An Assessment Tool
Integrating a Strengthening Families Approach into Early Childhood System Development

INTRODUCTION

What is Strengthening Families through Early Care and Education?

Strengthening Families through Early Care and Education is a strategy to reduce child abuse and neglect – but its impacts are much larger than that. The approach uses early childhood programs’ everyday activities to build “protective factor” around children and families. Currently, the Strengthening Families approach is being applied in 36 states.

Although Strengthening Families was developed in early care and education programs, partners such as child welfare departments and others in a variety of settings working with different populations are exploring ways to apply the approach.

With support from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, the Center for the Study of Social Policy identified five Protective Factors that research has shown are central to reducing child abuse and neglect. They are:

- Parental Resilience
- Social Connections
- Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development
- Concrete Support in Times of Need
- Healthy Social and Emotional Development of Children

While key to reducing child abuse and neglect, these same factors also are vital to improving child health and social development, child educational success, child mental health, and family health and development. In short, these factors enhance both child and
family resiliency and healthy development and readiness for success in school. Self-assessment is an important tool of the Strengthening Families approach. Often self-assessments have been designed and used to assist early care and education professionals identify specific strategies to integrate the Strengthening Families’ model in their daily work. Based on the results from the self-assessment, programs then develop an action plan. The Child Care Center Self Assessment tool helps programs evaluate themselves on seven strategies used by exemplary programs to support families. They are:

- Facilitate friendships and mutual support
- Strengthen parenting
- Respond to family crises
- Link families to services and opportunities
- Facilitate children’s social and emotional development
- Observe and respond to early warning signs of child abuse or neglect
- Value and support parents

In addition, the Center for the Study of Social Policy has identified five Levers for Change that states implementing the Strengthening Families initiative should include in their work plan in order to develop a robust and effective set of approaches. They are:

- Parent Leadership and Engagement
- Early Childhood Systems Integration
- Professional Development
- Family-Strengthening Child Welfare Practice
- Infrastructure Changes (e.g. related to developing or improving a Quality Rating and Improvement System, reimbursement practices, contracting, etc.)
The Build Initiative Strengthening Families work is being supported by a planning grant from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation. The assessment tool was developed by consultant, Dr. Jamilah R. Jor’dan, with assistance from Build team members Charles Bruner of the Child and Family Policy Center and Susan Hibbard. For more information about the Build Initiative, please visit www.BuildInitiative.org, or contact Susan Hibbard at SHibbard@BuildInitiative.org.

USING THE BUILD SELF ASSESSMENT TOOL

The Build Strengthening Families Assessment Tool is adapted from CSSP’s assessment tool and organized around these five Levers for Change. The tool is meant to help state early childhood system leaders identify where they are in implementing systems of programs, services and practices that incorporate protective factors as an integral part of early childhood systems and to suggest ways to do so.

This process of reviewing and completing the assessment tool can be done a number of different ways. For example, you might organize a broad group of stakeholders (we can provide you with a suggested list of relevant participants) and complete the assessment in a facilitated meeting format. You might use the assessment tool as a survey (we can send you a survey instrument using survey monkey) that people can complete individually. You can then compile the results and review them in a meeting of key stakeholders. And, there are numerous other ways that you can use the tool. Whatever approach you take, you certainly want to involve people knowledgeable about and involved in the many different areas of an early childhood system so that they can contribute specific information about how the state is or could incorporate the protective factors. Some of the key system areas each state will want to examine are:

- Early learning programs and services
- Health programs and services
- Child welfare programs and services
- Family support programs and services (including parenting education)
- Early intervention programs and services
- Cultural and recreational programs and services (e.g. libraries, parks, museums, public television, etc.)
- Youth and education programs and services
- Public policies related to each of these areas

Once the assessment has been completed, it should be used to help identify next action steps and create an action plan.
ASSESSMENT TOOL

Please review each item under each lever and rate your state using the following scale:

NO ACTION
IN PLANNING
IN PROGRESS
COMPLETE

These “ratings” merely provide a sense of where you are on a continuum. One end indicates that this is an area that needs thought and work; the other end of the continuum indicates that you are already doing this well and it is a strength.

Parent Leadership and Engagement
Including parents as partners in planning, advocacy, and implementation is important. Parent partnerships are needed at all levels of the system and opportunities must exist to support parents and family members in their leadership development.

| Parents and family members are involved on councils, boards, committees, and planning groups within Build. | ![Rating Scale](image) |
| Parent and family member advice is consistently sought in designing and implementing new programs and services and is an expectation among agencies serving young children and their families. | ![Rating Scale](image) |
| Parent leadership is supported by making training available (such as the Connecticut Parent Leadership program) and by providing networking opportunities for parents involved in the work. | ![Rating Scale](image) |
| Parents and family members from different cultures, languages, and races are involved in reviewing and developing policies and practices that are inclusive and respectful of the diversity of children and families served. | ![Rating Scale](image) |
| Parents and family members frequently serve as spokespersons within Build work. | ![Rating Scale](image) |

COMMENTS: For example, note specific areas of strength you can identify such as the use of quality funds (e.g. Child Care and Development Block Grant) to support Strengthening Families education initiatives for families.
**Early Childhood Systems Integration**

A family strengthening approach is needed within and across all systems serving young children and their families. Most systems serving young children have reform elements that are strength-based, treat parents and family members as participants rather than consumers of service, and engage families in peer support and mutual assistance activities – but these often are not part of routine practice nor are they embedded in organizational culture.

The involvement of early childhood systems is important in implementing the family strengthening approach. Only through collaboration, training, improved working relationships and the development of efforts to prevent child abuse and neglect and promote healthy social and emotional development in children can this be supported.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NO ACTION</th>
<th>IN PLANNING</th>
<th>IN PROGRESS</th>
<th>COMPLETE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>There is a intentional strategy for all children in the state to receive social and emotional screening that can identify developmental, behavioral, and other concerns, through primary care practitioners, early care and education programs, or other providers who come into contact with young children and their families.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is an effective referral process to ensure that children are referred to and receive culturally appropriate community services and supports as needed so they are safe, healthy, eager to learn and ready to succeed in school.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providers in all systems serving young children (primary care practitioners, early care and education providers, family support and other community service providers, etc.) are knowledgeable about developmental and mental health services available for young children and their families, particularly Part C of IDEA.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providers in all systems serving young children treat parents and young children with respect and help those parents connect with others in the community and contribute to their children's and the community's growth through participating in and leading activities.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regular cross-trainings ensure that providers in all systems learn about each others' goals, services provided, agency policies, regulatory requirements and each areas of expertise.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providers in all systems serving young children are trained to value and support parents and involve them in activities, including parent/family/fatherhood groups.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early care and education program staff recognize early signs of child abuse or neglect.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**COMMENTS:**

________________________________________

________________________________________

________________________________________

________________________________________

________________________________________

________________________________________

________________________________________

________________________________________
Professional Development

Professional development is needed to build the capacity and expertise in the Strengthening Families approach. Professional development includes a wide variety of activities that help to build skills and shift practice among all service systems serving young children toward a family strengthening and protective factors approach.

- Strengthening families/protective factors training and related family strengthening topics are integrated into the training and professional development curriculum within all service systems serving young children and their families.
- Training and professional development opportunities include specific support in working with parents and family members and supporting their development as leaders within their families, programs and communities.
- Training and professional development opportunities are developed through a process that involves parents and family members and includes persons with different cultural and language backgrounds to ensure the opportunities are culturally competent.

**COMMENTS:** Please note specific areas of strength such as the integration of a family strengthening approach in higher education early childhood coursework and/or in the state's in-service infrastructure for early childhood (e.g. the CCR&Rs) or the use of Child Care and Development Block grant funds to provide training and TA to early care and education professionals on family strengthening practices.
Family-Strengthening Child Welfare Practice

To work with child welfare agencies is important in the family strengthening approach. Frontline, supervisory, and administrative child protective services (CPS) staff – both those working in public and contract agencies need to be engaged. Their involvement allows staff to better recognize the value of programs who serve families and children. Most important, however, is for the child protective service system itself to develop a culture that builds upon the strengthening families/protective factors approach. Strength-based assessments (in lieu of or in addition to investigations), family team meetings/family group conferences, family-centered case planning, and CPS-Parents Anonymous partnerships are examples of reforms within child protective services that can help achieve these ends.

| Strengthening Families is integrated into the child welfare and child protective service system's culture and process of working with families referred to CPS, including use of strength-based family assessments and family team meetings/family group conferences. |
| The child protective service system has strong relationships at the community level with other service providers and systems and a process for ensuring families can develop positive social connections through involvement with other programs. |
| Parents of all young children coming into contact with the child protective service system are encouraged and supported in having their children receive a developmental screening (through Part C) and other social and emotional screenings, with follow-up services as needed. |
| Parents who come into contact with the CPS services are provided sufficient information to know their and their children's rights within the system and the services and supports, as well as the sanctions, available to them. |

**COMMENTS:** Please note specific areas of strength such as keeping educational placements stable even as children change foster care placements and achieve permanency.
Infrastructure

One approach to implementing the Strengthening Families approach within states is to convene a Strengthening Families Leadership Team. The Leadership Team provides the overall guidance for the state Strengthening Families initiative. In order for a state leadership team to be effective it must include individuals with diverse skill sets and backgrounds. Build Teams can serve as the state’s leads and coordinators.

Other considerations in implementing the Strengthening Families approach within states may include policy and systems change. A review of strategies for integrating the strengthening families approach into existing or planned systems or initiatives is helpful.

There is both a within-agency and cross-agency structure for incorporating family strengthening approaches within service systems that works to ensure that specific practices promoting family strengthening are incorporated in rules, regulations, policies, and training structures for agencies and that administrators as well as practitioners value the inclusion of family strengthening as part of their work.

The cross-agency structure develops approaches for providing effective referrals across systems, developing appropriate common training and cross-training opportunities for staff, and engaging parents and family members in the process.

State policies incorporate linguistic and cultural competency in all program and content standards, state and local agencies, early care and education programs and professional development systems.

Strengthening Families is sustained through leveraging stakeholders’ resources, funding sources and inclusion in existing state and community early childhood initiatives.

COMMENTS:

References: