

STRENGTHENING FAMILIES WISCONSIN: STATE PROFILE

Infrastructure

Wisconsin was among the first Strengthening Families initiative pilot states. The Wisconsin Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention Board (CANPB) partners with Supporting Families Together Association (SFTA) to convene a state leadership team that includes representatives from the Departments of Children and Families, Public Instruction and Health Services, Office of Children's Mental Health, Milwaukee Child Welfare Partnership, the Wisconsin Alliance for Infant Mental Health, Wisconsin Head Start Association and various family serving agencies. All saw the value in enhancing connections with systems like early care and education as a means of preventing child abuse and neglect. The partners find that the Strengthening Families protective factors provide a useful, strategic framework for working with families and the systems that serve them.

At this time there are no designated financial resources going towards the Strengthening Families Initiative in Wisconsin. All funds are provided in-kind by the respective agencies.

Parent Partnerships

Parent partnerships are happening in many sectors within Wisconsin. Waukesha County's Department of Health and Human Services is using Parent Cafés in an innovative way, inviting foster parents, biological parents with open child welfare cases and Head Start parents to participate in café conversations about the protective factors. As a result of these efforts, Milwaukee, Rock and Portage Counties are now using the Parent Café model in a similar fashion.

Other local communities have partnered with multiple agencies in their region to provide Parent Cafés to families who benefit from family support services. Parent Cafés are being offered in 4 additional communities throughout WI by Family Support agencies and many more through Head Start programs. In 2015, SFTA began implementing Parent Cafés statewide in partnership with Child Care Resource & Referral agencies and funding from Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge Grant at the WI Department of Children and Families. As of August 2016, 75 Parent Café sessions have been offered with 883 parents and/or caregivers benefiting from these sessions. Through this project, 120 parents have been recruited as parent hosts with 74 of those parents already trained to be a table host at future sessions.

Strengthening Families

Strengthening Families™ (SF) 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 SF 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 SF 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 SF 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	✓
SF included in State Home Visiting Plan	✓
SF is being implemented into child welfare system	On county basis

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Deepening Knowledge and Understanding

YoungStar, Wisconsin's child care quality rating and improvement system, gives early care and education programs the opportunity to earn a point towards their quality rating when they participate in training on the Protective Factors Framework. The statewide network of child care resource and referral agencies and family resource centers, now known as the Supporting Families Together Association (SFTA), has created a protective factors training plan and provides technical assistance to child care facilities interested in using the Protective Factors Framework in their settings. SFTA continually increases statewide access to Strengthening Families trainings with an emphasis on serving children and families from underserved language, cultural and geographic groups.

Shifting Practice, Policies and Systems

SFTA offers training and technical assistance on the Protective Factors Framework to early care and education providers and child care centers. SFTA also administers YoungStar, which includes training in Strengthening Families as a quality indicator. From 2011-2016, there have been 196 Strengthening Families Trainings with 3,728 participants. As of July 2016, 825 providers had received a point toward their YoungStar rating by attending the Strengthening Families training.

Wisconsin was selected in 2007 as one of three states to receive specialized technical assistance from the Center for the Study of Social Policy through a grant from the A.L. Mailman Foundation to build stronger relationships between early care and education and child welfare. Wisconsin continues that work within several counties to further embed the Strengthening Families philosophy as a means to enhance the relationship between child welfare and early care and education.

In addition, Wisconsin was selected to receive federal funding through the Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge, which is administered by the Department of Children and Families. With this funding, Department of Children and Families has placed a strong focus on Family Engagement which will better integrate Strengthening Families into existing infrastructure, such as YoungStar.

Ensuring Accountability

Though no rigorous evaluation has been conducted, in 2009 the peer-reviewed journal *Early Education and Development* published an article summarizing the effects of Wisconsin's early Strengthening Families implementation efforts. The authors analyzed program self-assessments submitted by 186 early care and education programs. The analysis revealed that Head Start programs had better support systems in place for families than "mainstream" early care and education programs. Results also showed that a small amount of state and local funding provided enough incentive for programs to improve their family-strengthening practices. In addition, Wisconsin created a logic model to discuss ways to integrate Strengthening Families into child welfare practice and also created Parent Café evaluation forms.

Evolving Work

Wisconsin will continue to focus its efforts on policy-level changes that promote the Strengthening Families philosophy. The initiative is also working on a plan to evaluate Parent Cafés and continues to identify strategies for implementing Strengthening Families in child welfare practice. In addition, better integration continues to occur between the Race to the Top efforts, the Governor's Early Childhood Advisory Council and Strengthening Families.

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