



## STRENGTHENING FAMILIES NEW JERSEY: STATE PROFILE

### Infrastructure

In 2006, New Jersey joined the Early Childhood Initiative of the National Alliance of Children's Trust and Prevention Funds learning community for states implementing Strengthening Families™. Now known as Strengthening Families New Jersey (SFNJ), this statewide initiative is led by the Division of Family and Community Partnerships (DFCP) in the Department of Children and Families (DCF). At the formative stage, New Jersey convened a task force of relevant stakeholders representing six state departments—education, human services, children and families, health and senior services, labor and workforce development and environmental protection; the New Jersey Children's Trust Fund; community-based child welfare and advocacy agencies; parents; child care resource and referral agencies; child care center directors; and college-level early childhood educators. The state also worked with partners to integrate the Strengthening Families framework within early childhood through developing work with the New Jersey Council for Young Children (NJCYC). The NJCYC was formed in Fall 2010 to strengthen and ensure better collaboration, coordination and access for parents and families to early childhood services (prenatal to age eight); and to promote healthy physical and social-emotional growth and development of young children, nurturing parent-child relationships, school readiness and achievement.

### Parent Partnerships

New Jersey will release a RFP to provide leadership training and opportunities to parents through the statewide County Councils for Young Children (CCYC) in twenty counties. The purpose of the CCYC is to create an environment where parents and other county community members can come together as active partners to share, learn and discuss issues that affect the health, education and well-being of their children. Members of the CCYC will develop and implement a plan to establish a sustainable infrastructure for ongoing operations of the CCYC. Currently, a CCYC pilot is being implemented in Cumberland County. The work of this pilot will inform the rolling out of the CCYCs statewide.

### Deepening Knowledge and Understanding

The Protective Factors are now infused in the New Jersey State Core Knowledge and Standards Competencies Manual for professionals working with children through age eight and in after-school programs. Sixteen community colleges statewide have incorporated two courses in social-emotional well-being, and students majoring in early childhood education and/or social work have opportunities to intern with early childhood centers implementing Strengthening Families and CCR&R agencies.

### 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](http://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	✓

### State Coordinator

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## Shifting Practice, Policies and Systems

SFNJ utilizes a train-the-trainer model to implement the core service components of training, technical assistance and ongoing support/monitoring with participating early childhood providers and childcare workers. In addition, participating centers and providers receive a \$400 mini-grant to support parent engagement/parent leadership activities. With four centers and two family child care providers per county, the SFNJ provider network has the capacity to serve 90 childcare centers and 42 family child care providers annually. Since SFNJ's inception, the program has reached more than 425 child care centers/providers. In 2014, SFNJ will be introduced to the state-funded preschools in 31 school districts through the Family Outreach Program in Partnership with DFD.

New Jersey is one of six recipients of a Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge Grant in 2013. With these funds the state is able to provide statewide train-the-trainer trainings to early childhood professionals. Training on the Protective Factors Framework will be one of many courses offered through the training academy.

In April 2014, together with the Casey Family Programs and the New Jersey Task Force on Child Abuse and Neglect (NJTFCAN) DCF completed a strategic plan for "Supporting Strong Families and Communities in New Jersey: Preventing Child Abuse and Neglect, 2014-2017". Seven-hundred and forty-seven stakeholders, including parents, caregivers, community advocates, providers, and public and private partners, were engaged in the planning process. The planning process included an analysis of quantitative and qualitative data acquired from DCF as well as surveys, interviews and focus groups. The plan provides an overview of child maltreatment as a public health concern, quantitative data specific to child maltreatment in New Jersey, and discusses risk and protective factors.

## Ensuring Accountability

SFNJ does not have a formal evaluator; however, one of the roles of the Strengthening Families program manager is to monitor and support the efforts and success of this initiative by providing training and technical assistance to the

CCR&R Trainers. The CCR&Rs prepare quarterly reports to DFCEP outlining the centers' progress based on standard evaluation tools. DFCEP will continue to utilize the Protective Factors Survey with all of its child care providers. NJ would use the data from each site to identify the aggregate needs of the families and would then coordinate the collaboration of local service providers with the child care providers to provide services that the families have identified.

## Evolving Work

DFCEP will continue its work with the NJCYC to integrate the Protective Factors Framework in all state early childhood initiatives and in developing the NJ QRIS tool - Grow NJ Kids. Additionally, County Councils for Young Children will engage parents and other stakeholders as Grow NJ Kids is implemented. The County Councils will be parent-led to ensure that policies and services are meeting the needs of families. Feedback from the County Councils will inform adjustments to the Grow NJ Kids implementation and policies recommended by the New Jersey Council for Young Children.

SFNJ is also partnering with NJ Department of Health (DOH) through grants from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and Nemours on Childhood Obesity Prevention—Taking Steps to Healthy Success. One module of this initiative has incorporated the Strengthening Families approach to engage and partner with parents. DOH is planning its second cohort and SFNJ will continue to be at the table to help inform the work of childhood obesity prevention in the state of New Jersey.

Profile last updated: June 2014