



Strengthening Families

Michael Harnar, Ph.D.
Julie Tarr, Ed.D.

A look at national data on program strategies, staff capacity and the protective factors

ABSTRACT

This paper analyses data from the Strengthening Families national database that includes the program self-assessment (PSA), staff survey, and the protective factors survey (PFA). The data shows how programs rate across the seven strategies with best practices to support children and families, and staff understanding of the framework, practice and professional development needs. Parent resiliency and areas where additional program supports may be warranted are provided. The authors offer insights and recommendations on how to better use the Strengthening Families tools to inform practice and resource allocation.



CENTER FOR THE STUDY
OF SOCIAL POLICYS

strengthening families
A PROTECTIVE FACTORS FRAMEWORK

About the Center for the Study of Social Policy and Strengthening Families Framework

Over the last three decades the Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) has worked to influence policy that affects vulnerable populations. Since 2000 CSSP has focused on place-based and two-generation strategies to end poverty and improve children's future. With funding from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation CSSP sought to develop new strategies for preventing child abuse and neglect by intervening before abuse or neglect occur. Its aim is to systemically reach a national audience and very large numbers of children, by targeting children 0-5 through early care and education providers and agencies working in child welfare.

Following an extensive literature review, and input from an advisory committee and the field, CSSP launched the Strengthening Families initiative, the heart of which is the Protective Factors Framework. The initiative also undertook development of a program self-assessment tool that helps programs align their strategies with best practices to support children and families¹. Concurrently, the FRIENDS National Resource Center for Community-Based Child Abuse Prevention developed a Protective Factors Survey (PFS) for its network of federally funded Community Based Child Abuse Prevention (CBCAP) programs. The PFS is a pre-post evaluation tool for use with caregivers receiving child maltreatment prevention services. It is a self-administered survey that measures protective factors in five areas: family functioning and resiliency, social support, concrete support, nurturing and attachment, and knowledge of parenting and child development. The primary purpose of the PFS is to provide feedback to agencies for continuous improvement and evaluation purposes, including identifying areas where workers can focus on increasing individual family protective factors². Another important addition to the Strengthening Families toolbox is a staff survey for programs implementing the Strengthening Families Framework to measure staff capacity to work effectively with families. It is intended to help staff improve families' day-to-day experiences by building staff competency in identifying family stress and responding effectively. The survey is completed anonymously and reported in aggregate at the program level. Programs are then able to develop action plans and target professional development resources to help staff increase their knowledge of the Protective Factors, build skills and better support families.

About Mosaic Network, Inc. and the online data system

Founded in 2000, Mosaic Network, Inc. (Mosaic) provides evaluation services by using technology as a tool to improve data collection and analysis. CSSP partnered with Mosaic to develop the Strengthening Families online data system that includes the program self-assessment, the protective factors survey, and the staff survey. Together these enable programs to track and use their findings for improvements that will benefit children and families. In addition to information provided at the program level, the data system allows state-level administrators to aggregate data to identify trends and inform decisions around training, technical assistance and resource allocation.

Implications for Practice

Programs that build the strengthening families framework into their approach with parents are likely to realize better outcomes for children and families, and ultimately in the communities where they live. With respect to early education providers, integrating the framework into state standards and quality rating systems reinforces the need to provide social and emotional support to children, and promotes strategies to engage and support families. The PSA and staff survey allows providers to estimate where they are in reaching these goals and tracks their progress towards identified program improvement plans.

This inquiry intends to present an analysis of the national dataset that will: 1) provide a baseline of how providers rate themselves in meeting the framework factors; 2) assess staff competency in understanding and building support across the protective factors; and, 3) provide insight into how families are doing against the protective factors and whether changes in parental ratings are influenced by implementation of the Strengthening Families Framework. Understanding variations across program and parent characteristics can help guide resource allocation to improve services and provide states with more concrete strategies to effectively implement the framework, particularly as part of their Quality Rating Improvement Systems (QRIS).

¹ Doris Duke Charitable Foundation and Center for Study of Social Policy Report (October 2009), A look at Strengthening Families in the States.

² Institute for the Educational Research and Public Service at the University of Kansas and Friends Network (March 2008), User Manual: A guide to administering the Protective Factors Survey.

Specifically, the analysis of the online data sought to answer the following questions:

- 1. How do programs rate themselves across the seven strategies in the PSA?**
- 2. Do staff responses on the staff survey demonstrate an understanding of the Strengthening Families Framework, and is staff given opportunities to build their capacity to support families?**
- 3. How are parents rating themselves across the five Protective Factors?**
- 4. Are programs that provide multiple services and rate themselves highly on all strategies serving parents that need services most?**
- 5. Are there positive changes in how parents respond (pre-post) on the protective factors survey, and is change predicted by parent characteristics?**

Methodology

Three data sets were included in these analyses. The Program Self Assessment survey (PSA), completed by program managers, covers seven strategies that programs might include in their programming. Each strategy has varying numbers of items, from 7 to 19, with numerous sub-items. Also included in the PSA data set was a program profile that organizations are required to complete when registering with the data system. The Protective Factors Survey (PFS) completed by parents, comprises 20 items covering the five factors mentioned above and various demographic variables. The Staff Survey (SS), completed by staff working for programs, comprises 20 items, each with multiple sub-items, eight of which are basic demographic items.

The online data system began collecting data in 2009. To date 2,677 program self-assessments have been completed, and 865 staff at some of these programs completed the staff survey. Parents completed 4,674 protective factor surveys, with 321 pre-post matched surveys.

After data cleaning, the final PSA data set included 2,671 program profiles with self-assessments. Not every program completed the entire survey but because incomplete records still provided important data, all were retained. For analyses, strategy scores were computed first by creating a dichotomous variable of either implementing each strategy component or not. This was computed as:

- **Agree and strongly agree = yes [1]**
- **Disagree, strongly disagree, neither, and not applicable = no [0]**

Strategy items with multiple options were weighted by the total number of options available. For instance, Strategy 1 item 4 offered six (a-f) options to meet “The program provides opportunities for families to socialize and foster a sense of community through:” Options included:

- a) Periodic events like coffee breaks and breakfasts**
- b) Celebrations, graduations, and holidays**
- c) Field trips and activities**
- d) Events celebrating cultural customs, potlucks, and other opportunities for parents to share and learn about each other’s home lives and cultural backgrounds**
- e) Affordable family activities**
- f) Special programs for dads, grandparents, teen moms, and other caregivers**

By counting a 1 for each of these items the above scoring method disproportionately weighted items with different numbers of examples of ways to meet the item. The weighted coding schema allowed items only a 1 or 0 and those with multiple examples were divided into 1. For example, the six examples in Strategy 1 item 4 were each given .167 for agree or strongly agree and 0 for all other responses. This method was used to compute a strategy percentage score by taking the total yes entries and dividing it by the total possible yes entries per strategy.

Parent PFS data were also cleaned for data errors and missing data. The original data set included 4,764 records and was reduced to 3,843 records that provided complete PFS survey data. Data entries were recoded so that a scale of 1-7 emerged and survey subscales were calculated as directed in the PFS Manual.³

The Staff survey data was downloaded and cleaned so that 865 records remained in the final data set. Not every participant completed the entire survey but because incomplete records still provided important data, all were retained.

³http://friendsnrc.org/direct-download-menuitem/doc_download/153-protective-factors-survey-user-manual

Results

Program Self-Assessment

The Strengthening Families Self-Assessment Survey is organized by seven program strategies (see insert below). This approach for working with families is considered best practice and is widely used in Quality Rating and Improvement Systems. Each of the program strategies consisted of varying number of questions asking agreement that the program implemented dimensions of that strategy. Response options use a 5-point agreement scale of: Strongly Disagree; Disagree; Neither Agree or Disagree; Agree; Strongly Agree or Not Applicable. These were coded to provide a dichotomous response of either implementing or not implementing each dimension (see methodology section for a description of the coding method).

Strengthening Families Program Strategy Descriptions used for Rating Task

- 1. Facilitating friendships and mutual support** – Helping parents to connect with each other and develop social networks.
- 2. Strengthening parenting** – Providing guidance, role modeling, and information on parenting and child development, including special support around children’s challenging behaviors.
- 3. Responding to family crises** – Noticing family stress, listening, making referrals, and/or mobilizing other parents to provide support as needed.
- 4. Linking families to services and opportunities** – Making and following through on referrals, maintaining relationships with service providers, and sharing community information with families.
- 5. Facilitating children’s social and emotional development** – Providing a nurturing and caring environment, using a structured curriculum for social and emotional development, teaching parents to support that development and respond to challenges, and observing and responding to signs that development is not on track.
- 6. Observing and responding to early warning signs of child abuse and neglect** – Consistent monitoring of child health and family stress, immediate outreach at signs of stress, clear protocols for staff response, and trusting relationships with social service and mental health agencies.
- 7. Valuing and supporting parents** – Making all family members feel welcome, involving parents and caregivers in decision-making at all levels, and providing many opportunities for participation.

Table 1 shows the mean percentage score and standard deviation for programs agreeing or strongly agreeing with the implementation of each strategy in the program self-assessment. Programs agreed that they were implementing nearly three-fourths of all items included in each strategy, with the lowest (.70) agreement on the first strategy: Facilitate Friendships and Mutual Support, and the highest (.87) on strategy 5: Facilitate Children’s Social and Emotional Development. Overall, reported implementation of each strategy is relatively high, which has been confirmed in other state-level analyses.

Table 1. Program Self-Assessment Strategies Implementation Percentage

Strategy	Mean %	S.D.
1. Facilitate Friendships and Mutual Support	.70	.24
2. Strengthen Parenting	.81	.17
3. Respond to Family Crises	.75	.20
4. Link Families to Services and Opportunities	.73	.26
5. Facilitate Children’s Social and Emotional Development	.87	.17
6. Recognize and Respond to Early Warning Signs of Child Abuse and Neglect	.78	.21
7. Value and Support Parents	.73	.16

The variation in implementation of each strategy as shown by the standard variation requires a closer look at the item level scores. **Table 2** provides the highest and lowest ranked items among the strategies. Items were bunched at the high end of the implementation scale with 24 of the 82 strategy

items being implemented by 90% or more programs. At the highest end, seven strategy items were implemented by more than 95% of the programs. The high-rate of agreement suggests that these are things all programs should be able to do, for example, *supporting diverse family constellations, prohibiting physical discipline, intentional support of children’s social and emotional development, encouraging children’s expressive play, recognizing and valuing parents, modeling social and emotional expressiveness toward children, and developing relationships with parents.*

Items ranked low appear to be more challenging for programs to implement. For example, strategies 6 and 7 had the four lowest ranked items with fewer than half of programs indicating they had implemented the following items: *providing opportunities to participate in social activities, connecting parents to resources to explore parenting, welcoming fathers and other male family members, and advocating for parents with children in protective services.*

Table 2. Highest and Lowest Implemented Program Strategies by Item

Strategy/Item	Mean%	S.D.
Highest level of agreement among programs		
7.8 Staff are accepting and supportive of diverse family constellations	.97	.18
2.13 Physical discipline (spanking or hitting) is not allowed in the program by staff or parents	.97	.18
5.1 Program supports children’s social and emotional development with intentional practices	.96	.14
5.7 Staff encourage children to express their feelings through words artwork, and expressive play	.96	.19
7.7 Staff recognize and value parent contributions	.96	.19
5.8 Staff model behavior toward children that encourages social and emotional expressiveness	.96	.20
3.1 Staff develop personal relationships with parents by taking time to get to know them individually-listening and learning about their interests, families, current activities, and hopes and expectations for their children	.96	.21
Lowest level of agreement among programs		
7.10 Parents have opportunities to participate in social activities, support groups, special days out, activities that promote healthy adult relationships	.36	.35
7.15 Parent are connected to resources that help them explore different ways of parenting	.40	.34
7.12 The program welcomes fathers and other male family members	.48	.28
6.10 If a child is placed in custody, staff: maintain contact with the parent, advocate for the family with the child protective services system, when possible, and help the parent(s) connect with resources to help reunite them with their child	.49	.43

Staff Survey

Comparison of staff survey results and the program self-assessment is limited because of the 865 completed surveys only about half (n=424) could be associated with a program (n= 51) that completed a program self-assessment. However, the survey results lend some insight into staff understanding and application of the Strengthening Families Protective Factors, and areas that may require more technical assistance. Overall, staff familiarity with Strengthening Families and the Protective Factors was mixed. Not quite half (42%) indicated they were somewhat familiar and 18% were very familiar with the approach, however, a third of staff indicated they knew very little or nothing at all.

Information about the framework can be communicated in many ways, such as through trainings, staff meetings, or other types of activities. The activity that the greatest number of staff had participated in was training on children’s social and emotional development. Special activities to support families in the center, and staff meetings were rated as the next most frequently used method for staff to learn about the approach.

Despite staff reporting they had not participated in many activities surrounding Strengthening Families, approximately 75% of staff overall agreed or strongly agreed with the basic tenets of the approach and its importance to their job (shown in the sidebar). Most believed the framework had a posi-

tive impact on staff morale, and fostered sportive relationships between staff and parents; providing more opportunities for parent feedback and parent engagement. However, opportunities to practice these strategies is not as apparent, and there were several key areas where more technical assistance may be valuable to increase implementation including:

- **Helping parents understand the child welfare system**
- **Recognizing stress in children and adults**
- **Talking with families in crises**
- **Developing strategies for engaging parents**
- **Addressing children’s challenging behaviors, and talking with parents about them**
- **Understanding the culture and values of children and parents in their program**

How important are the following to your job?
Get to know the parents of each of the children in my program
Foster a sense of community among the families I work with
Talk with parents about parenting and child development
Respond when families are going through a difficult time
Connect families to services and resources in the community
Help parents to understand and respond to their children’s emotions
Respect parents’ values and decisions about their children
Talk with parents about parenting practices that concern me
Help parents strengthen Protective Factors in their family
Prevent child abuse and neglect
Personally acknowledge parent efforts and contributions
Help parents deal with children’ challenging behaviors

Protective Factors Survey

The Protective Factors Survey (PFS) is completed by parents either online directly into the system or on paper and staff at programs input the paper responses into the online system. The survey includes the 20 PFS items and some demographic questions that help interpret the results. These include ethnicity, family income, housing situation, information about children in the home, and highest education attained by the parent completing the survey. Again, there is a great deal of missing data limiting some interpretive analyses.

The PFS measures the five areas of *Family Functioning/Resiliency*, *Social Emotional Support*, *Concrete Support*, *Nurturing and Attachment*, and *Child Development/Knowledge of Parenting*. The primary purpose of the PFS is to provide feedback to agencies for continuous improvement and evaluation purposes. Subscale scores are presented below for 4 of the 5 subscales. Because of the nature of the items on the 5th subscale, *Child Development/Knowledge of Parenting*, calculation of a subscale score is not recommended. Therefore, average scores for each item are presented instead. The following table shows pretest average scores. Overall, parents rated their resiliency highly across all areas, which is consistent with other parent surveys and national looks at PFS.

Table 3. PFS factors pretest average scores (N=3,457)

Subscale	Mean	S.D.
Family Functioning/Resiliency	5.653	1.109
Social Emotional Support	5.965	1.298
Concrete Support	5.397	1.682
Nurturing and Attachment	5.300	1.044
Child Development Items		
12. There are many times when I don’t know what to do as a parent	2.715	1.782
13. I know how to help my child learn	5.800	1.607
14. My child misbehaves just to upset me	2.810	1.83
15. I praise my child when he/she behaves well	6.219	1.259
16. When I discipline my child, I lose control	1.890	1.353

Program Strategies and PFS Factor Scores

An exploratory analysis looked at pre-test PFS factor scores and their relationship with program strategies to assess whether parents with low PFS factor scores are attending programs that have the capacity to support them. Very weak negative correlations were found across the PFS factors and program strategies. This could be interpreted to mean that parents who score lower on some factors are attending programs that provide more services in these specific strategies. So, parents who report low family functioning and resiliency are attending programs in organizations that report higher on providing strategies that value and support parents. Conversely, parents who are higher on family functioning are attending programs that provide fewer strategies that value and support parents.

Protective Factors Survey Pre-Post Analyses

Though the primary use of the PFS is providing insight for program development and improvement, it has also been used to measure change in families being served by these programs. The Mosaic data system instituted a post-test functionality in May 2010 and the first post-test surveys began entering the system in late 2011. The current data set provided 321 pre-post matches where a parent ID could be reliably matched from pre to post-test. The following table provides scores reflecting only those who were matched from their pretest score to their posttest score. T-tests were conducted on each factor, including each item in factor 5, to measure whether the change is statistically significant from pre to post. Change in concrete support rating is statistically significant at the $p < .05$ level and family functioning/resiliency at $p < .10$ level. Though a standard cut-off for statistical significance is .05, this is only a convention that allows researchers to say that there is a 5% probability that this finding would have been found by chance. Here, considering the fact that almost all the other factors were not close to significance, a 10% probability of finding this difference is practically, if not traditionally statistically significant.

Caution should be exercised in interpreting these findings as the pre-post match and limited the number of programs they tie back to diminish the impact. Additional research would be use to look at the following:

- **How demographics such as race, income, marital status influence pre-post PFS rating scores, and**
- **What interventions have the greatest impact on change?**

These types of analyses were limited in the current data set due incomplete administration of the surveys and missing data.

Table 4. Pre-test to Post-Test Change

Subscale	Pre	Post	Diff.	df	t	p
Family Functioning/Resiliency	5.78	5.89	0.11	320	1.790	.074
Social Emotional Support	6.20	6.25	0.05	320	.857	.392
Concrete Support	5.59	5.85	0.26	320	2.143	.033
Nurturing and Attachment	6.60	6.61	0.01	320	.113	.910
12. There are many times when I don't know what to do as a parent.*	5.55	5.48	-.07	320	.666	.506
13. I know how to help my child learn.	6.08	6.15	.07	320	.724	.470
14. My child misbehaves just to upset me.*	5.16	5.23	.08	320	.688	.492
15. I praise my child when he/she behaves well.	6.52	6.55	.03	320	.620	.536
16. When I discipline my child, I lose control.*	6.48	6.45	-.03	320	.516	.606

*Reverse coded before analysis so that increase scores are better

Conclusion

Much of the implementation of Strengthening Families has occurred at the state agency level, and in some cases at the county level. However, work has not always progressed effectively due to limited funding and sporadic technical assistance. More systemic implementation and a methodologically sound effort to collect data on progress could improve use of the Strengthening Families tools and produce better data to inform program practices. It is recommended that as part of a Quality Improvement Plan (QIP) program directors complete a PSA and have staff complete the staff survey annually to assess growth in the Strengthening Families Framework. In addition, parents ought to be completing the PFS each year to assess resiliency and areas where programs could provide greater support.

Despite the limitations with the data available in the online system, this analysis provides a glimpse of how programs are implementing the Strengthening Families Framework, how staff understand and utilize the approach, and parent resiliency across the protective factors. Overall, programs rate their implementation of the strategies very high, with over 70% agreeing or strongly agreeing that they had implemented each strategy. Within items there was more variance, showing surprisingly low ratings on programs that provide parents with opportunities to participate in social activities, support groups and activities that promote healthy adult relationships. Further, connecting fathers and male family members, and helping families connect to resources were rated low by programs.

These findings are consistent with content areas where staff felt they needed the most training, specifically, recognizing stress in children and adults, understanding the culture and values of children and parents in their program, and developing strategies for engaging parents. Based on staff assessment of training they had participated in, knowledge base, and actual practices, programs could provide more opportunities for staff to engage in activities that promote the strengthening families framework, and allow staff opportunities to practice parent engagement through extra-curricular activities outside of the facility, social hours, and one-on-one meetings. Staff competency in reaching out to parents about a child's challenging behavior, talking to families in crises, and referring parents to outside resources ought to be addressed with support from experts such as early childhood mental health coaches and family support staff.

Protective factors that were statistically significant pre-post were those related to concrete support and family functioning/resiliency. More research is needed on how interventions impact change on the protective factors. Further efforts to provide supports particularly for parents on how to communicate and problem solve, and providing assistance when parents are experiencing a crisis, could contribute to improvement on protective factors.

Recommendations

The online platform was made wide available to programs, however lacked a structured system for data collection resulting in a lot of missing data. As more states embed the Strengthening Families framework into their Quality Rating Improvement Systems (QRIS), we would encourage states and programs to seek guidance in how to use the tools, including technical assistance in administering the data collection protocols and interpreting data.

Embedding the Strengthening Families framework into QRIS presents an opportunity to include parent engagement strategies into the quality improvement plan and measure outcomes in parent resiliency through the PFS. Further research on specific interventions and their impact on resiliency can help focus resources in quality improvement efforts. This will require more robust data sets involving individual and program characteristics to produce complex analyses.

Assessment of Strengthening Families strategies in relation to quality outcomes and the protective factors will help to build support for including best practices related to parent engagement in state standards, thereby focusing more attention on the importance of supporting parents in their child's social and emotional development. For example, it is clear that there are some strategies that programs score nearly unanimously as having been implemented. These are things all program ought to be able to do. Those strategies that have more variance in the level of implementation may require more professional development. Technical assistance offerings to support implementation of more challenging strategies ought to be a focus of state level administrators.