

The “Strengthening Families” Approach

Strengthening Families is an approach to working with families to prevent child abuse and neglect that builds upon their strengths, rather than focusing on their deficits. It is not a curriculum or a program, but instead offers a framework of five research-based Protective Factors that give parents what they need to parent effectively, even under stress:

- ◆ **For adults:**
 - Parental resilience
 - Social connections for families
 - Knowledge of parenting and child development
 - Concrete supports in time of need
- ◆ **For children:**
 - Healthy social and emotional development

Pennsylvania joins other states in using Strengthening Families as part of the core safety net and the first response to families under stress. This prevention approach reduces the chance that families will require more costly government services and is a cost-effective way to reduce abuse and neglect, lighten social service caseloads and improve school success.

Background

The Center for the Study of Social Policy identified a need to support early childhood programs’ support for families who are under stress. The Center researched and developed a set of strategies that involve early childhood programs working with families to build protective factors around children.

These factors are not new or unique to Strengthening Families; they are utilized less formally by many current child abuse prevention efforts. Strengthening Families compiles the protective factors into a meaningful and usable format that is easily understood by teachers and administrators of early childhood programs. A protective factors approach, such as Strengthening Families, has the advantage of being do-able, affordable and able to reach millions of children through the outreach to child care and other early learning settings that parents readily access for their children. The approach uses a strength-based model to build families’ capacities.

Why should we do this work?

Implementing the Strengthening Families framework in PA provides:

- A purposeful and intentional approach to working with families in all child- and family-serving systems.
- Easy concepts for parents and professionals to grasp.
- A universally inclusive approach that values the input of parents working side by side with professionals.
- Common sense (or logical) linkages to many federal and state requirements.
- Support for all child and family service systems to view the connectedness of our work.
- A common language for child and family service systems to adopt in their work.

Mission: “Pennsylvania, through the Strengthening Families Leadership Team, works to sustain and weave the Five Protective Factors, which are social and emotional competence of children, knowledge of parenting and child development, social connections, concrete supports in times of need and parental resilience, into policies, program and practice across child and family service systems.”

*Relationships * Strong Families * Respect*

Vision: “Pennsylvania families will use a seamless network of committed partners who provide strength-based family supports.”

The PA Strengthening Families Leadership Team’s committed members represent the following child and family service systems:

Office of Child Development and Early Learning (OCDEL)

Pennsylvania Children’s Trust Fund (CTF)

Office of Children, Youth and Families (OCYF)

PA Child Welfare Training Program

Office of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services (OMHSAS)

Pennsylvania KEY

Early Childhood Mental Health Program

Community Engagement Groups (CEGs)

Head Start (State and local programs)

Project ELECT Education Leading to Employment & Career Training (PDE)

PA Parent Information and Resource Center (PA PIRC)

Local School Districts and Intermediate Units

Pennsylvania Family Support Alliance (PFSA)

The Strengthening Families Leadership Team

Pennsylvania's efforts to integrate the Strengthening Families approach into its early childhood and child welfare programs has been led by a statewide Leadership Team that includes representatives from the Departments of Public Welfare and Education, as well as community-based service partners, early care and education programs, local school districts and Intermediate Units. The Team offers guidance to state child- and family-serving programs in incorporating the Strengthening Families approach within their work.

Accomplishments

Pennsylvania joined the Strengthening Families effort in 2006. The following accomplishments have occurred since that time:

- PA became an affiliate member of the Strengthening Families National Network sponsored by the Center for the Study of Social Policy.
- Since 2006, the PA Children's Trust Fund grant application has included requirements for the use of the Strengthening Families framework in programs.
- Forty early childhood professionals attended training in the use of the *Prevent Child Abuse and Neglect* curriculum developed by the national organization, Zero to Three, which has aligned its prevention work with the Strengthening Families framework and provided technical assistance and resources to 42 early childhood programs in the southeast region of Pennsylvania.
- The PA Quality Rating and Improvement System (Keystone STARS) was updated to incorporate Strengthening Families language in the worksheets and Best Practice Guides used by early learning programs and can be found at www.pakeys.org under the tab Early Childhood Programs, forms & tools, optional tools.
- Thirty-eight professional development instructors from the early childhood field completed a 6.5 hour Building Protective Factors with Families "Professional Development Instructors' Institute" (PDII) in January 2010.
 - Toolkits, containing resources relating to Strengthening Families, were assembled and distributed to the instructors, providing materials for ongoing use in their regions.
 - Following the PDII, 13 regional trainings have occurred in PA, involving 221 early childhood professionals.
- The Office of Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services (OMHSAS) included several articles on the Strengthening Families framework and the Protective Factors in their newsletters and on their website, <http://www.parecovery.org>.
- The Child Welfare Training system and representatives from the state Office of Children, Youth and Families (OCYF) are adapting the Strengthening Families materials for use within their system.
- The National Alliance of Children's Trust Funds awarded a mini-grant to PA for the provision of technical assistance in Leadership Team development to further expand the Strengthening Families approach in state initiatives.

Next Steps

The leadership team is working to weave Strengthening Families into existing policies, programs, and practice across child and family service systems using three key areas where an investment in focused work can leverage opportunities to integrate Strengthening Families ideas into a large number of programs and/or have a sustainable impact over time. These key areas are **Building Parent Partnerships, Infusing Protective Factors into Professional Development and Building Collaboration across Systems.**

For more information

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Visit the Strengthening Families website at www.strengtheningfamilies.net.