



STRENGTHENING FAMILIES ALASKA: STATE PROFILE

Infrastructure

Alaska joined the Strengthening Families™ effort in 2005 as an original pilot state. With a very high rate of child abuse and neglect, Alaska policymakers were intrigued by the opportunity to approach prevention in a new, innovative way. The initiative's original focus was on embedding Strengthening Families in early care and learning programs. Over the last several years, the reach has expanded to professional development systems, university programs, child protection services, schools and other service providers.

The program is coordinated by the Office of Children's Services in the Department of Health & Social Services. From the beginning, the leadership team has included key decision-makers from a variety of programs. Current membership includes representatives from the University of Alaska, United Way of Anchorage, the Alaska Children's Trust, the Department of Education and Early Development, the Head Start Collaboration Office, Title V & Women's, Children's & Family Health, the Child Care Program Office, the Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems (ECCS) Initiative, the Child Care Resource & Referral (CCR&R) Agency, the Early Intervention/Part C Program, Best Beginnings, the Child Welfare Academy and Alaska 211. Parents are also important members of this leadership team.

Strengthening Families Alaska (SFA) has benefited from a variety of supporters: the Alaska Children's Trust, Title V Block Grant, System for Early Education Development, ECCS grant, United Way of Anchorage, Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority, the Part C/Early Intervention Program and the National Alliance of Children's Trust and Prevention Funds. In fiscal year (FY) 2012, Strengthening Families was awarded nearly \$500,000 for a one-time expansion of programs through federal funds to the state. General funds of \$250,000 per year have been allocated beginning FY 2015 to expand SFA in communities in the Western and Northern parts of the state. The SFA Leadership Team has begun the planning for this expansion and will be using a collective impact approach in the targeted communities.

The ASF strategic plan includes policy and systems goals focused on including the Protective Factors Framework in grant requirements for a number of programs. Already the protective factors are embedded in grant solicitations from the United Way of Anchorage, the Alaska Children's Trust, the Part C/Early Intervention program and the Child Protection Agency. The Alaska Early Childhood Coordinating Council has made the expansion of Strengthening Families one of their priorities.

Parent Partnerships

Parents are represented on the state leadership team and co-facilitate committees and workgroups. Strengthening Families programs are required to include parents on local leadership teams. In partnership with the "CHOOSE RESPECT" campaign, community cafés are being promoted as a means to create meaningful dialogue with parents and community members.

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.

Nationally, the Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) coordinates Strengthening Families and works with more than a dozen national partner organizations to create a new vision in which communities, families, institutions, service systems and organizations:

- Focus on protective and promotive factors
- Recognize and support parents as decision-makers and leaders
- Value the culture and unique assets of each family
- Are mutually responsible for better outcomes for children, youth and families

For more information, visit www.strengtheningfamilies.net.



Implementation Checklist

Protective Factors used in Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems or other early childhood systems planning	✓
Protective Factors used in Community-Based Child Abuse Prevention RFP Process	✓
Protective Factors integrated into state Quality Rating and Improvement System	
Child Care Resource & Referral Network in state supporting program implementation	✓
Strengthening Families included in State Home Visiting Plan	✓
Strengthening Families is being implemented into child welfare system	✓

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Deepening Knowledge and Understanding

The Strengthening Families framework has been embedded in several professional development systems and will be included in the new Early Childhood Professional Development Core Knowledge document. Embedding the information in professional development efforts such as university courses, CCR&R training, workshops at regional conferences and specific training to organizations has been key. In 2012, the Protective Factors Framework was integrated into the training for child protection staff.

Shifting Practice, Policies and Systems

From the very beginning, Alaska has worked to embed Strengthening Families in early care and learning programs. Programs are recruited, trained and provided ongoing support and technical assistance. Early childhood programs are encouraged to have at least 30 percent of their staff complete 12-15 hours of Strengthening Families training, complete the self-assessment, develop an implementation plan and participate in weekly coaching. A monthly “learning network” provides ongoing training, discussion and support for programs across the state. Strengthening Families has partnered with the Alaska Pyramid Project to bring the Social and Emotional Pyramid Model to early care and learning programs. With the promotion of a “no wrong door” policy, programs are encouraged to implement both frameworks in their work. A cadre of experts have been trained in both models and provide ongoing coaching to programs.

As SFA has matured, it has expanded its reach into new systems and program service areas. Expansion has included reaching providers that are focused on school-aged children and their families, schools, child protective services, Part C/Early Intervention providers, home visitors, and mental health clinicians. Early childhood partnerships in local communities are using the framework to guide their activities and planning. In addition, the Alaska Governor’s Domestic Violence initiative, “CHOOSE RESPECT,” has partnered with SFA to distribute materials and messages about the protective factors.

Ensuring Accountability

Several major evaluations have been conducted on early childhood programs utilizing the Strengthening Families approach in Alaska. The evaluations have focused on changes in staff knowledge, program practice changes and resulting parent changes and benefits. All evaluations found significant improvements in program practices, staff knowledge and parental protective factors. An evaluation also examined the methodology used to support Strengthening Families programs. Regular coaching has been determined to be an especially effective method of creating real, lasting program change.

Evolving Work

Alaska will continue to support and deepen the work of existing programs and provide training and support to new programs and interested parties. Alaska will explore the alignment of Strengthening Families protective factors with Alaska Native values and the use of community conversations as a way to support the building of strong, supportive communities around the state. The Collective Impact Approach will be evaluated as a strategy for broad and lasting change in rural areas of the state.

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