

## CORE FUNCTIONS OF STRENGTHENING FAMILIES™ IMPLEMENTATION

Strengthening Families™ is implemented in a wide variety of programs, agencies, systems, communities and states. Across all of these settings, implementation includes five core functions:

- Building an infrastructure to advance and sustain the work
- Building parent partnerships
- Deepening knowledge and understanding of a protective factors approach
- Shifting practice, policies and systems toward a protective factors approach
- Ensuring accountability

Each of these functions is critical to effective implementation, although exactly how they are carried out will vary depending on the setting and role of the implementer.

### **Building an Infrastructure to Advance and Sustain the Work**

Leadership and implementation teams are typically the driving force behind successful implementation of Strengthening Families. At the state or community level, the Strengthening Families leadership team brings together partners from various systems to coordinate their efforts and services to focus on protective factors. At the program or agency level, an internal implementation team – ideally including parents who participate in the program or receive services – can ensure that a focus on protective factors infuses all aspects of the organization's work. Other critical aspects of building the infrastructure include advocating for the vision of the initiative, identifying funding to support the work and developing and monitoring implementation and action plans.

### **Building Parent Partnerships**

At all levels of implementation, parents are crucial partners in authentic and effective application of the Protective Factors Framework. Parent partnership begins at the program and service level, where collaboration is based on building relationships between providers and parents. This work with parents is also reinforced through activities that support parents in building protective factors for themselves and their children. Building on this foundation, parents should have opportunities for leadership and participation in decision-making so that they can play a guiding role in ensuring that the programs and services they use are both accessible and effective. Parents who become engaged in this way often step into further leadership roles at the community, system, state or national level. Parent partners bring important perspectives and insight to leadership teams, and can play a variety of meaningful roles such as engaging other parents and community members and modeling what authentic partnership looks like for service providers.

### **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.

For more information, visit [www.strengtheningfamilies.net](http://www.strengtheningfamilies.net).

## Implementation Levels

The core functions of Strengthening Families implementation are carried out by implementation teams at multiple levels.

At the **national** level, the Strengthening Families team at the [Center for the Study of Social Policy](#) supports a national network of implementing states and jurisdictions and national partner organizations; develops and disseminates tools and materials to support implementation at all levels and encourages expanding the research base for the Protective Factors Framework.

At the **state or jurisdiction** level, a leadership team typically works on coordinating efforts across partners and systems; making the case to stakeholders and new partners; integrating the Strengthening Families approach into current practices; recommending shifts in policy and systems to deepen and sustain implementation and developing a plan for local and/or state evaluation. Authentic inclusion of parent members enhances these teams and models and promotes partnerships with parents at the program and agency level.

Implementation teams within **agencies and systems** introduce changes in daily practice, provider perspective and policy to shift to a protective factors approach. These teams know their own systems and agencies best and are able to motivate staff members to make small but significant changes, engage parents and help monitor the agency or system's implementation progress and effectiveness.

Finally, at the **program** level, implementation teams typically include direct service staff, parents and management. Implementation at the program level means connecting with and supporting parents, ensuring that all staff are trained in the Strengthening Families approach, integrating the framework into current practice and evaluating the impact of their efforts.

## Deepening Knowledge and Understanding

Training and outreach, professional development activities and raising awareness among parents and providers are the primary strategies used to deepen knowledge and understanding of the Strengthening Families approach and the Protective Factors Framework. This work can take on several forms. In some cases, leadership team members are called on to create local outreach tools and messaging to engage new partners in supporting parents. At other times, this work entails offering in-depth training to providers to give them the tools and support to change their practice.

## Shifting Practice, Policies and Systems

At its heart, Strengthening Families is about changing how service providers interact with families to support them in building protective factors. Programs and agencies will need varying levels of support as they change their daily practices and organizational policies. Technical assistance, incentives and practice tools aligned with the Protective Factors Framework are all critical in supporting those shifts. Policies and systems affect large numbers of children and families and offer opportunities to institutionalize a protective factors approach. Policy changes may occur at the organizational level (e.g., changing board bylaws to include parent members), at the agency level (e.g., requiring case workers to use assessment forms that address protective factors) or at the state or national level (e.g., making parent partnership an element of quality rating and improvement systems for early care and education).

## Ensuring Accountability

Finally, implementers must ensure that their efforts are effective, making a difference for families and making good use of the funds invested in them. Strengthening Families is an approach, not a model, and it can be implemented in many different ways. This flexibility is a tremendous strength and, when it comes to evaluation, a challenge. At the national level, CSSP works to ensure that the Protective Factors Framework is supported by established and current research, and supports the development of tools and materials to support evaluation. Local and state implementers may choose to assess the effect of training or professional development on provider practice; the effect of program participation on parents or families or the strength of protective factors among families in a community over time.