

Brief No. 1 Introduction to Family Strengthening

Family Strengthening: Principles and Practices

Family strengthening provides an approach that takes into account these difficult challenges. It goes beyond specific strategies, programs and interventions and identifies a framework based on the belief that the best way to protect and support children is by strengthening and supporting their families [1].

Family Strengthening – An Emerging Model

The family strengthening framework has been embraced by the Annie E. Casey Foundation (AECF), which is committed to fostering public policies, human service reforms, and community supports that better meet the needs of vulnerable families. The underlying principle of the foundation's work is that *children do well when their families do well, and families do better when they live in supportive neighborhoods.*

AECF defines family strengthening as a *deliberate process of giving parents the necessary opportunities, relationships, networks, and supports to raise their children successfully, which includes involving parents as decision-makers in how their communities meet family needs.*

Building on the Foundation's work, the Family Strengthening Policy Center seeks to mainstream family strengthening practice by making it a public priority. By leveraging the National Assembly's network of nearly 70 human and health service nonprofit organizations, the Center's objective is to influence how family policy is formulated and implemented.

The Center has identified three core areas essential to strengthening families:

- **Family Economic Success** : Helping families improve self sufficiency through expanded opportunities to work, earn a living wage that provides for the basic needs of the family, and build assets that grow with the family over time, such as homeownership and retirement accounts.
- **Family Support Systems**: Building appropriate and adequate systems of support for healthy family development that encompass health care, child care, education, and other essential components of strong families.
- **Thriving and Nurturing Communities**: Building a nurturing and supportive environment in which healthy families can pursue long-term goals is critical to sustainable family development. Essential components for family success include access to affordable housing, strong neighborhood institutions, safe streets, supportive social networks, and an environment that promotes community and strengthens bonds between families.

These fundamental elements are in part guided by family systems and ecological theories. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Children's Bureau publication on family-centered practice highlights the influence these theories have on family strengthening or family-centered practice (National Child Welfare Resource Center for Family-Centered Practice, 2000, pp. 8-9):

Family systems theory assumes that emotional and behavioral problems of individuals are maintained through patterns of interaction within the family. Thus, the goal of the intervention is to evaluate and change these patterns of behavior and to help the family interact in more effective ways.

Ecological theories emphasize that the behavior of individuals and families is a function of their adaptation to the demands of the broader context. Thus, the approach to intervention includes strengthening the interactions between the family and other systems in the community that are an integral part of the decision-making and intervention process.

These theories support the following principles:

Family is the most fundamental factor influencing the lives and outcomes of children. Aside from a child's physical needs, such as food and clothing, children need an emotionally healthy home environment and stable and reliable relationships with adults and caregivers.

Families are strong when they are supported by safe and thriving neighborhoods. Strong neighborhoods are an almost seamless web of vital resources and opportunities such as formal and informal social networks, employers and public services. By making these networks, economic opportunities and services more accessible to families, neighborhoods thrive and families have the supports they need to succeed.

These principles, while not universally embraced, can be found in emerging approaches around the country. For example, Family Support America, a network of thousands of members and over 2,500 family support programs, defines family support, a concept that closely parallels and embraces family strengthening as both “*a shift in human services delivery*,” and “*a movement for social change* that urges all of us – policymakers, program providers, parents, employers – to take responsibility for improving the lives of children and families. The family support movement strives to transform our society into caring communities of citizens that put children and families first and that ensure that all children and families get what they need to succeed.” (Family Support America, 2004, About Family Support section, para.4).

[1] The Family Strengthening Policy Center includes in the definition of “family” nuclear, extended, foster care or adoptive families.

Source:

http://www.nassembly.org/fspc/practice/Brief%201_ToC/FamilyStrengtheningPrinciplesandPractices_Brief1_TOC.htm