

Mobilizing Family Strengths

The information from this training module was taken from the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, ECLKC web page, http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/Family%20and%20Community%20Partnerships/Family%20Partnerships/Communicating%20with%20Families/famcom_lea_09273_062005.html.

Objectives

- Participants will be able to define a working definition of the term *Family Strengths*.
- Participant will be able to list the methods used in drawing out family strengths.
- Participants will be able to list critical characteristics of Head Start staff needed to promote family strength oriented relationship.
- Participants will be able to give a working definition of the term *Reframing*.
- Participants will be able to give a working definition of the term *Key Players*.

Key Concepts

The key concepts of Module 3 that serve as a knowledge base for developing the skills needed for mobilizing the strengths of Head Start families include:

- **Family Strengths.** The strengths of the family are the elements most useful for helping families achieve their hopes for the future.
- **Reframing.** Reframing means being able to "build new windows" around families by highlighting their skills, gifts and capacities, rather than dwelling on their problems. Through reframing, families are helped to see problems as challenges which can be solved. reframing releases a family's positive energy and, thereby, mobilizes the family to work on its challenges in new ways.
- **Key Players.** Key players are persons who know the family best and may be counted on as sources of support. Key players are involved in the family's everyday life and are invested in seeing the family's hopes and dreams become reality. A thorough assessment of family strengths includes identifying the key players in the life of the family.

Background Information

Many Head Start families have long histories of seeing themselves in terms of their problems. Often, that problem-oriented view is reinforced by traditional social service agencies. When families meet with service providers in the system, the focus is usually on family problems. The problem-oriented approach reinforces what is wrong with the family, not what is right with the family. As a result, families fail to recognize and realize their problem-solving capabilities. When we move away from only looking at family problems, we encourage family confidence and optimism. A strength-oriented approach is far different from the one most low-income families have traditionally experienced. A trusting partnership, built on family strengths, may take several weeks or even months to develop.

Family Strengths

The strengths of the family are the elements most useful for helping families achieve their hopes for the future. When we keep a focus on family strengths, we learn the good news about families. Family talents and capacities define our work, not labels or categories that imply deficits in family functioning.

There are many types of family strengths. Some family strengths include: adaptability, cohesion, humor, willingness to try, and networks of support. Any provider will find strengths in all areas of family life including family interests and activities; extended family and friends; religious, spiritual or cultural beliefs; family values and rules; employment and education; emotional or psychological well-being; physical health and nutrition; shelter and safety; income or money; and family interaction.

Head Start staff can become proficient at drawing out family strengths by: 1) believing that family strengths exist; 2) having conversations, not interviews, with the family; 3) asking the family process questions; 4) talking with the family about everyday things and listening to their responses; and 5) identifying and celebrating the family's successes.

A strength-oriented staff-family partnership is most likely achieved by Head Start staff exhibiting the following characteristics:

- **Recognizing that they are the family's partner.**

Most helpers come to the family partnership-building process with their own expectations of what will be accomplished. However, in doing so, they are not adhering to the role of family partner. It is important to let the family set the agenda.

- **Trusting the family.**

Each family member has its own unique set of experiences. The judgments, observations, and recommendations of family members deserve our attention and trust; they are based on a track record that precedes Head Start involvement with the family.

- **Working with the family.**

Head Start families have invited us, or accepted a request from us, to be part of a process that is already going on in their lives. Working together in all aspects of what is being planned for a family is the way we show our respect for that privilege.

- **Showing flexibility.**

Our own family history shapes our expectations about what families should be like. However, to form an effective family partnership, we must begin with and

work toward meeting the family's expectations for its future. We also show flexibility by adapting our schedule to the family's schedule, whether or not family members are employed.

- **Relating to the family as people.**

Using a style of interaction that is both comfortable for us and for the families we work with helps to communicate the message: "We all want to be treated as people. No one wants to be treated as a case."

- **Looking at the whole picture.**

One individual does not make a family. One event does not make a history. We must always be aware of how easily that knowledge can slip away, unless we maintain a focus on the whole family picture.

- **Displaying creativity and enthusiasm.**

There are many ways to accomplish the same thing. Creativity - finding different views of the same family picture or different paths to the same goal - produces a lively, strength-oriented family partnership.

Mobilizing Family Strengths

Mobilizing family strengths requires a special set of staff skills. Two key skills are reframing and identifying key players.

- **Reframing**

Reframing means "building new windows" around families through an emphasis on family strengths; this means using language that reinforces family strengths, teaching families how to use their strengths, and encouraging success in families through a focus on what they can do. reframing emphasizes strengths by:

- Using language that shows respect for the family;
- Avoiding language that may be offensive to the family; and
- Using "people first" language such as "a family experiencing stress" instead of "a stressed out family," or "a child with disabilities" instead of a "disabled child."

When working with families, many times staff fall into deficit-oriented patterns, which we can change through the skill of reframing. First, **we tend to label families and then think they can't improve their lives**. For example, when we use words such as "lazy," "dysfunctional," "unmotivated," and "uncooperative" to describe families, we are, in effect, saying the families' situations are unworkable. We're not seeing the **family as people**, nor are we seeing the **whole family picture**. In contrast, when we use the skill of

reframing, we see the family as people with skills, talents, and capacities - we emphasize what the family does well.

Second, **we tend to do too much for families**. This is because it is easier to do things for families than to help them to do things for themselves. When we use the skill of reframing, we encourage families to use their strengths to achieve what they want in life, taking one small step at a time.

Finally, **we tend to pay too much attention to family problems**. Dealing with problems takes so much of our time and energy that we fail to build on family strengths. We don't pay enough attention to what families **can do** or what families **could accomplish**. When we use the skill of reframing, we build on family strengths by encouraging families to pursue areas that have high chances for success - areas that will give the families (and us) positive feedback for what they do well.

- **Identifying Key Players**

Key players, as supports for families, can have significant roles in helping families achieve their hopes for a better life. Identifying key players in the lives of Head Start families is a critical first step toward mobilizing family strengths. Key players:

- Are personally invested in the family;
- Are involved in the family's daily life in natural ways;
- Are accessible during times when the family is together; that is, after the work day and on weekends;
- Feel close to the family/have emotional ties to the family;
- Expect the family to have a good life and thereby bring enthusiasm to help the family move forward; and
- Show an unwavering commitment to the family.

Staff's role in involving key players in efforts to support the family will vary, depending upon each family's needs and desires.. For some families, involving key players in staff-family partnerships may be necessary and desired. Other families may only need encouragement to be able to turn to key players for specific types of support.

The time involved in identifying key players - people who know the family best - is time well spent. The outcome of the process is likely to contribute significantly to the family's success in moving ahead.

1. ***The problem-oriented approach***

- a. reinforces what is wrong with the family.
- b. does not reinforce anything.
- c. is the most directive and focused approach.
- d. is the only way to reframe the issues of a family.

2. **Head Start staff can become proficient at drawing out family strengths**

- a. by having conversations and listening to the responses of family members.
- b. by conducting interviews with the family.
- c. by having family members list the problems they are having.
- d. by talking to others who are familiar with the family.

3. **Letting the family set the agenda in family partnership building**

- a. is part of the role of the family partner.
- b. is counter productive because it prevents the helpers from establishing their own expectations as the goals.
- c. is beneficial if the helper does not know the family well.
- d. is not beneficial because the helper has special training in family problem solving.

4. **The concept of "Reframing" could be described as**

- a. changing the structure of the family.
- b. focusing on an issue as a challenge rather than as a problem.
- c. having the family let someone else solve their problems.
- d. using the right diagnostic term for the problem of the family.

5. **Key players for the family**

- a. are professional people who have the skills to resolve family difficulties.
- b. means the specific roles of each family member as a problem solver.
- c. are family or friends who are not too close to the family so that they can be objective.
- d. bring enthusiasm to help the family move forward.

Name _____

Location _____