



Strengthening Families™ Core Messages Explained

**The Protective Factors approach is not about giving you more to do.
It's about doing more with what you have.**



Implementing Strengthening Families is about small but significant changes in everyday practice, and about the shifts in policies and systems that allow and promote those changes. In most cases, Strengthening Families has been implemented using existing funding streams. Many implementation activities for Strengthening Families can be carried out at little cost, particularly when partner agencies and systems bring resources such as allocated staff time to the table. Education, implementation and assessment tools are available free of charge.

As an approach, Strengthening Families can be used in any setting that serves children, youth and families, and can bring together program-level and systems-level partners from multiple sectors – providing a common language and set of collective outcomes to work toward.

Families gain what they need to be successful when key protective and promotive factors are robust in their lives and their communities.



Protective Factors are conditions or attributes of individuals, families, communities, or the larger society that mitigate or eliminate risk. Promotive Factors are conditions or attributes of individuals, families, communities, or the larger society that actively enhance well-being. Traditionally, child maltreatment prevention and intervention strategies have focused exclusively on risk factors and their elimination. Risk factors refer to the stressful conditions, events or circumstances that increase a family's chances for poor outcomes, including child abuse and neglect. Risk factors include things like maternal depression, substance abuse, family violence and persistent poverty.

Focusing exclusively on risk factors with families can leave families feeling stigmatized or unfairly judged. On the other hand, using a protective factors approach can be a positive way to engage families because it focuses on families' strengths and what they are doing right. A protective factors approach can also provide a strong platform for building collaborative partnerships with other service providers—like child care—that are not as familiar or comfortable with a risk paradigm as a basis for engagement with families.

Recently, the terminology of promotive factors has also entered the picture. Promotive factors go beyond just protecting against risk or bad outcomes to actively promote a healthy outcome. Research shows that the protective factors identified by Strengthening Families actually serve as promotive factors, as well. This is because the research behind Strengthening Families identifies characteristics of families that increase the likelihood of optimal development for children (a promotive function) while simultaneously reducing the likelihood of child maltreatment (a protective function).

As long as children are nurtured, safe and thriving, parenting along the mainstream isn't essential.



Culture plays a key role in effective parenting and effectively supporting positive parenting practices. Parents from any cultural background can benefit from learning new information as long as it is respectfully communicated and connects with their cultural traditions.

We have to shift our perspectives to see parents as the primary agents of change for their families, and to find the ways that we, as service providers, can help them be the best parents they can be.

Once parents experience being treated as partners in getting to good outcomes for their children, we can invite them to partner in other ways as well. We are all more receptive to an invitation when we feel it is coming from a place of respect. When we engage them effectively, parents are our most valuable partners in ensuring that programs, services, and policies meet the needs of families.

Developmental science tells us what is important.



Brain development research points us to early childhood (the first three years in particular) and adolescence as critical periods of development.

Strengthening Families focuses on early childhood while the parallel Youth Thrive initiative focuses on protective and promotive factors for youth.

Looking at early childhood in particular, Strengthening Families emphasizes the importance of nurturing and responsive relationships with caregivers. A fast-growing body of research underscores the effects of traumatic experiences on children and youth – effects that can carry into the rest of a young person's life. We know now that the presence of a buffering adult can be critical in helping children come through stressful experiences without experiencing negative effects on their development. But we also know that typical system responses to children's traumatic experiences can actually exacerbate those negative effects – for instance, through practices such as removing children from the home unnecessarily, or punishing children for “misbehavior” when they react to their traumatic experiences.

