for children, youth and families
- Recognize and support parents as decision makers and leaders
- Value the culture and unique aspects of each family
- Are mutually responsible for better outcomes for children, youth and families

For more information, visit  
[www.strengtheningfamilies.net](http://www.strengtheningfamilies.net)

## **Building Momentum Through Key Levers for Change**

Using very small investments, state and community leaders have found three “levers for change” that facilitate implementation of the Protective Factors Framework at the program level and statewide. These levers are the keys to growing and sustaining Strengthening Families over time.

### **1. Policy and Systems**

States are using the Protective Factors Framework to define a shared set of desired outcomes for families across systems and disciplines. Contracting, regulation, performance monitoring and outcome evaluation are other avenues that states are using to create and reinforce use of the protective factors as a frame for improved child and family outcomes. Sixteen states have linked Strengthening Families to the Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems planning initiative funded by the federal Health Resources and Services Administration. At least six states incorporated Strengthening Families into their Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge federal grant applications. Eleven states report that Strengthening Families is part of their child care Quality Rating and Improvement Systems. Thirteen states report including Strengthening Families in their state plans for federal Home Visitation grant funding. Out of 18 states reporting, all incorporated Strengthening Families into their Community-Based Child Abuse Prevention (CBCAP) grant proposals for community-based grantees. Thirteen states report building new partnerships between child welfare and early care and education. Five states are integrating the Protective Factors Framework into training for child welfare workers and Strengthening Families is becoming part of the child welfare practice model in six states.

### **2. Parent Partnerships**

Leadership from parents at every level encourages policymakers and practitioners alike to value parents as decision-makers and leaders. The Protective Factors Framework applies to all families and focuses on building strengths, which offers a positive starting

point for family engagement. Program strategies built on the framework are intended to be adapted to the cultures, traditions and values of participating families, since protective factors are built and expressed differently in different contexts. Twelve states use Parent Cafés or Community Cafés to engage parents in direct, parent-to-parent conversations about building protective factors. Eleven states offer parent leadership training. Nine states report offering incentives and supports to encourage parent participation, such as child care, travel reimbursement and participation stipends. Parent leadership roles include those of co-trainers, café hosts and advisory board members. Seven states report that parents serve in paid staff positions at the program or state agency level.

### **3. Professional Development**

Infusing the Protective Factors Framework into training for those who work with children and families, from frontline workers to supervisors to administrators, helps build a workforce across disciplines with common knowledge, goals and language. Eighteen states report training nearly 25,000 individuals and delivering more than 162,000 person hours in 2010 on Strengthening Families and the protective factors.

## **Conclusion**

The simple, powerful ideas behind Strengthening Families have led to rapid implementation and eager adaptation in states across the country. Overall, a common spirit of opportunism has yielded diverse efforts under the banner of Strengthening Families. Collectively, these changes are helping to realize the vision of a “new normal” in which families and communities, service systems and organizations:

- Focus on building protective and promotive factors to reduce risk and create optimal outcomes for children, youth and families
- Recognize and support parents as decision-makers and leaders
- Value the culture and unique aspects of each family
- Are mutually responsible for better outcomes for children, youth and families