

THE RESEARCH BEHIND STRENGTHENING FAMILIES™

Strengthening Families is an evidence-informed approach to shifting program and worker practice, in order to help families build protective factors. Strengthening Families is deeply informed by existing research, as well as a structured approach to knowledge building to ground the work. The research behind Strengthening Families can be divided into five specific phases:

- I. Developing the Protective Factors Framework
- II. Understanding the changes in programmatic practice that support implementation of a protective factors approach
- III. Learning from state pilots about the changes in state policy and infrastructure that would support adoption of Strengthening Families practice in a significant number of programs on the ground
- IV. Continuous learning from and with a network of state implementers
- V. Continued investment in knowledge building

Phase I—Developing the Protective Factors Framework

The first phase of the initiative was informed by a structured look at the intersection between existing research and practice wisdom from the field. The goals were to ground the work deeply in what existing research says about protective factors correlated with lower rates of child abuse and neglect. Practice and field wisdom were used to inform the overall understanding of how protective factors were impacted by programmatic interventions.

- **National Advisory Committee:** A national advisory committee was created that represented national leadership from the child abuse and neglect prevention sector, early childhood sector and child welfare sector. This national advisory committee helped to guide the work through phases I and II.

- **Original Literature Review:** The Erickson Institute at the University of Chicago was commissioned to review existing research literature to identify protective factors that were correlated with a reduction in child abuse and neglect. A larger set of protective factors formed the basis of the literature review but some protective factors were dropped as there was not enough evidence to support their inclusion. This [literature review](#) served to define not only the protective factors but some of what we know about how to build them, and served as a fundamental backbone for the work helping to define the five protective factors that are at the core of the Strengthening Families initiative.

- **Dialogue sessions** were held around the country with practitioners in the early childhood, CAN prevention, and child welfare fields. These dialogue sessions served to test the evolving protective factors framework with practitioners across multiple disciplines. Over 300 individuals participated in more than 15 dialogue sessions held across the country.

Dialogue Sessions included:

- Natl. Resource Center for Community Based Family Resources and Support
- Child Trends
- Child Welfare League of America
- Family Support America
- Free to Grow
- Natl. Alliance of Children's Trust and Prevention Funds
- Natl. Association for the Education of Young Children
- Natl. Conferences on Child Abuse and Neglect
- Natl. Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Associations
- Natl. Child Care Association
- Prevent Child Abuse America
- USA Child Care
- ZERO TO THREE

The literature review and the field wisdom gathered were used to inform and develop the Protective Factors Framework at the heart of Strengthening Families.

Strengthening Families—an Evidence-Informed Approach

There is current strong national attention to the development of evidence-based program models. This approach requires programs to have completed randomized control trials, and to be replicated with high attention to fidelity (as close as possible to the version that was tested). In contrast, Strengthening Families has taken an approach that builds off of existing empirical research on what influences outcomes for children and families—as well as structured ways to test and learn from practice on the ground, including how the policy and implementation environment impact the ability to put research knowledge into practice.

- **Build from what existing research tells us.** Every day, universities and researchers are completing studies on human behavior, child development, family interactions and so on. Strengthening Families seeks to synthesize and make this knowledge actionable for those on the ground. By grounding the work in existing research the initiative seeks to develop an approach that is informed by the best existing evidence.
- **Provide guidance and a framework for adaptive implementation.** Tools like the self-assessment are important because they both have the flexibility to encourage adaptation and the structure to ensure that implementation strategies are grounded in the research that is the basis for the initiative. At each level of the initiative, Strengthening Families tries to support implementation through the development of tools that support this type of adaptive implementation.
- **Understand the larger context that will influence implementation.** The state pilot was a crucial part of the work. Too often program models are developed without a clear understanding of and response to the environment in which programs operate. By explicitly looking at the context of state implementation in a structured way, Strengthening Families was able to both identify levers in the state environment that would support programmatic implementation and identify potential obstacles.
- **Strategically use levers that can help to enhance fidelity.** One part of the focus on state level infrastructure is to strategically identify the levers that can be used to support underlying fidelity to the framework. For example, a state can help to ensure fidelity to the framework by modifying Requests for Proposals (RFPs) to require programs funded by federal Community Based Child Abuse Prevention funds to use the Strengthening Families self-assessment in their work and submit annual updates to their action plans. Similarly, a state can support and deepen the work at the individual program level by contracting with their Child Care Resource and Referral Network to provide coaching and individual technical assistance to programs on Strengthening Families implementation.
- **Create continuous learning loops with implementers on the ground.** Finally, the initiative learns from and with implementers at all levels in a structured way. Annual reporting helps to measure progress in consistent ways across all states in the Strengthening Families National Network, while monthly networking calls help to ensure that learning flows between states and can be harvested through regular conversations. As the work moves into new environments, it is often shaped by the experience of early adapters as well as structured efforts at the national level to build the knowledge base that will support broader implementation.

Phase II—Understanding the changes in programmatic practice that support implementation of a protective factors approach

In phase II, a year-long study of exemplary practice informed a concrete understanding of how programs build protective factors with families. This was accomplished through reviewing information submitted by early care and education programs nominated as exemplary programs, including site visits to over two dozen programs. All of the research tools which informed this study were keyed to the protective factors.

- Five hundred national nominators with deep knowledge of the early childhood and child abuse and neglect prevention fields were asked to nominate exemplary programs that built protective factors in their day-to-day work with families.
- Nominated programs were invited to submit an extensive survey as well as materials and tools that would help create a picture of their day-to-day practice. One hundred programs participated in this phase of the work.
- Two-day site visits were conducted to choose a final pool of 21 exemplary programs. The study protocol included: review of program materials; structured observation; interviews with parents, program leadership and staff; and focus groups with parents, staff and community partners.

The most powerful, convincing information about the impact of programs on parents were family members themselves and the community partners who worked closely with these programs.

Early childhood programs – along with after school programs, home visiting programs, family resource centers and other places where families already go and feel comfortable – also demonstrated that they were eager to think about what more they could do to reduce stress for the families they serve. Their alignment with the culture and values of the families who they serve, their daily contact and their mission of healthy child development make them ideally trusted coaches for all kinds of parents.

Based on this research, a set of practice implementation tools was developed, including a self-assessment to help early care and education programs identify specific changes they could make to enhance their ability to support and strengthen families. A number of practice monographs and other tools were created at this time.

Phase III—Learning from state pilots

The Strengthening Families state pilot was a learning partnership between the Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) and seven states interested in implementing the Strengthening Families approach. Over a two-year period (2005-2007) these seven states examined changes in state policy, new linkages between the early childhood and child welfare systems and enhanced training and support for programs that could help many more early care and education programs implement Strengthening Families practices across their states.

The participating states in the CSSP Strengthening Families Pilot were Alaska, Arkansas, Illinois, Missouri, New Hampshire, Rhode Island and Wisconsin. These seven states were chosen from a field of 27 state teams who applied for the opportunity to work with CSSP on implementing Strengthening Families.

CSSP provided planning, technical assistance and training to each state through a national technical assistance network that included CSSP staff, staff members from exemplary early childhood programs and other national experts in early care and education and child welfare. In the course of the pilot, each state developed and implemented its own unique plan, supported by technical assistance and strategic planning from CSSP. The Doris Duke Charitable Foundation provided funding for technical assistance and peer learning among the states. States provided their own funding for the implementation.

Each state was encouraged to develop strategies and structures that would be appropriate for its unique policy and program implementation environment. Continuity was created through the adoption of the following hallmarks for implementation:

- More programs use the Protective Factors Framework
- Parent leadership is demonstrated at all levels
- Integration of Strengthening Families into Early Care and Education initiatives in many settings is evident
- Early care and education and child welfare services build stronger, mutually beneficial relationships
- Documentation describes key decision points and provides evidence that the “Hallmarks” are being achieved

The creation of a strong learning network between implementing states helped to ensure that effective strategies were spread quickly between states and that state leads were informed by strategic conversation with their peers.

Phase IV—Continuous learning through structured partnerships with a national network of implementers at all levels

In 2007 the Strengthening Families National Network was launched. The network consists of several interconnected circles of partners and implementers.

- At the heart of the network is the circle of over 30 states who are implementing Strengthening Families. In most of these states, the work is led by an interdisciplinary leadership team. State leads and members of leadership teams participate in monthly webinars on topics related to Strengthening Families implementation, co-convened by CSSP and the National Alliance of Children’s Trust and Prevention Funds. In 2013, membership in the Strengthening Families National Network was opened to cities, communities and counties with cross-systems leadership teams implementing Strengthening Families, as well.
- A set of national and federal partners who are engaged in supporting Strengthening Families implementation among their constituencies come together on a quarterly basis to share strategies and plan collaboratively for national work.
- Finally, a broad network includes programmatic implementers, policy-makers, researchers and those simply interested in the work. While this network has less formal membership it includes about 3,000 individuals who receive newsletters, contribute their learning and experience to the network and participate in broader network activities.

CSSP has intentionally built the network so that there is continuous learning both among network members and between the network members and the national initiative. New national-level materials and tools are often built upon the best of what states and localities are developing on the ground and are tested and fine-tuned through active participation by network members.

Active monthly webinars, quarterly national partner meetings and regular formal and informal dialogue with network members help to shape and inform the direction of the national initiative. At the same time, national Strengthening Families team members help to shape the direction of implementation in states, both by working collaboratively with state leads to ensure their work is in line with national thinking and by actively helping to connect and develop learning conversations between states.

Phase V—Continued investment in knowledge building

The initiative also continues to make structured investments in knowledge building that serve to:

- Continue to ensure that the initiative is informed by the most relevant and up-to-date research on protective factors
- Lay the foundation for the expansion of the initiative into new areas and disciplines
- Capture in a structured way the learning from Strengthening Families implementation across the country

Like Phase IV, Phase V is ongoing. Some of the specific ways that the initiative has been continuously building knowledge include:

Conducting Research to Inform the Work. CSSP has engaged in and supported a variety of research methods on specific topics related to protective factors for children, youth and families. This has included:

- **Home-based Child Care Study:** CSSP conducted a study to better understand what exemplary Strengthening Families practice looked like within the context of home-based child care programs. Forty programs in four states (Georgia, Illinois, New Jersey and Wisconsin) were studied. As a result of the study, a separate self-assessment tool was developed for family child care programs. A revised version of this [self-assessment tool](#) was released in 2014.
- **A Look at Strengthening Families in States:** This report was developed based on interviews with all implementing states, site visits to four states and harvesting of information from larger network activity. It was intended to be a point-in-time look at trends and themes based on state implementation of Strengthening Families as of 2009.
- **Youth Thrive:** CSSP has developed a parallel framework of protective and promotive factors for youth and young adults, entitled [Youth Thrive](#). Research to develop the Youth Thrive framework has paralleled early steps in the development of Strengthening Families, including a review of existing literature, dialogue with experts in the field and the identification of exemplary programs. Youth Thrive is currently being piloted in child welfare systems to improve well-being for youth in and transitioning out of foster care.
- **The Quality Improvement Center on Early Childhood:** From 2008-2013, CSSP housed the federally funded [QIC-EC](#), to generate and disseminate new knowledge and robust evidence about programs and strategies that contribute to child abuse and neglect prevention and the promotion of optimal development for infants and young children and their families. Four research and demonstration projects each focused on a particularly vulnerable group of young children and their families. Findings from the QIC-EC were published in a special issue of [The Journal of Zero to Three](#) in September 2014.
- **Foundational paper:** In 2013-14, CSSP revisited the literature review that provided the research base for the development of the Strengthening Families Protective Factors Framework. In the ten years since the original literature review, huge advances had been made in scientific understanding of brain development and the impact of trauma, for example. Updating the research base to incorporate those new understandings also led to better [definitions of each of the protective factors](#) and the development of a range of new materials to provide more guidance to those implementing Strengthening Families. [The Strengthening Families Approach and Protective Factors Framework: Branching Out and Reaching Deeper](#), released in 2014, describes the foundational ideas and research base for the entire framework.

Intensive Knowledge Building with States and Jurisdictions. In addition to information sharing and light-touch technical assistance to all members of the Strengthening Families National Network, CSSP works intensively with smaller groups of states and jurisdictions to explore specific areas of Strengthening Families implementation, advance the work in a particular direction and develop new tools together that are then shared with the rest of the network.

- **Implementation of Strengthening Families in Child Welfare Practice:** Throughout the Strengthening Families initiative, CSSP has partnered with states and jurisdictions to build knowledge around how a protective factors approach can be applied in child welfare practice. Strengthening Families application in child welfare practice. All early pilot states were asked to look at these issues. Following the initial pilot, funding was secured from the A. L. Mailman Foundation to specifically partner with three states—Illinois, New Jersey and Wisconsin—to explore the issues around implementation in child welfare in 2007-2008. In more recent years, states (including CT, NC, UT) and jurisdictions (including the city of Philadelphia and Arlington County, VA) have contracted with CSSP to support integration of Strengthening Families into their child welfare practice models, caseworker training and supervision and/or assessment forms and other tools used in daily child welfare practice. A peer working group of 14 states meets on a bimonthly basis to discuss issues related to implementation in child welfare. All of this work contributes to CSSP's growing understanding of effective strategies for implementing the Protective Factors Framework in child welfare.
- **Intensive work with four “AIM States.”** Through the AIM Initiative, CSSP worked in partnership with four states (Idaho, Massachusetts, Tennessee and Washington) on questions of sustainability for state Strengthening Families efforts. This work included a structured look at the arc of state experiences with Strengthening Families; peer networking and learning around four key issues; and an opportunity for CSSP to learn with and from states about how the national effort can be structured in ways that are supportive of states' work. Based on this work a number of new materials and tools were developed, including new framing material around Strengthening Families evaluation; a framework of core functions for Strengthening Families implementation; and a “depth-finder” tool to be used by leadership teams to self-assess and identify points of opportunity for implementation.
- **Working groups.** In addition to the peer working group on child welfare, CSSP convenes working groups to build knowledge related to other issues in Strengthening Families implementation. (CSSP also encourages and supports national partners and member states to convene working groups on topics of interest to them.) Recent working groups have focused on evaluation of parent and community cafés, development of a [fidelity checklist](#) for café implementation and development of crosswalks between the Strengthening Families program self-assessment and [Head Start's Parent, Family, and Community Engagement framework](#) and [Performance Standards](#).

Facilitating Collection of Meaningful Data in the Field. Programs and states need support to collect meaningful data related to their implementation of Strengthening Families. CSSP has developed tools and systems to support that data collection as well as supported national partners in developing and making tools available.

- **Online tools:** CSSP's national partner Mosaic Network provides an [online data system](#) to support Strengthening Families implementation. Child- and family-serving programs can create accounts in the system, which then includes the program self-assessments, the Protective Factors Survey for parents (with confidential survey administration options) and a staff survey. Programs can generate reports from the data they have entered; and administrators can generate reports of the aggregate data from multiple programs at a local, state or national level.

- **Protective Factors Survey:** The FRIENDS National Resource Center for Community-Based Child Abuse Prevention, a national Strengthening Families partner, worked with the University of Kansas to develop and validate the [Protective Factors Survey](#) (PFS). The PFS is used widely by child- and family-serving programs to measure parents' own assessments of their knowledge and behaviors related to protective factors. The PFS is included in the online data system.
- **Parents' Assessment of Protective Factors:** Through the Quality Improvement Center on Early Childhood (QIC-EC), a new tool was developed to measure protective factors among parents served by each of the research and demonstration projects. The results tool, the Parents' Assessment of Protective Factors (PAPF), has been validated and tested for use with a universal parent population. The PAPF will be released for public use in late 2014 and will be added to the Strengthening Families online data system at a later date.