

WORKING WITH EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION PROGRAMS: CREATING A SUCCESSFUL ACTION PLAN

To successfully implement the Strengthening Families™ approach in early care and education centers, states must have an action plan that describes appropriate goals and steps to achieving them. Below, we will (1) define what it means for a state to work with early care and education (ECE) programs, (2) describe goals for working with ECE programs that can be included in a state's action plan, and (3) provide guidance based on lessons learned by states in pursuing each of those goals. For more lessons learned on working with early care and education programs, see the tools dealing with [professional development](#) and [policy](#).

1. Definition

Implementing the Strengthening Families approach within an early care and education program means:

- Engaging staff, families and other partners in completing the Strengthening Families program self-assessment
- Developing action plans that involve ECE centers based on the results of the program self-assessment
- Changing ECE program practice and using the action plan to support a Strengthening Families approach

A primary focus of state Strengthening Families efforts is supporting large numbers of early care and education programs in implementing the initiative.

2. Action Plan Goals

The Strengthening Families goals for states in working with early care and education programs are to:

- Create broad awareness of and excitement about Strengthening Families within the early care and education community
- Identify models of exemplary practice within the state
- Engage a broad range of early care and education centers in implementing Strengthening Families practice changes
- Build a learning community for centers implementing the Strengthening Families model

3. Guidance on Meeting Goals

Goal 1: Create awareness and excitement about Strengthening Families in the ECE community

Providing information about Strengthening Families and protective factors throughout the early care and education community in the state is basic to the program's work. A number of pilot states used statewide early care and education conferences as kick-off events to announce their state Strengthening Families Initiative

strengthening families

THROUGH EARLY CARE & EDUCATION

is a research-based, cost-effective strategy to increase family stability, enhance child development, and reduce child abuse and neglect. It builds five protective factors:

- Parental resilience
- Social connections
- Knowledge of parenting and child development
- Concrete support in times of need
- Children's healthy social and emotional development

Through the Strengthening Families Initiative, more than thirty states are shifting policy, funding and training to help early childhood providers build protective factors with families. Many states are also using the Strengthening Families approach to integrate state prevention strategies, strengthen families in the child welfare system, and engage parents and communities in building protective factors. For more information, visit cssp.org/doris_duke

Working with Early Care and Education Programs: Creating a Successful Action Plan, p. 2

and to provide opportunities for early childhood center staff from around the state to hear about the initiative from respected leaders in their field. States also used state publications aimed at the ECE field (such as Child Care Exchange), newsletters, websites, fact sheets and program give-aways (such as Strengthening Families calendars or posters) as ways to get the word out about the initiative and encourage local programs to participate. Wisconsin also enlisted its Child Care Resource and Referral network to provide information about the initiative to all early care and education centers within the state.

Goal 2: Identify models of exemplary practice within the state

Most states reached out to exemplary programs first, as a way to highlight what excellent practice should look like. Engaging exemplary programs as partners in implementation is a way for a state to showcase a small group of programs that are more receptive to new ideas and attuned to continuous quality improvement. Being able to point to the strategies in action is an important way to help other programs see that they, too, can implement the program, with relatively small changes to what they already are doing. Working with a pilot or exemplary program group was an important strategy for building knowledge and “lessons learned” both among the participating centers and with the leadership team.

There are some cautions regarding identifying exemplary programs as a place to start. While the designation itself was a carrot that drew excellent programs to participate, it was not always enough of an incentive to get many programs to apply. Also required was considerable up-front work, such as visiting applying sites to determine whether their practice really fit into the exemplary category. One state discovered too late that one site that had been designated as exemplary appeared to have a stronger grant writer than actual family strengthening in its practices. This site eventually had to be dropped from the pilot.

It is important to think of exemplary programs as learning laboratories that focus on strategies to help a broad range of programs to deepen their family strengthening work — even those that are not doing exemplary work.

Goal 3: Engage a broad range of early care and education centers in making Strengthening Families practice changes

One of the tenets of the Strengthening Families approach is that any program, no matter how big or how small, how “excellent” or how challenged, can make changes to improve its family strengthening family practices. A state approach should not be limited only to a small group of exemplary programs, but should broaden to include even programs that do not fall into the “exemplary” category. One of the most successful strategies that states used to engage a broad range of early childhood centers was mini-grants. When the opportunity to apply for a mini-grant was tied to completing the self-assessment and developing an action plan, large numbers of programs participated. Two states used this approach: Wisconsin,

ACTION PLAN GOALS

- Create broad awareness of and excitement about Strengthening Families within the early care and education community
- Identify models of exemplary practice within the state
- Engage a broad range of early care and education centers in implementing Strengthening Families practice changes
- Build a learning community for centers implementing the Strengthening Families model

Working with Early Care and Education Programs: Creating a Successful Action Plan, p. 3

where 186 programs completed self-assessments and action plans (or 9% of all licensed early care and education programs in the state), and Missouri, where 57 programs completed self-assessments and action plans (or 21% of all accredited programs). This was the highest level of penetration of any of the pilot states. This high response occurred despite the fact that Wisconsin's mini-grant amounts were quite low (less than \$1,000 for each center) and Missouri only chose six pilots for its \$5,000 mini-grants. While this approach may not have created broad practice changes at the program level, introducing the self-assessment and implementing a few concrete changes in practice helped increase awareness of the importance of Strengthening Families and instituted some concrete changes at the program level.

Goal 4: Build a learning community for centers implementing the Strengthening Families model

It's important to have a mechanism to support ongoing learning and practice change and sustain and deepen implementation. States found that a learning network among programs fosters information sharing and peer learning across participating programs and provides an important infrastructure for the state to provide training and information to all participating programs. Interestingly, ECE sites were hungry for peer learning opportunities, and once the learning networks were established the networks themselves acted as a draw for other programs to join the initiative.

Learning networks acted as the bridge between the modeling work of exemplary programs and the need to engage a broader range of early care and education programs. Most states successfully used programs with more advanced family strengthening practices as peer leaders to train and support other programs that were on the road to developing these practices. Some networks were organized by the state and some by the program. Regardless of who convenes the network, they needed to be provided with resources and support to ensure their vibrancy and longevity. Network resources include:

- Funding for meeting costs such as food
- Dedicated staffing for network coordination
- Practice development resources (e.g., training, new information, tools and activities for practice sharing within the network)
- Communication vehicles for network members (e.g., regular conference calls)
- Funding for program costs incurred due to participation, such as funds to pay substitute teachers or transportation costs for staff to attend meetings

Strengthening Families Illinois has developed a short [paper](#) that describes how to start a learning network and shares network tools they developed.

LEARNING NETWORKS REQUIRE:

- Funding for meeting costs such as food
- Dedicated staffing for network coordination
- Practice development resources (e.g., training, new information, tools and activities for practice sharing within the network)
- Communication vehicles for network members (e.g., regular conference calls)
- Funding for program costs incurred due to participation, such as funds to pay substitute teachers or transportation costs for staff to attend meetings