



U.S. Department of Health & Human Services

ADMINISTRATION FOR
CHILDREN & FAMILIES Office of Child Care



Addressing the Needs of Vulnerable Families: The Use of Strengthening Families™ in QRIS

Federal Guidance to States

A joint information memorandum (IM)¹ from the Administration on Children, Youth and Families and the Office of Child Care, *Child Welfare and Child Care Partnerships: Partnering with Families Involved in Child Care Subsidy Programs*, was released April 1, 2011 to provide information to Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) Lead Agencies and State and local child welfare agencies to encourage partnerships across these agencies to better serve vulnerable child populations and families. The IM states:

“Child care and child welfare agencies are ideal partners because both strive to improve the well-being of children. Child care, with its mission of promoting positive early development, is in a unique position to strengthen families involved in the child welfare system by offering information, resources, and positive relationships in a supportive environment. Young children whose families are served by the child welfare system are often developmentally vulnerable as a result of trauma stemming from early abuse and neglect, and from risk factors that commonly co-occur, such as prenatal drug exposure, prematurity, low birth weight, poverty, homelessness, parental depression and other mental health problems. Partnerships between child care and child welfare agencies can ensure that the developmental needs of the most vulnerable populations are being identified and met. These agencies can educate each other regarding their respective responsibilities as well as the services, benefits and opportunities each has to offer to meet these goals.

Many States have employed the Strengthening Families framework, developed by the Center for the Study of Social Policy, to address workforce development, quality improvement, and family engagement related to child care and child welfare services. The approach helps States to develop training in science-based parenting skills, children's life skills, and family life skills specifically designed to build protective factors that prevent abuse and neglect and promote family strength. Strengthening Families was developed to give early care and education programs common-sense strategies

¹ *Child Welfare and Child Care Partnerships: Partnering with Families Involved in Child Care Subsidy Programs*, a joint information memorandum by the Administration on Children, Youth and Families and the Office of Child Care. (April 1, 2011). <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/occ/resource/im-child-welfare>

The National Center on Child Care Quality Improvement does not endorse any non-Federal practice, organization, publication, or resource.

to support vulnerable families; it has since been widely used to anchor efforts to build comprehensive early childhood systems at State and local levels.

Many States have also incorporated the core concepts of Strengthening Families into child care and child welfare staff training and related programming, as well as Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS). QRIS refers to a systematic framework for evaluating, improving and communicating the level of quality in early childhood programs and contains five key elements: program standards, supports to programs to improve quality, financial incentives and supports, quality assurance and monitoring, and outreach and consumer education. Incorporation of protective factors into State QRIS can help to ensure that children in need of protective services have their needs met and are targeted for high quality child care. The Office of Child Care is piloting QRIS quality indicators that include protective factors as part of the quality indicator for promoting family engagement.”

About QRIS

A quality rating and improvement system (QRIS) is a systemic approach to assess, improve, and communicate the level of quality in early and school-age care and education programs. Similar to rating systems for restaurants and hotels, QRIS award quality ratings to early and school-age care and education programs that meet a set of defined program standards. By participating in their State’s QRIS, early and school-age care and education providers embark on a path of continuous quality improvement. Even providers that have met the standards of the lowest QRIS levels have achieved levels of quality that are beyond the minimum requirements to operate.

QRIS are composed of five common elements: (1) standards; (2) accountability measures; (3) program and practitioner outreach and support; (4) financial incentives; and (5) parent/consumer education efforts.

About Strengthening Families

The Strengthening Families™ approach, developed by the Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP), is a research-based, strategy to increase family strengths, enhance child development, and reduce child abuse and neglect.² The Strengthening Families approach is designed to recognize and support parents as decision makers and leaders; value the culture and unique assets of each family; and help programs, systems, and communities share mutual responsibility for better outcomes for children, youth, and families. The Strengthening Families approach builds on family strengths, buffers risk, and promotes better outcomes. It can be integrated on multiple levels into existing programs, strategies, and systems.

Five Protective Factors are the foundation of the Strengthening Families Approach. The protective factors are:

- Parental Resilience

² The Center for the Study of Social Policy has reviewed and approved the information in this section.

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

Research studies support the common-sense notion that when these protective factors are well established in a family, the likelihood of child abuse and neglect diminishes. Research shows that these protective factors are also “promotive” factors that build family strengths and a family environment that promotes optimal child and youth development.

Field research has identified seven Strengthening Families Program Strategies that help families build protective factors. The seven strategies are:

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

National Collaboration

Nationally, CSSP coordinates the Strengthening Families initiative and works with national partner organizations, states and federal partners to embed the SF Protective Factors into existing programs and systems. Since 2007, more than 30 states have adopted the Strengthening Families approach into their work with children and families.

CSSP connects the many partners who are implementing the Strengthening Families approach through the Strengthening Families National Network. The network provides a forum for sharing the many tools and ongoing learning emerging across national, state and local work. CSSP continues to build knowledge, research, and evidence to expand the use of the Strengthening Families approach across the country. The organization currently serves as a convener of learning opportunities for national and state organizations and as an information hub. It also helps peers in child welfare and other fields learn how to implement the Strengthening Families approach.

<http://www.cssp.org/reform/strengthening-families>

Self-assessment Tools

CSSP has developed Strengthening Families self-assessment tools for programs to use to determine how well they are implementing the seven Strengthening Families Program Strategies. There is an assessment for center-based child care programs and for family child care programs. The tool can be accessed in hard copy or online. After completing the self-assessment, programs can develop an action plan to implement changes. The online tools can help programs deepen Strengthening Families implementation, keep track of their work, and evaluate its impact on parents and staff. For administrators working with multiple programs within a state or a locality, the online tools can provide aggregate data to target technical assistance and support and assess the impact of Strengthening Families across programs.

<http://www.cssp.org/reform/strengthening-families/resources/changing-programmatic-practice>

Training

Several states have developed training on the Strengthening Families approach and Protective Factors and have made that training available to child care programs and other disciplines within their state. In addition, the National Alliance of Children's Trust and Prevention Funds, a partner of CSSP, has developed an online training to support implementation of the Strengthening Families Protective Factors Framework in multiple settings. The curriculum includes new materials on partnering with parents and addresses promising strategies to strengthen families for practitioners. The curriculum is posted on the Alliance website and is available free of charge.

<http://www.ctfalliance.org/onlinetraining.htm>

Strengthening Families in QRIS

A growing number of states are utilizing the Strengthening Families approach in their QRIS. The following table includes sample language from state QRIS standards that include Strengthening Families.

States and Sources for Information	Sample SF Language from QRIS Standards
<p>ARKANSAS Better Beginnings http://www.arbetterbeginnings.com/</p> <p>Center-Based Requirements http://www.arbetterbeginnings.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/centergridswithdef.pdf</p> <p>Family Child Care Requirements http://www.arbetterbeginnings.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/fchgridswithdef.pdf</p>	<p>At Level 2, a center administrator reviews the Strengthening Families website, webinar, or receives training in the Strengthening Families Initiative. At Level 3, Administrator completes Strengthening Families online self-assessment for 3 or more strategies, and facility develops a Strengthening Families action plan and implements at least 1 action step.</p> <p>At Level 2 in family child care, the primary caregiver reviews the Strengthening Families website, webinar or receives training in the Strengthening Families Initiative. At Level 3, the primary caregiver completes Strengthening Families online self-assessment for 3 or more strategies and implements at least 1 action step.</p>
<p>GEORGIA Quality Rated https://qualityrated.decal.ga.gov/</p> <p>Quality Rating – Rating Rubric https://qualityrated.decal.ga.gov/Content/Documents/PM_RatingRubric.pdf</p>	<p>The program can be awarded 1 to 3 points if 50% to 100% of staff has completed the Strengthening Families online training. The program can be awarded 1 to 3 points if it has conducted the Strengthening Families self-assessment within the past year and has developed a written improvement plan to address 1 to 4 of the strategy areas.</p>

States and Sources for Information	Sample SF Language from QRIS Standards
<p>IDAHO</p> <p>IdahoSTARS Quality Rating & Improvement System http://idahostars.org/?q=gris</p> <p>Standards for Child Care Centers http://idahostars.org/sites/default/files/documents/gris/center_folded_poster.pdf</p> <p>Standards for Family Home and Group Child Care http://idahostars.org/sites/default/files/documents/gris/home_folded_poster.pdf</p>	<p>Child Care Center: The program can be awarded 1 to 5 points if the director, 75% of lead teachers, and 50% of assistant teachers have received 3–15 hours of training in Protective Factors, completed the Strengthening Families Self-Assessment Summary, and completed the Action Plan.</p> <p>Family Child Care: Owner has taken 3-15 hours training in Protective Factors, completed the Strengthening Families Self-Assessment Summary, and completed the Action Plan. Link to training video: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8jpAy0YDqTI</p>
<p>MASSACHUSETTS</p> <p>Massachusetts Quality Rating and Improvement System http://www.mass.gov/edu/birth-grade-12/early-education-and-care/gris/</p> <p>Center and School Based QRIS Standards http://www.eec.state.ma.us/docs1/board_materials/20101214_gris_standards_ctr_based.pdf</p> <p>Family Child Care QRIS Standards http://www.eec.state.ma.us/docs1/board_materials/20101214_gris_standards_fcc.pdf</p> <p>After School and Out of School Time QRIS Standards http://www.eec.state.ma.us/docs1/board_materials/20101214_gris_standards_after_school.pdf</p>	<p>At Level 2, the center program administrator is trained in the Strengthening Families protective factors, and the program completes the Strengthening Families Self-Assessment and uses data to engage in continuous improvement.</p> <p>At Level 2 for family child care, the provider is trained in the Strengthening Families protective factors, and completes the Strengthening Families Self-Assessment. The provider also produces a description of a program improvement plan based on the self-assessment.</p>

States and Sources for Information	Sample SF Language from QRIS Standards
<p>NEW HAMPSHIRE</p> <p>Licensed Plus http://www.dhhs.state.nh.us/dcyf/licensedplus/index.htm</p> <p>Licensed Plus Quality Standards http://www.dhhs.state.nh.us/dcyf/licensedplus/documents/option1standards.pdf</p>	<p>For Licensed Plus, the program director has completed a Strengthening Families self-assessment form.</p>
<p>NEW YORK</p> <p>QualitystarsNY http://qualitystarsny.org/</p> <p>Standards for Center/School-based Early Learning and Development Programs http://qualitystarsny.org/pdf/QUALITYstarsNY_Center-School-Based-Standards_2012.pdf</p> <p>Standards for Family-based Early Learning and Development Programs http://qualitystarsny.org/pdf/QUALITYstarsNY_Family-Based-Standards_2012.pdf</p>	<p>Center-based programs can be awarded points if it conducts self-assessment using a tool such as the Center for the Study of Social Policy's Family Strengthening Self-Assessment tool, and if the results are used for program improvement.</p> <p>Family child care homes can be awarded points when the provider completes a self-assessment on family-responsive practices using a tool, such as the Center for the Study of Social Policy's Family Strengthening Self-Assessment tool, and results are used for program improvement.</p>

States and Sources for Information	Sample SF Language from QRIS Standards
<p>RHODE ISLAND</p> <p>BrightStars http://www.brightstars.org</p> <p>Child Care Center and Preschool Quality Framework http://www.brightstars.org/documents/BrightStarsCenterFramework120808_000.pdf</p> <p>Family Child Care Quality Framework http://www.brightstars.org/documents/BrightStarsFamilyChildCareFramework090109_000.pdf</p>	<p>Standards for centers and family child care homes list Strengthening Families Through Early Childhood Education as a resource in meeting level 1-5 Family Communication and Involvement criteria.</p>
<p>VERMONT</p> <p>STep Ahead Recognition System for Child Care Programs (STARS) http://dcf.vermont.gov/cdd/stars/</p> <p>Step Ahead Recognition System (STARS) Standards http://dcf.vermont.gov/sites/dcf/files/pdf/cdd/stars/Adopted_STARS_rule_FINAL.pdf</p>	<p>Licensed programs and registered homes can receive three points for annually assessing their family-strengthening practices using an approved tool. Assessment addresses strategies including facilitating social connections among parents, parent education, response to families in crisis, connecting families to services and opportunities, support for children’s social-emotional development, and response to early signs of abuse and neglect. Also, Vermont has created a continuous improvement plan to implement and maintain practices related to Strengthening Families’ protective factors (e.g., parental resilience, social connections, and knowledge of parenting and child development).</p>
<p>WASHINGTON</p> <p>Early Achievers (Regional) http://www.del.wa.gov/care/qrisc/toolkit.aspx</p> <p>Early Achievers Quality Standards http://www.del.wa.gov/publications/elac-qrisc/docs/EA_Quality_Standards.pdf</p>	<p>For centers and family child care homes, at Level 2, the program director or owner must complete a professional training series which includes training on Strengthening Families. At Levels 3-5, programs can receive one point for completing a modified Strengthening Families self-assessment and one point for developing a plan of action based on the Strengthening Families self-assessment.</p>

States and Sources for Information	Sample SF Language from QRIS Standards
<p>WISCONSIN</p> <p>Wisconsin Young Star http://dcf.wisconsin.gov/youngstar/default.htm</p> <p>Group (Center) Child Care Point Detail http://dcf.wisconsin.gov/youngstar/pdf/point_detail_family.pdf</p> <p>Family Child Care Point Detail http://dcf.wisconsin.gov/youngstar/pdf/point_detail_family.pdf</p>	<p>Group Child Care: The program can receive one point if at least 50% of the Lead Teachers/Director have completed the Strengthening Families/Child Protective Services Abuse and Neglect Prevention Training or have attained the Family Services Credential.</p> <p>Family Child Care: The program can receive one point if the provider is trained in protective factors training around working with parents through the Strengthening Families Initiative.</p>