



Core Functions of Strengthening Families Implementation

Strengthening Families is an approach to working with families with a focus on building key protective factors that help their families thrive. It can be flexibly implemented in a wide variety of programs, agencies, systems, and communities. Equitable, high-quality, and effective implementation of the approach is grounded in a shared commitment to a set of foundational values and attention to a set of core functions. The foundational values, listed below, were developed by the Center for the Study of Social Policy to guide implementation of the approach with integrity, and are described in more detail in a 2024 report.¹

Foundational Values of Strengthening Families

- Employ a social-ecological approach
- Adopt a strengths-based perspective
- Recognize and respond to oppression and privilege
- Incorporate an intersectional frame of reference
- Demonstrate cultural responsiveness, cultural humility, and intellectual humility
- Amplify constituent voice and power
- Pursue equity and justice for all children, youth, and families

Grounded in these values, there are common strategies or functions that should be carried out by any program, agency, community, state, or national organization implementing Strengthening Families. These core functions may look very different in practice from one program or community to another; some entities may not have the capacity to engage in all six of the core functions, but should aim to partner with other entities so that a community or state's Strengthening Families efforts are touching on all six core functions. Informed by people implementing and evaluating Strengthening Families around the country, CSSP describes these six core functions as:

- 1. Partner and share power with parents to build strengths, shape implementation plans, and reach other parents**
- 2. Provide leadership to encourage effective implementation of Strengthening Families through efforts such as coordination, funding, and collaboration**
- 3. Train and coach service providers and system leaders to shift practice**
- 4. Implement policy and system changes to better support families**
- 5. Promote community conditions that strengthen families**
- 6. Evaluate effectiveness and engage in regular reflection to improve the work**

Each of these core functions is described in more detail in the following pages, followed by a description of how implementers carry out the core functions at various levels of implementation.

¹ Harper Browne, C. (2024, January). Expanding the Perspectives and Research Foundation for the Strengthening Families & Youth Thrive Frameworks. Center for the Study of Social Policy. <https://cssp.org/resource/expanding-the-perspectives-and-research-foundation-for-the-strengthening-families-youth-thrive-frameworks/>.

1. Partner and share power with parents to build strengths, shape implementation plans, and reach other parents

- Be explicit and intentional about welcoming the voices and partnership of all adults who play a primary caregiving role in children’s lives, including mothers and fathers through birth, adoption, or temporary care; grandparents and other extended family members raising children; and all others who play this role in a child’s life
- Respect parents as first teachers, decision-makers for their families, and engaged participants in programs and services - as the baseline for all other partnership efforts
- Invite and compensate parents/caregivers as partners in delivering training or services, improving programs, shaping implementation plans, and educating other parents/caregivers about protective factors, the interplay between positive and adverse childhood experiences, and the importance of foundational relationships
- Model parent partnership to service providers and other decision-makers
- Welcome and support parents/caregivers to lean into advocacy and leadership roles – particularly those parents whose communities or families have not been served well; their voices are critical in shaping services, systems, and policies for the better

2. Provide leadership to encourage effective implementation of Strengthening Families through efforts such as coordination, funding, and collaboration

- Convene or participate in a Strengthening Families implementation or leadership team at the organization, agency, community, or state level, including parents/caregivers, direct service providers, and decision-makers
- Dedicate organizational, community, philanthropic, state, and/or federal resources to support and sustain the work
- Envision what you are working to achieve, and coordinate how various members of the team are contributing to achieving that vision
- Develop and monitor implementation plans
- Center equity – always focusing on who is being reached, who is at the table, and where different or additional efforts are needed

3. Train and coach service providers and system leaders to shift practice

- Provide or coordinate training for service providers to recognize, validate, and bolster the strengths of **all** parents/caregivers
- Share tools and resources to help providers integrate the everyday actions that help families build their protective factors
- Provide coaching and feedback to support practice change, through supervisory practices, observation and feedback, and/or peer learning and support



4. Implement policy and system changes to better support families

- Design and implement incentives and/or requirements for practice changes that focus on family strengths
- Institutionalize practice changes by revising policies, forms, and other protocols
- Insist on diverse voices and perspectives at decision-making tables that affect child- and family-serving systems and family well-being, including parents/caregivers
- Consider policy changes 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)

5. Promote community conditions that strengthen families

- Work to ensure that all families, in all neighborhoods, have access to essential services and can meet their basic needs
- Foster strong social connections and broad social support for children and families
- Build social norms that promote a culture of shared responsibility for children, looking out for each other, and asking for help when needed
- Address historical and structural racism and other forms of discrimination and their effects on individuals, families, neighborhoods, and communities

6. Evaluate effectiveness and engage in regular reflection to improve the work

- Ensure that Strengthening Families efforts are effective, making a difference for families, and making good use of the funds invested
- Focus on desired results, how to assess whether they have been achieved, and what can be done differently to improve performance - such as by assessing 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
- Take a continuous quality improvement approach - gathering data or less formal feedback, making changes, and assessing their effects over time



Implementation Levels

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

At the national level, 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 meets to coordinate efforts across partners and systems; make the case to stakeholders and new partners; integrate the Strengthening Families approach into current practices; recommend shifts in policy and systems to deepen and sustain implementation; and develop a plan for local and/or state evaluation. Authentic partnership with 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 organizational 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 to build their protective factors, ensuring that all staff are trained and supported in applying the Strengthening Families approach, integrating the framework into current practice, and evaluating the impact of their efforts.

