



ILLINOIS

strengthening families™

A PROTECTIVE FACTORS FRAMEWORK

STRENGTHENING FAMILIES ILLINOIS: STATE PROFILE

Infrastructure

In 2004, Strengthening Families Illinois (SFI) began as an early childhood primary prevention collaboration convened by the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (IDCFS) through a contract with a fiscal agent, Family Focus Inc. In 2011, there were more than 80 partner organizations represented on the leadership team. IDCFS, under the leadership of first Bryan Samuels and then Erwin McEwen, was a major partner in the initiative as well – being the first child welfare system in the country to adopt the Protective Factors Framework as an integral part of its trauma-informed, family-centered, strengths-based practice model. From 2005–2011, IDCFS collaborated with SFI staff to embed the protective factors into its training and staff development and child welfare tools and materials.

Strengthening Families Illinois has been a leader in the national Strengthening Families™ movement. Among its contributions:

- Making the Strengthening Families protective factors accessible to parents through a parent-to-parent public awareness campaign called Love Is Not Enough to Keep Your Family Strong
- Creating the original model for Parent Cafés and training more than 704 people in Illinois on facilitating and hosting cafés
- Researching and adding a sixth protective factor – nurturing and attachment/parent-child relationships
- Developing a comprehensive training sequence for embedding the protective factors into early childhood programs
- Developing evaluation tools

In 2012, due to a state fiscal crisis and resulting budget cuts, the primary prevention portion of SFI was defunded. Strengthening Families Illinois is currently being convened as a voluntary collaboration of its partners.

The protective factors continue to be infused in the partner organizations participating in SFI since 2004. Funding for convening and coordinating the collaboration does not exist at this time. Strengthening Families Illinois partners are committed to sustaining the relationships underlying the success of the Initiative and continuing the work. They have initiated a planning process and are meeting quarterly.

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	✓

State Coordinators

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Parent Partnerships

In Illinois, more than 8,000 people have participated in cafés and 704 people have been trained to facilitate or host cafés. There are voluntary “core teams” to support these activities in four regions in Illinois. More than 7,000 parents are also engaged with SFI through its statewide leadership team that connects parents through events, an online community and website. Be Strong Families (BSF) is especially skilled at engaging child-welfare-involved families in a strength-based, respectful way.

Deepening Knowledge and Understanding

BSF/SFI has a training sequence for early childhood professionals that includes topics such as: protective factors, building relationships with families, recognizing and responding to signs of family stress, communicating with families, collaborating with child welfare and understanding childhood trauma and helping children heal. SFI has developed a robust professional development catalogue for parents and professionals interested in implementing Strengthening Families. SFI collaborating partners also developed training curricula based on the protective factors for professional staff.

Shifting Practice, Policies and Systems

In 2011, more than 120 early childhood programs statewide participated in 13 peer-to-peer SFI Learning Networks to embed the Strengthening Families approach in their work. Evaluation results demonstrate an increase in both the quality and quantity of parent engagement. This work is highlighted in the November 2012 issue of the National Association for the Education of Young Children’s (NAEYC) *Young Children* journal.

Ensuring Accountability

Evaluations of Parent Cafés have shown that 87 percent of participants learned something at the café about each protective factor and intend to change their behavior as a result; 99 percent say the café was helpful. SFI also produced an evaluation report which supported the conclusion that *Awaken to your Potential* is having a positive and sustaining impact on parents’ lives. Site visits to 27 early learning programs that had been implementing Strengthening Families for at least two years showed that SFI helped programs improve the quality of family

engagement and support, shift attitudes of program staff and administrators, achieve greater success in their family engagement efforts and share materials on Strengthening Families with staff and families. The report supports the positive assessment outlined in a 2009 white paper. All reports are available on the Strengthening Families Illinois [website](#).

Evolving Work

In addition to the efforts detailed above, a new organization has emerged in Illinois. The staff team working on Strengthening Families Illinois for the past seven years have launched a 501(c)3 organization called Be Strong Families (BSF). BSF has a contract with the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services to build protective factors with child-welfare involved families including: birth parents, foster parents, teen wards who are parents, young parents who recently aged out of the child welfare system, adoptive parents and families receiving in-home services from the child welfare system. For example, BSF has developed a support program for parents whose children are in substitute care called *Get Real About Getting Your Kids Back* – a three-hour workshop, three one-hour booster sessions, a weekly positive check-in with a coach, and daily inspirational text messages. BSF is working to build Be Strong Dads – a Strengthening Dads Initiative. Finally, BSF is using Parent Cafés as a foundation for a violence prevention initiative in 21 Chicago / Cook County communities.

Profile last updated: February 2014