

strengthening families in early childhood programs

Strengthening Families™ provides a set of tools for early care and education (ECE) programs that helps them deepen their work with the families of the children they serve. When early care and education programs adopt the Strengthening Families approach to working with children and families, they frame their work around building five, research-based Protective Factors (see sidebar) with families. The Protective Factors have been shown to reduce the likelihood of abuse and neglect and also to create the environment children need for optimal development.

WHY DO STRENGTHENING FAMILIES IN ECE?

- Strengthening Families gives ECE providers a framework and tools for building relationships with parents. When providers have close, trusting relationships with parents, they can help to address problems early.
- Using Protective Factors language across sectors (such as child welfare and early childhood) helps to engage new partners and identify new resources.
- Strengthening Families is not a curriculum or a program; it is an approach that is consistent with what many ECE providers are already doing. The tools and Protective Factors framework help providers build on their strengths and implement changes in a way that makes sense.
- A National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) survey showed that 97% of ECE providers want to do more to prevent abuse and neglect. Strengthening Families offers concrete tools and strategies for helping families build Protective Factors to prevent child maltreatment.

WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE?

A study of 21 exemplary early care and education programs around the country showed that early childhood educators are already doing things every day that strengthen families and build Protective Factors. Strengthening Families through Early Care and Education is about bringing intentionality to those activities and everything else that goes on in a program.

Implementing Strengthening Families in an early childhood program involves assessing what is already taking place that builds Protective Factors and making **small but significant changes** that can help providers support families. These changes can be affordable, effective ways to make programs more family-friendly and practice more strengths-based while they allow providers to recognize and respond to signs of family stress that may lead to child maltreatment.

“I couldn’t believe how small actions we took forever changed the life of a family.” - ECE PROVIDER

PROTECTIVE FACTORS

Five Protective Factors are the foundation of the Strengthening Families approach. Research indicates that when these factors are present and robust in a family, the likelihood of abuse and neglect diminish. The Protective Factors are:

- Parental Resilience
- Social Connections
- Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development
- Concrete Supports in Times of Need
- Social and Emotional Competence of Children

Professionals in early childhood, family support, child welfare, and a variety of other sectors can make small but significant changes in their day to day work to build these Protective Factors in families.

strengthening families

THROUGH EARLY CARE & EDUCATION

PROGRAM STRATEGIES

The Center for the Study of Social Policy conducted a thorough study of 21 exemplary early care and education centers around the country and identified 7 program strategies being used that build Protective Factors with families:

- Facilitate Friendships and Mutual Support
- Strengthen Parenting
- Respond to Family Crises
- Link Families to Services and Opportunities
- Value and Support Parents
- Facilitate Children's Social and Emotional Development
- Observe and Respond to Early Warning Signs of Abuse and Neglect

STRENGTHENING FAMILIES SELF ASSESSMENT

The Self Assessment is a tool for early childhood programs interested in making small but significant changes in their practice that both support providers in their work with families and dramatically impact the lives of parents and children involved in the program. It is a learning and assessment tool to help identify concrete and practical ways to incorporate the Strengthening Families approach into what is already taking place in a program.

Facilitate Friendships and Mutual Support	Excellent	Fair	Poor	Not Applicable	Comments and Examples
1 A comfortable space is available for families to meet informally					
2 The program helps parents set up formal and informal support mechanisms, such as phone trees, car pools, babysitting co-ops, and play groups					
3 The program connects families with similar interests,					

A selection from the Self Assessment

The Self Assessment materials are applicable to ECE programs of any size, budget, or structure, and most of the strategies described can be implemented without creating new staff positions, making significant changes to existing facilities, or raising additional financial resources.

There are seven short sections of the Self Assessment, corresponding to the seven program strategies (see sidebar), to be completed by a diverse group of people involved with the program. Once the Self Assessment is completed and areas for improvement have been identified, the group can create an action plan to enhance the program's work.

The Self Assessment is available in hard copy as part of the **Strengthening Families Guidebook**, and also online at www.strengtheningfamilies.net. When a program uses the online Self Assessment, it can generate reports based on its responses and invite parents and staff to log on and complete short, anonymous questionnaires about the impact of Strengthening Families. Information entered online will also help build a growing library of aggregated data about programs implementing Strengthening Families.

TOOLS FOR IMPLEMENTATION

The Strengthening Families website, at www.strengtheningfamilies.net, includes a wide variety of tools for programs to use to align their practice with Strengthening Families strategies, as well as materials for parents. Some of these include:

- One-page handouts on each of the Protective Factors for staff
- Power Point presentations to make the case for Strengthening Families to staff, administrators, and board members
- Profiles of each program from the study of exemplary ECE centers
- Introductory letters, Protective Factors handouts, and Family Satisfaction Surveys in English and 16 other languages