Family Strengthening Policy Center

Policy Brief

An Initiative of the National Human Services Assembly

Family Strengthening Writ Large:

On Becoming a Nation that Promotes Strong Families and Successful Youth

Policy Brief No. 24

Culture and systemic change are paramount to achieving significant and long-lasting gains in child and youth wellbeing. Such changes should deliberately strengthen family fundamentals: promoting nurturing family relationships, family financial stability, and positive connections.

Overview

The Huxtables had them. So, too, did the Cleaver and Cunningham families. Maya and Miguel's family in the current PBS show for preschoolers also has them. Although the creators of these families aimed for high television ratings, they intuitively instilled characteristics in these families that researchers have found to be fundamental elements for successful children and youth. These fundamentals are:

- Loving, nurturing relationships.
- Financial stability.
- Positive connections to people, organizations, and opportunities.

The future economic prosperity of the nation is directly tied to the capacity of today's children and youth to contribute (when they grow up) as workers and business owners, parents, caregivers to aging friends and family members, and volunteers and civic leaders. The aging of the baby boomer generation, and the longevity of its members, intensifies import of the next generation. The ratio of workers to Social Security beneficiaries illustrates the exigency. Currently, 10 workers support three Social Security beneficiaries, but in just 25 years, 10 workers will be supporting 4.6 beneficiaries—a 50 percent increase.[1] Thus, dramatically boosting the percentage of children who become responsible, contributing adults is not just the right thing to do, it is necessary.

While all families have strengths, socioeconomic disparities in opportunities and barriers have produced generations of children and families at the lower end of the economic ladder who do not escape their disadvantages. A core reason is society's responses have been problem-focused and piecemeal instead of addressing the underlying causes of poverty: social conditions.

Culture and systemic change is paramount to achieving significant and long-lasting gains in

child and youth wellbeing. The goal is to transform policies, programs, and practices so they deliberately strengthen families and thereby improve outcomes for children and youth. A public will campaign can fuel this change. The family-strengthening field has started this work with the public and policy makers through National Family Week; the field is also actively encouraging peers to integrate family-strengthening approaches into their work. The next step is to mobilize a critical mass of policy makers, employers, community leaders, educators, and others to make and act on a robust commitment to families.

The recommendation for culture and systemic change results from eight years of experience and research in place-based family strengthening. The main principles of place-based family strengthening, as articulated by the Annie E. Casey Foundation (AECF), are that "Children do better when their families are strong, and families do better when they live in communities that help them to succeed." This policy brief also draws deeply upon insights from the Family Strengthening Policy Center (FSPC) on proven and promising approaches.

Public Will Campaigns – "Structured, organized initiatives designed to legitimize and garner public support for social problems as a mechanism of achieving policy action or change."(Michigan State University for the Communications Consortium Media Center[4])

Place-Based Family Strengthening: The Field

Groundbreaking leadership from the Search Institute, Northwestern University, and AECF has generated a broad shift in thinking, policy, and programming for children, youth, families, and communities. The shift is from defining people and places by their problems, which external interventions can fix, to mobilizing

Definitions for Key Terms Used in this Policy Brief

Family – A supportive group of people who are committed to each other and which may include, though is not limited to, nuclear, extended, foster care, adoptive, and step or blended families. (Family Strengthening Policy Center[2])

Higher Risk Families – Families that encounter more numerous and disruptive challenges that interfere with family stability, parenting practices, and child wellbeing. Families can also be vulnerable when parent/caregivers have less exposure to information, insufficient family supports, or lack positive role models. (Family Strengthening Policy Center[3])

Parent/Caregiver – A biological or "adoptive" parent of a child, foster parent, person acting in the place of parent (such as a grandparent or stepparent with whom the child lives), or any caregiver who has primary responsibility for the care and support of a child. (Family Strengthening Policy Center2) In non-traditional families, the primary caregiver may not be a biological parent, but could be an older sibling, another relative, a teacher, neighbor, or even an agency and its staff.

Public Will Campaigns – "Structured, organized initiatives designed to legitimize and garner public support for social problems as a mechanism of achieving policy action or change."(Michigan State University for the Communications Consortium Media Center[4])

existing assets so families can progress towards self-sufficiency and other goals.

Since 1999, AECF has provided seminal leadership in building the place-based family-strengthening field through its Making Connections initiative.[5] The roots of place-based family strengthening are in the Search Institute's framework of 40 Developmental Assets™ that support positive youth development and the approach developed by Northwestern University's Asset Based Community Development Institute approach that uses community assets as key building blocks in sustainable community revitalization.

The core premise of place-based family strengthening, according to AECF, is that "Children do better when their families are strong, and families do better when they live in communities that help them to succeed." As depicted in Figure A, both quality support systems and thriving and nurturing communities have a vital role in building family and child assets.[6]

At all levels and in many spheres of the human services field, the concept of place-based family strengthening has begun to take root. What once was a small community of pioneers is now a growing field that encompasses frontline professionals, policy makers, analysts, employers, funding agencies, and intermediaries. Approaches in the field reflect a paradigm shift—a new way of thinking about and working to strengthen families that focuses on families as a whole and attends to their broader contexts.[7]

With AECF support, the National Human Services Assembly established the Family Strengthening Policy Center (FSPC) to engage the human services sector in adopting family-strengthening approaches. Drawing on the collective experience and knowledge of the field, FSPC has carefully examined leading issues affecting low-income families and produced more than 20 practice/policy briefs. Recurring themes in this extensive work are

FIGURE A. Family Strengthening Writ Large

that children best thrive in families that offer them three fundamentals: loving, nurturing relationships; financial stability, which includes accumulating assets; and positive connections to resources through families' social and community networks.

The aggregate of knowledge and practice in the family-strengthening field indicates:

- The effects of socioeconomic disadvantage on children and youth are serious and merit action.
- Improving outcomes for children and youth requires strengthening families so they consistently provide the fundamentals for child and youth development.
- Families do better when they live, learn, and work in thriving and supportive communities.
- Problem-focused and piecemeal responses in the past have achieved only marginal changes in child and youth wellbeing.
- Culture and systemic change are necessary to achieve a substantial improvement in outcomes for children and youth.

"Children do better when their families are strong, and families do better when they live in communities that help them to succeed." – Annie E. Casey Foundation

What Is the Problem?

Too many young adults—about 57 percent—are not fully Ready by 21™ for college, work, and life, as called for by the Forum for Youth Investment.[8] Nearly a quarter (22 percent) of young people in their early twenties are experiencing difficulties in two of three life areas—economic self-sufficiency, healthy family and social relationships, and community involvement—and are not doing well in any. Thirty-five percent have some risk.[8, 9] The consequence, from society's perspective, is a future generation that is less prepared for adult responsibilities.

Most at-risk children and youth are growing up in families with low incomes, have parent/caregivers with low educational attainment levels, or live in disadvantaged neighborhoods. Currently, 39 percent of children 18 and younger live in families with low incomes (i.e., than 200 percent of the federal poverty line). This rate has been relatively constant since 1998.[10]

According to Child Trends, 39 percent of children 18 and younger live in families with low incomes. This rate has been relatively constant since 1998.[10]

Extensive data have established that many children and youth from low-income families receive fewer of the developmental assets connected with wellbeing and positive outcomes. In time these persistent disadvantages thwart significant upward economic mobility. A recent Brookings Institution analysis indicates only 36 percent of persons born into poverty move into the middle class as adults; the majority (58 percent) stay in low-income groups.[11]

The following statistics illustrate the pervasiveness of the disparities. (See also Resources in Child, Youth and Family Issues textbox.)

- Lower income children are more likely to start kindergarten with a full set of the physical, cognitive, and emotional assets that provide a foundation for academic learning.[12] In a small study assessing 113 children qualifying for Early Head Start, researchers found that about 15 percent were not ready for kindergarten and about 65 percent were at-risk and in need of supportive

services.[13] Children who start kindergarten with delayed development and fewer assets are by far more likely to repeat grades, get tracked into lower-tier classes, and drop out of high school.[14]

- Youth ages 12-17 years from low-income households are 1.4 times more likely to witness violence and 2.8 times more likely to experience assaults than youth from high-income households.[15] Routine exposure to traumatic violence during childhood is associated with behavioral and mental health problems; use of alcohol, tobacco, and illegal drugs; and low school achievement.[16, 17]

- Slightly more than 50 percent of low-income children report having safe schools and neighborhoods; in contrast, about 80 percent of high-income children indicate they have these safe places, according to America's Promise Alliance. Low-income children also appear to have less access to affordable, high-quality afterschool activities.[18]

- About 40 percent of all children who live in father-absent homes have had no contact with their nonresidential fathers in the prior year.[19] Among the many advantages of nurturing father/child bonds for children are school success, healthy self-esteem, mental health, and avoidance of drug use.[19, 20]

In summary, children, youth, and their families encounter a multitude of socioeconomic disparities. Past responses to these disparities have been problem-focused and piecemeal, achieving only marginal effects.

Three Fundamentals of Strong Families

Family is the most important asset shaping the lives and outcomes of children and youth. As depicted in Figure A, most children raised in families that have three fundamentals grow up to become caring, contributing, and successful adults. The fundamentals of these strong and supportive families are:

- Loving, nurturing relationships.
- Financial stability (i.e., family economic success).
- Positive connections to people, organizations, and opportunities.

Resources on Children, Youth, and Family Issues

Data and analyses of low-income children, youth, and families are available on the Web sites of AECF's KIDS COUNT initiative; Child Trends; the federal government's ChildStats.gov; DataPlace.org; Education Resources Information Center (ERIC); National Center for Children in Poverty; and the Search Institute. The Center for Research on Child Wellbeing offers in-depth perspectives on the assets and struggles of "fragile families."

For family-strengthening policy and program analyses, the AECF Knowledge Center and the Family Strengthening Policy Center are top resources because they cover a wide array of topics. More in-depth resources are available from the Brookings Institution; Center on Budget and Policy Priorities; Center for Law and Social Policy; Connect for Kids; Children, Youth and Families Education and Research Network (CYFERnet); The Finance Project; MDRC; Promising Practices Network (PPN); Rural Policy Research Institute; and Urban Institute.

The Resources section, starting on page 20, describes these groups and provides their URLs.

These fundamentals are apparent in the research of such authorities as the Board on Children, Youth, and Families of the Institute of Medicine and National Research Council; Center for Research on Child Wellbeing; Child Welfare League of America; Search Institute; and Urie Bronfenbrenner, developmental psychologist, and Salvador Minuchin, family therapist. Also, a review of FSPC policy briefs reveals these three fundamentals as dominant themes in family-strengthening policy and practice. (NOTE: These three fundamentals apply not only to families raising minor children, but also to families caring for aging relatives, families of persons with disabilities, and individuals living alone of all kinds. However, these groups are not the focus of this brief.) Finally, it is clearly intuitive that nurturing is the most important function of families, that parents/caregivers require resources to provide for healthy development, and that strong connections with other people and institutions are necessary for parent/caregivers to access supports and opportunities for themselves and their families.

As an ecological model, Figure A recognizes that families with children, regardless of circumstances, depend on other people and community supports, such as early child care and education. But not all families have communities and support systems that can help them give children a strong start.

Figure A features thriving and nurturing communities and quality support systems as the means of strengthening families with children. Improving families' ability to provide the three fundamentals requires changes in each level of Figure A. For example, to promote nurturing relationships, a comprehensive strategy would develop parent/caregivers and youth as leaders in their community, invest in high-quality relationship education in schools and other community settings, provide home visiting to new parent/caregivers with multiple risks, and encourage parent/caregivers to have the family eat most suppers together.

The next sections explore these fundamentals in depth: why they are important and what policies, programs, and practices make a difference. The brief then explores the role of cultural and systemic change in creating the conditions that will actively support families and parent/caregivers in raising children. It concludes with recommendations for the family-strengthening field, policy makers, and employers.

Loving, Nurturing Relationships

A strong mutual attachment with one or more caring adults is essential to the socio-emotional, physical, and mental development of children. Bronfenbrenner helped establish this fundamental, and other scholars, practitioners, and child and youth advocates have confirmed the centrality of parents and other caring adults as a foremost developmental asset.[9, 21-26] As described by the multi-disciplinary panel of experts that developed From Neurons to Neighborhoods, a National Research Council/Institute of Medicine (NRC/IOM) report: "Children grow and thrive in the context of close and dependable relationships that provide love and nurturance, security, responsive interaction, and encouragement for exploration."[25]

Indeed, nurturing relationships with parents and other caring adults, including those outside the home, have a significant positive impact on children and youth.[25] The converse, or lack of such beneficial relationships, can impede healthy development. For example, Ghosts from the Nursery: The Roots of Violence, summarizes research documenting that neglect and child abuse during the first two years of life are associated with violent behavior in older children and adults.[27]

FIGURE C. Nurturing Relationships

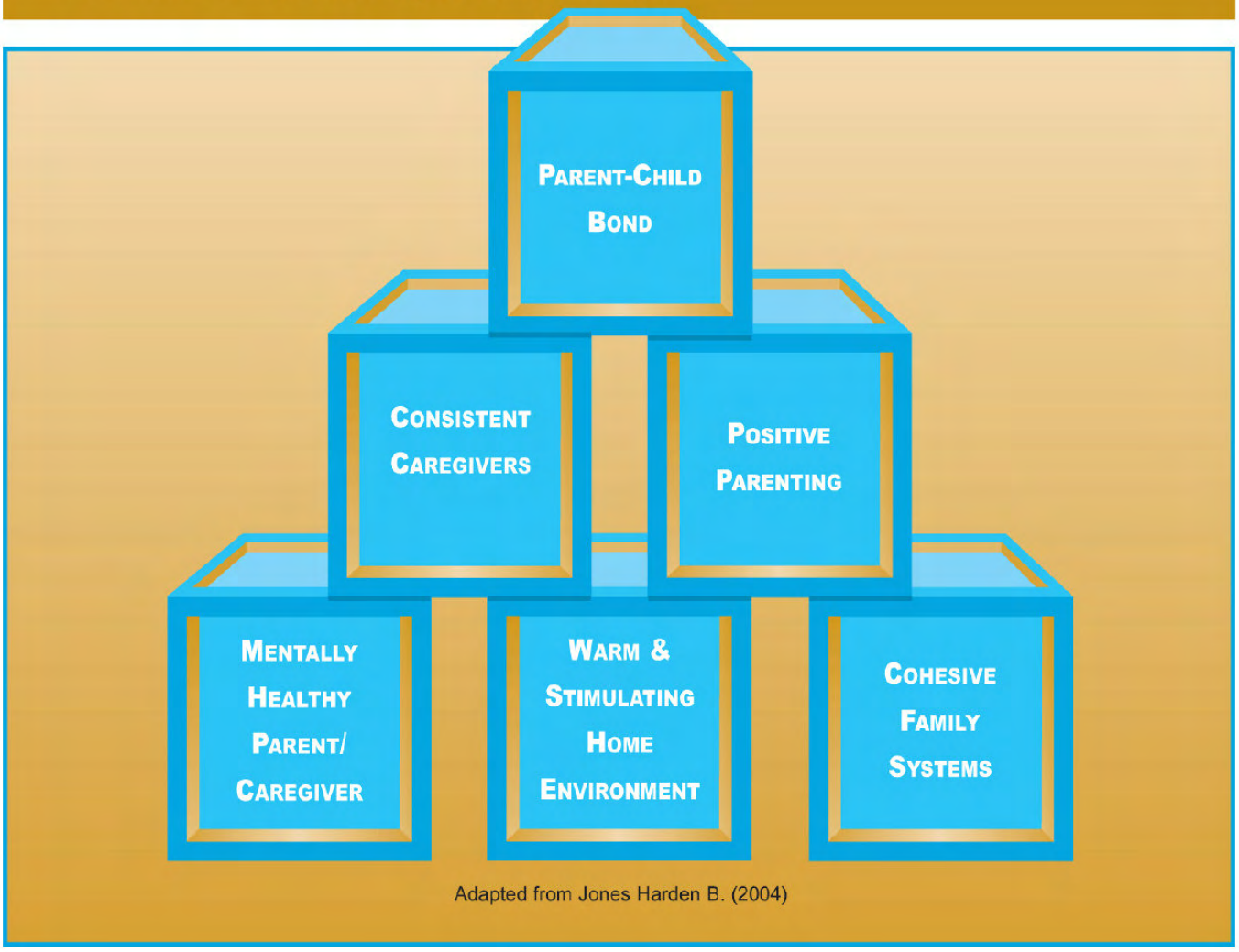


Figure C summarizes the building blocks of nurturing relationships between parent/caregivers and children. These relationships develop when parent/caregivers and other family members take specific steps to:

- Establish and maintain a healthy and strong bond with the child.
- Assure consistency in caregivers.
- Use positive parenting practices.
- Attain or preserve mental health.
- Provide an emotionally warm and stimulating home environment for the child.
- Achieve or maintain cohesive family systems.[28]

Because of teen parenthood, a limited understanding of age-appropriate behavior, mental illness, or other factors, many families face challenges relative to providing consistently nurturing relationships. Supports in the community can help parent/caregivers develop strong, healthy bonds with their children.[3]

Strategies for Promoting Nurturing Relationships

Until children are born with a foolproof operating manual, communities need to invest in a range of supports to shape positive parenting practices and support healthy and nurturing family relationships. These investments, such as those outlined below, would not only develop parent/caregivers' knowledge and skills, but also connect parent/caregivers to role models and community resources.

Dual-Generation Approaches. These approaches, such as Early Head Start and family literacy programs, combine child- and parent-focused investments. A dual-generation approach can produce statistically significant positive effects for both children and parent/caregivers.[3, 14, 25, 29-33]

Father Involvement Programs. Programs vary widely, but most seek to sustain and grow low-income, nonresidential fathers' emotional and financial involvement in their children's lives. Necessary policy changes include authorizing funding for employment-related services for low-income, noncustodial parents as well as transforming child support into family-centered systems in which the foremost goal is to benefit children (and cost-recovery for welfare or foster care benefits is secondary).[34]

Home Visiting. Home visiting is an early childhood intervention that enhances parenting, links at-risk families to community resources, and helps prepare young children for kindergarten. Several home visiting models can produce considerable positive effects and net savings over the long term. The strategy has also been applied with families with older children.[33]

Parent Education. When evidence-based frameworks are used, these activities "strengthen parent knowledge about child development, build parent skills to strengthen relationships between parent and child, and promote age appropriate care and activities to promote a child's health, development, and social emotional skills," as described by AECF.[35]

Relationship Education. Although a wide variety of curricula and program elements are in use, common elements are relationship skills (such as communications and problem-solving); characteristics of and behaviors and attitudes associated with healthy relationships; and indicators of unsuitable relationships (such as abuse). Relationship education can be integrated into pre-K through 12th grade education, youth development, family support programs, and adult learning. It is not a cure-all; underlying barriers known to stress relationships include unemployment, mental illness, drug or alcohol problems, and incarceration.[36]

Other Proven and Promising Approaches. Effective services for children, youth, and families intentionally promote nurturing family relationships and assure children and youth have a caring adult in

their lives. The following are a small set of other ways to support nurturing relationships.

- Family mentoring and mentoring for youth that involves family.
- Initiatives to involve parents in education and youth development.
- Respite services for grandparents and other relatives raising children.
- Programs for families in which a parent/caregiver is incarcerated.

Visit the Family Strengthening Policy Center's Web site for additional information about these strategies: http://www.nassembly.org/fspc/practice/practices.html.

Financial Stability

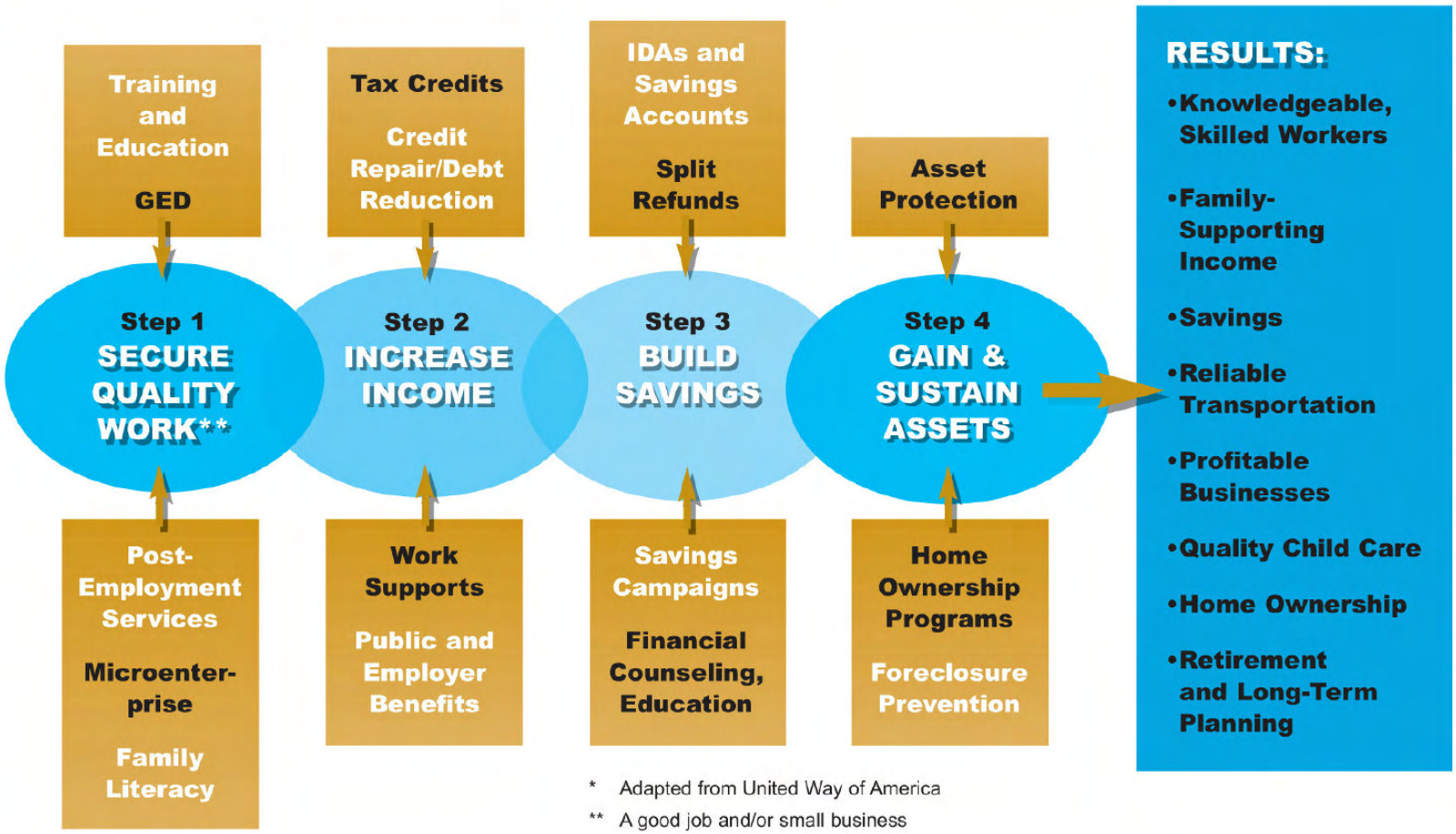
Across a wide range of measures, children and youth from lower income families do not fare as well as their peers in higher income groups.[37, 38] The risks associated with lower incomes are due to resource disparities, not character weakness.[3] Financial instability and deteriorating financial circumstances increase risks for children.

> The risks associated with lower incomes are due to resource disparities, not character weakness.
>
> – Family Strengthening Policy Center[3]

The obvious "solution"—increasing family income—is not enough to achieve financial stability and overcome poverty. Building assets is also necessary, as illustrated in Figure B, a framework for financial stability that FSPC adapted from the United Way Financial Stability Partnership™. Based on five years of research and interaction with community partners, the United Way Financial Stability Partnership is a nationwide initiative designed to help low-to-moderate-income individuals and families achieve financial stability. It uses a step framework to helping Americans receive support and develop skills so they move from instability to financial stability. The core steps are: increase income, build savings, and gain and sustain financial assets.[39,40] FSPC added a preceding step – quality work, which could be a good job or a profitable small business—as a cornerstone of gaining financial stability.[41] Although Figure B presents a linear process for community-wide planning, at the family-level the actual process would be customized to individual families' circumstances and goals.

Financial and property assets are critical to helping low-income families become self-sufficient. Asset ownership promotes family stability, which in turn enhances child and family wellbeing. Families with savings or other assets can supplement income to meet an unexpected expense or weather a layoff, pay for higher education, manage emergencies before a crisis develops, and build a promising future.[39, 42] Other assets that can help families move out of poverty include literacy, skills desired by employers, reliable transportation, and a positive credit history.

FIGURE B. Enhanced* Financial Stability Framework



* Adapted from United Way of America

** A good job and/or small business

Family financial stability not only benefits family members, but also their communities.

- Last year, about $40 billion in external dollars from Earned Income Tax Credits (EITCs) flowed into local economies.[43]
- Individual development accounts (IDAs) can advance home ownership and business startups or expansions.[44]
- Local purchasing power increases when access to low-cost credit and deposit services from mainstream financial institutions saves families from paying high fees to nontraditional lenders.[45]
- Businesses can be more competitive when they have a local workforce that is educated and trained to meet their needs, when low earners receive work supports that augment family resources, and when improved financial stability reduces workers' distractions and generates higher productivity.[46]

Strategies for Promoting Financial Stability

Figure B shows key strategies for helping families progress towards financial stability by increasing income and building assets. Most of these strategies have generated positive outcomes for individuals, families, and communities. FSPC used United Way Financial Stability Partnership materials in developing these strategy descriptions.[40]

STEP 1: ***Secure Quality Work***

Workforce Training and Education. Programs for youth and parent/caregivers to assure they have basic and continued education as well as soft (e.g., job etiquette) and technical skills valued by employers, so they can get and keep good jobs.

Employment Services. A full spectrum of services that place youth and parent/caregivers in jobs, especially ones that offer benefits and support career development, and help them maintain employment.

Microenterprise. Lending, training, counseling, and policy changes to specifically enable low-income individuals to develop businesses that provide or increase income, assets, and financial stability. This strategy relates to all four steps.

Family Literacy. A family-centered educational approach to improve basic reading and mathematics skills, English language proficiency, and life skills of both parent/caregivers and children.

STEP 2: ***Increase Income***

Tax Credits. Campaigns to build awareness and provide free tax preparation and filing assistance to help eligible individuals claim EITCs and child tax credits.

Credit Repair and Debt Reduction. Services that connect individuals to reliable community agencies offering credit repair and debt services.

Work Supports. Services enabling parent/caregivers to access work supports (such as food stamps and other nutrition programs, child care subsidies, and transportation assistance).

Public and Employer-Based Benefits. Screening for eligibility and assistance with applying for public and employer-based benefits like Medicaid and health insurance, food stamps, Social Security, and retirement plans.

STEP 3: ***Build Savings***

IDAs and Savings Accounts. Individual development accounts with corporate and local partners offering a match to help families accumulate savings to acquire long-term assets like a house, secondary education, or a small business. For regular savings accounts, community partnerships with mainstream financial institutions connect families to no-minimum, low-cost deposit accounts.

Split Refunds. Educating and encouraging tax filers receiving a credit to use this new tax procedure to directly deposit funds into savings accounts or IDAs.

Savings Campaigns. Information and resources to develop customized savings goals for families and individuals as well as the communities in which they live.

Financial Counseling and Education. Skilled and unbiased counselors to provide effective personalized financial advice, planning, and assistance.[47, 48] When counseling is paired with high-quality educational programs, consumers improve their financial management practices.[49] Ongoing access to financial counseling and education at all steps enables families to develop the know-how to effectively manage household finances and grow assets.

STEP 4: ***Gain and Sustain Assets***

Asset Protection. A set of tools and strategies to help sustain assets in the event of an emergency or an unexpected life event. These include appropriate insurance coverage, saving for home maintenance, and using mainstream financial services.

Homeownership Counseling Programs. Individual and classroom-based counseling, including review of a full set of mortgage loan documents, to help vulnerable consumers purchase homes they can afford over the long term, in part by minimizing abusive mortgages.

Foreclosure Prevention. One-on-one counseling and services that strive to enable people to find a way to avoid foreclosures on home mortgages. This strategy includes foreclosure prevention services, such as the public outreach campaign and hotline for struggling borrowers offered by NeighborWorks America's Center for Foreclosure Solutions.

A Supportive Environment for Financial Stability

Community-Development Financial Institutions (CDFIs), such as community development banks and credit unions, are one way to bring low-cost, fair financial services to disadvantaged neighborhoods. More than 22 million U.S. households need access to basic bank or deposit accounts.[50] Until their neighborhoods provide ready access to CDFIs or other sources of mainstream financial services, efforts to help low-income families build assets will achieve little.[49, 51]

Practice/policy briefs from Family Strengthening Policy Center explore many of these strategies in greater depth. The briefs are available at: http://www.nassembly.org/fspc/practice/practices.html.

Positive Connections

Families are strong when they have positive connections to resources through their social and community networks. In Bowling Alone, political scientist Robert Putnam describes multiple studies finding that children tend to do better in school and are less likely to have problem behaviors or drop out of school when their parent/caregivers have high

levels of social capital, which he defines as "connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them."

In addition, families do better when their communities have strong institutions and when residents are connected to neighbors and community organizations.[52, 53] Putnam reports that social capital at a neighborhood and community level likewise affects child and youth development.[54]

"Positive connections" is about opening doors so families can build a future, not just meet everyday needs. Lower-income families have social capital, but tend to rely on informal networks, especially relatives and friends who are often in similar disadvantaged circumstances. These informal networks tend to be more helpful with getting by than with serving as bridges to resources for getting ahead.[53, 55] In this context, promoting positive connections includes both:

- Enriching individuals' and families' social networks, especially to formal groups. An AECF review concluded that: "Parental involvement with neighborhood social institutions, neighbor-to-neighbor relations and community resources for families can have positive effects on parenting and early child development."[53, 56]

- Developing institutional networks so neighborhood groups have better ties to external partners and resources.[53] These institutional networks help expand the support and opportunities accessible to neighborhood residents.[52]

Strategies for Promoting Positive Connections

As described in an AECF Making Connections report, the core task of promoting positive connections is "to help people get ahead…[by facilitating] links to people and organizations who bring different and often more powerful connections and resources to the network. It requires intentional efforts to cross class lines to build personal relationships with people who are not poor who in turn open doors and create connections with their own personal and professional networks."[57] A few of the many approaches are as follows.

Family-Centered Community Building is the process of engaging family residents and other stakeholders in sustained collaborative efforts to strengthen and improve conditions for families with children in an identified geographic area.[58] Community building enhances both the structural and social fabric of neighborhoods by involving local residents and institutions and external leaders and partners.[52]

Parent Involvement in Youth Development and in Education strategies engage parent/caregivers in active roles in their children's lives and the community organizations interacting with young people. Effective strategies find ways to help parent/caregivers to meet new people and community leaders, learn about resources outside their neighborhoods, develop advocacy skills, and more.[56]

Volunteering and Service-Learning are key ways to develop positive connections for parent/caregivers, families with children, and youth. In addition to strengthening families' connections to their community, these and other forms of civic engagement also benefit participants when they learn new skills and knowledge, find new role models, gain experience that is attractive to colleges and employers, and improve local conditions.[52, 59, 60]

Web-Enabled Information Technologies show great promise for connecting higher risk families with community resources and strengthening inter-agency collaboration. Effective models include 2-1-1, in which trained workers use databases to refer callers to a wide array of community supports, and automated telephone and Internet systems, like the National Council on Aging's BenefitsCheckUp.[61]

Other Proven and Promising Approaches. More targeted initiatives address the special priorities of grandfamilies, parent/caregivers re-entering society from incarceration, and adolescent parents. School-linked services, community health workers, intergenerational programming, and home visiting are additional approaches for improving families' access to resources by enriching their social networks.

Practice/policy briefs from Family Strengthening Policy Center explore many of these strategies in greater depth. The briefs are available at: http://www.nassembly.org/fspc/practice/practices.html.

The Pursuit of Culture and Systemic Change

The future economic prosperity of the nation is directly tied to the capacity of today's children and youth to contribute (when they grow up) as workers and business owners, parents, caregivers to aging friends and relatives, and volunteers and civic leaders. The peril of not achieving culture and systemic change is a younger generation which is less prepared for adult responsibilities, despite a greater reliance on them for taxes and service in meeting community needs.

Investing in the future means investing in children, youth, and their families. The three fundamentals of strong and successful families will only be advanced on a great scale when the collective American culture actively reinforces and supports families and parent/caregivers in raising children. With a heightened public will for strengthening families, concrete improvements will occur in public policy, employment, other private sector practices, and the delivery of family services.

By "culture," this brief refers not to moral or religious values, but social norms that support families and recognize the collective responsibility to assure families have thriving communities and quality support systems. This contrasts with a prevailing culture that emphasizes personal responsibility but gives short shrift to the interdependence of the individual with family and community.

Historic Perspective

The power of culture change to effect fundamental reforms is undeniable. For example, substance abuse appears to be endemic to the human condition, but prevalence ebbs and flows with the degree of social acceptance. That is, eras when drug use is "cool" have higher rates of substance abuse than eras when public service announcements, public policies, law enforcement, and prevention programs signal that illicit drug use is unacceptable.

There are and have been many efforts to address poverty and other issues affecting the disadvantaged. Often these strategies fell short of their intended impact because the approach:

- Had a single focus or single solution (e.g., public assistance, jobs) whereas the challenges facing higher risk families are complex.
- Focused on an ideology or moral view rather than a developmental one (e.g., promoting marriage as contrasted with promoting relationship education and supports).

- Blamed and sought to "fix" the victim instead of altering the underlying conditions, which are beyond the purview of any individual.

Rarely, if ever, have the three fundamentals of strong families been addressed in tandem, yet these fundamentals are clearly intuitive and backed by research.

Nature of the Culture Change

FSPC envisions a society that embraces child and youth success as a common good, perhaps not solely a moral matter, but an economic and social necessity as well. In *Rebuilding the Nest*, Bronfenbrenner describes the end game as "public policies and practices that provide place, time, stability, status, recognition, belief systems, customs, and actions in support of child-rearing activities not only on the part of parents, caregivers, teachers, and other professional personnel, but also relatives, friends, neighbors, co-workers, communities, and the major economic, social, and political institutions of the entire society."[21]

In this vision, the U.S. culture visibly promotes nurturing relationships, financial stability, and positive connections for all families. These values, alongside a keen public will for social change, will stimulate meaningful improvements across society. Figure D depicts a four-strand mobilization that leads to stronger families and better outcomes for children and youth. The four strands are:

- Leadership from the family-strengthening field that works externally to engage other sectors and internally to promote the integration of place-based family-strengthening approaches throughout the greater human services community.

- A public will campaign that prompts culture change and builds public support for policy action that deals with social problems.

- Transformation of public policy to focus on family and youth assets instead of problems, foster the delivery of family-centered supports, and invest in the vitality of communities where low-income families live, learn, and work. The public policy levers of regulation and financing can effect change.

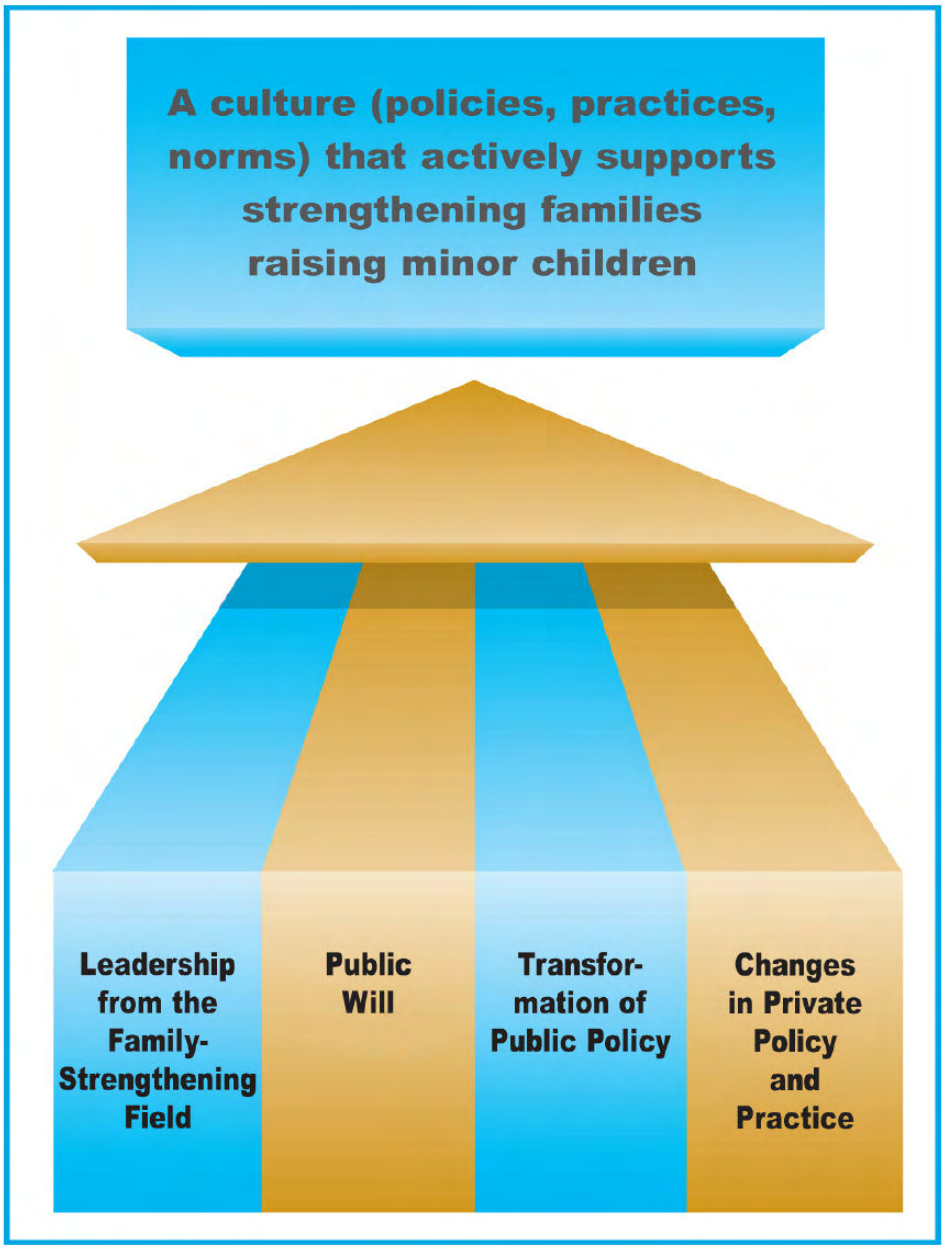
- Changes in private policy and practice, especially employment, so that parent/caregivers have sufficient time and stability to cultivate the three fundamentals.

Making Culture and Systemic Change Happen

Mobilizing public will, as part of the four-strand strategy in Figure D, would help achieve culture and systemic change. In the framework of Charles Salmon and other communications experts at Michigan State University (MSU), public will campaigns are "structured, organized initiatives designed to legitimize and garner public support for social problems as a mechanism of achieving policy action or change."[4] Public will campaigns have tremendous potential to shape social norms and ultimately achieve meaningful and enduring social change, according to Salmon et al.[4] While other models exist for achieving culture change, public will campaigns specifically focus action at the social and policy levels. (NOTE: Some of the many approaches for culture change are: social marketing; public communications campaigns (including those for awareness or education); community mobilization; and grassroots organizing.) The MSU model emphasizes the use of two essential "tools" for mobilizing public will.

- Building and leveraging social capital, so that communities become the mechanism for change, instead of being passive recipients.

FIGURE D.
Cultural Improvements Driving Policy, Programs and Practice



- Strategic use of social marketing concepts and processes, but with an orientation to social change instead of the usual aim of individual-level change.[4]

In this approach, changing social norms and mobilizing communities and public opinion contribute to social change, and vice versa. For example, tobacco prevention and control efforts gained momentum when advocates reframed the issue from "smoking is bad for you" to "other people's secondhand smoke is harmful to you." Their campaign helped shift public attitudes about tobacco

use and increased voters' support for policy changes that would protect them.[4] More recently, the environmental movement has demonstrated that it is possible to gain consumers' attention, even when the commercial sector spends billions each year promoting high-carbon lifestyles.

Given a highly competitive environment, public will campaigns succeed when they are:

- Well designed. This entails using a social marketing process to develop the campaign and mobilizing community sectors to be part of and eventually own the campaign.[4]
- Sufficiently funded over a number of years. Although funding levels cannot match the billions that the commercial sector spends, the campaign will have little impact if tested messages fail to reach the audience.
- Careful so that social marketing and public communications components do not inadvertently reinforce a dialogue focused almost exclusively on personal responsibility. Instead, the public will campaign would elevate the dialogue by framing issues as social problems that have policy options.

Recommendations for the Family-Strengthening Field

The family-strengthening field has a critical role with starting the mobilization process because of its understanding of the power of place-based family-strengthening approaches in improving outcomes for children and youth.

Within the broad field of agencies serving children, youth, and families, family-strengthening professionals can share the merits of a place-based, family-strengthening approach with colleagues. Leader-to-leader strategies would help peers understand the opportunity and develop the know-how to succeed in integrating family-strengthening approaches in their work. Expansion of the field will require external partners that make available technical and financial resources for capacity building.

Externally, a key opportunity is National Family Week (NFW), an annual celebration in November that embraces the premise that children live better lives when their families are strong, and families are strong when they live in communities that connect them to economic opportunities, social networks, and services. With support from AECF, the Alliance for Children and Families directs NFW. Although organizations new to NFW may want to plan a modest debut, more experienced organizations use NFW celebrations to bolster year-round family-strengthening work and, in turn, foster long-term systemic change.

NFW activities have enabled sponsors to build relationships with local partners, obtain proclamations from municipal and county leaders, connect community leaders with families, attract media coverage, reach new families, and further fundraising efforts. The NFW Web site (www.nationalfamilyweek.org) has a wide range of resources and tools for community groups.

Funding agencies committed to a family strengthening, child and youth development, poverty reduction, and community building can reach out to other stakeholders to create a financial base for a public will campaign. The campaign goal would be to effect culture and systemic change so that society actively promotes family fundamentals. A campaign coordinator would develop synergy from investments at multiple levels of society. Regional intermediaries, as existing networks with public-private partnerships, are natural allies. Also, family-strengthening agencies

would be a key partner at the local level because their trusting relationships with families can be leveraged for building social capital and positioning communities as the mechanism for change.

Recommendations for Policy Makers

With support from a broad array of community leaders, policy makers can accomplish the following.

Align public policies and programs, first by assessing how well publicly financed services and programs—individually and together—support the three fundamentals of strong families. This analysis would help policy makers align policy and investments with a family-strengthening approach, which, by definition, is neither piecemeal nor problem-focused. Opportunities include:

- Structuring funding to facilitate family-centered service coordination and community building at the local level.
- Making higher risk families and children the top priority and matching resources to actual parent/caregiver priorities.
- Requiring and providing resources for grant recipients and contractors to directly involve families and community groups.
- Removing artificial time limits on funding because strengthening higher risk families and building community in disadvantaged neighborhoods often need multiple years of continued support to realize significant improvements.[3, 14]

Alignment will likely require policy makers to maintain or expand the current level of investment. The latter might be possible by creating a dedicated funding stream for family strengthening.

Designate a family-strengthening lead at the federal, state, and local levels that is responsible for providing leadership on family strengthening in policy development, mobilizing public and private resources, and promoting cross-agency coordination and collaboration. The lead could be a new intergovernmental or public/private commission, interagency task force, or a family cabinet. In states that have children's cabinets, their charge could be updated to encompass strengthening families with minor children. Use of technologies (ex. 2-1-1 systems, BenefitsCheckup), uniform screening and needs-assessment tools, referral networks, and child/family government budgets are among the essential components of a quality support system.[6, 61-63]

In 2006, federal legislation authorized a new Federal Youth Development Council to enable federal agencies to implement multifaceted approaches to reaching youth by leveraging and coordinating existing resources. However, until funds are appropriated as authorized in the enabling legislation, the Federal Youth Development Council will exist only on paper.

Influence private-sector policy and practice, with a specific focus on employers, through public policy and the bully pulpit. Among the many ways governments can leverage change are:

- Educate employers about the business case for helping low-wage working families move towards economic self-sufficiency. As medium and large employers themselves, governments can provide leadership by walking the talk and by evaluating the results of their efforts.

- Use a stick-and-carrot approach to encourage key sectors affecting families (such as employers, financial institutions, the housing industry, and others) to do their part in strengthening families.

- Create incentives for businesses to increase their investment in educating and training their low-wage workforce. The incentives would give priority to high-demand, good jobs for workers on the lower end of the pay scale.

- Work with community-based organizations to engage employers in strengthening families (see next section). Small and medium-sized businesses merit attention because they employ many low-wage working parents.

Recommendations for Employers

Employers can participate in and use guidance from Corporate Voices for Working Families (CVWF); the Families and Work Institute (FWI); and similar groups that advance changes in policy and practice that will benefit both working families and business.

- CVWF's 55 partner companies, of which 70 percent are members of the Fortune 500, provide critical leadership through CVWF to bring the private sector voice into the public dialogue on issues affecting working families. Members of CVWF also invest in effective family-strengthening policies for their own workforces.

- FWI is a nonprofit center dedicated to providing research for living in today's changing workplace, changing family and changing community.

- For small and medium-sized businesses, local chambers of commerce and business roundtables can provide a forum for improving productivity in the current workforce, preparing the future workforce, and bettering the community.

In their own backyard, some of the many ways employers can make a difference include offering paid leave or flexible scheduling so working parents and caregivers can better manage work and family responsibilities, sponsoring family volunteering days, encouraging staff to participate in civic affairs, organizing employee-giving campaigns focused on strengthening local families and disadvantaged neighborhoods, and assuring employees can connect to a wide array of local resources through employee assistance programs and partnerships with local agencies.

Resources

Annie E. Casey Foundation (AECF)

www.aecf.org

Making Connections is AECF's decade-long, flagship initiative to demonstrate that the best way to improve outcomes for vulnerable children living in tough neighborhoods is to strengthen their families' connections to economic opportunity, positive social networks, and effective services and supports. Resources in the foundation's Knowledge Center capture the experience and learning of the foundation in its efforts to improve outcomes for vulnerable children, youth, families, and communities.

Alliance for Children and Families

www.alliance1.org

The Alliance for Children and Families provides services to nonprofit child- and family-serving and economic empowerment organizations. Motivated by a vision of a healthy society and strong communities, the Alliance works to strengthen America's nonprofit sector and through advocacy to assure the sector's continued independence. Two relevant initiatives are National Family Week and new Voices at the Civic Table.

Assets Based Community Development Institute

www.northwestern.edu/ipr/abcd.html

Based on the noteworthy research by John Kretzmann and John L. McKnight at Northwestern University, the institute's website offers excellent resources and tools for building communities by mobilizing neighborhood assets.

Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP)

www.clasp.org

CLASP's mission is to improve the economic security, educational, and workforce prospects, and family stability of low-income parents, children, and youth and to secure equal justice for all. To carry out this mission, CLASP conducts cutting-edge research, provides insightful policy analysis, advocates at the federal and state levels, and offers information and technical assistance on a range of family policy and equal justice issues.

Connect for Kids and Child Advocacy 360

www.connectforkids.org

Connect for Kids and Child Advocacy 360 work to connect concerned adults and young people to compelling, accurate information and context on children's issues, as well as tools to take action; in addition, they also help child- and youth-focused organizations effectively reach a broad audience with their content and materials. The Forum for Youth Investment manages Connect for Kids.

Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service, USDA (CSREES)

www.csrees.usda.gov

CYFERnet (Children, Youth and Families Education and Research Network)

www.CYFERnet.org

CSREES is an agency within the US Department of Agriculture. The agency works closely with an extensive network of state, regional, and county extension offices in every state and territory. Administered by CSREES, CYFERnet brings together the best information resources on children, youth, and families from the nation's land-grant universities and their partners. Visitors can find program, evaluation, and technology resources to inform community-based programs for at-risk children and families.

Corporate Voices for Working Families (CVWF)

www.cvwf.org

CVWF is a non-partisan, non-profit corporate membership organization created to bring the private sector voice into the public dialogue on issues affecting working families. Collectively, its 55 partner companies employ more than 4 million individuals throughout all 50 states, with annual net revenues of $1 trillion.

Families and Work Institute (FWI)

www.familiesandwork.org

FWI is a nonprofit center dedicated to providing research for living in today's changing workplace, changing family, and changing community.

Grantmakers for Children, Youth and Families (GCYF)

www.gcyf.org

GCYF serves as a point of contact for grantmakers seeking collegial and collaborative relationships with other funders concerned with children, youth, and families. Some resources are accessible only to members.

National Human Services Assembly Family Strengthening Policy Center

www.nassembly.org/fspc

The National Human Services Assembly's Family Strengthening Policy Center identifies practice-based approaches to strengthening families raising children in low-income communities and also explores policy implications. The Center's policy briefs cover the three core areas essential to strengthening families: family economic success, family support systems, and thriving and nurturing communities.

National League of Cities (NLC)

www.nlc.org

The NLC mission is to strengthen and promote cities as centers of opportunity, leadership, and governance. Its Institute for Youth, Education, and Families helps municipal leaders take action on behalf of children, youth, and families in their communities.

NeighborWorks® America

www.nw.org

Created by Congress, this national nonprofit organization provides financial support, technical assistance, and training for community-based revitalization efforts. NeighborWorks® America promotes affordable homeownership and community development. Its Center for Foreclosure Solutions is a national resource for struggling borrowers, community agencies, and policy makers.

Points of Light & Hands On Network

www.pointsoflight.org

In August 2007, the nation's two largest volunteer networks, the Points of Light Foundation and Hands On Network, combined forces to empower Americans to build a better world through volunteering. With AECF support, the network promotes "neighboring," an empowerment and assessment-based approach to volunteer engagement in under-resourced communities.

United Way of America

www.unitedway.org/fsp/index.cfm

United Way improves lives by mobilizing the caring power of communities to make long-lasting positive changes. United Way of America is the national organization dedicated to leading the United Way movement, which includes approximately 1,350 community-based United Way organizations, in making a measurable impact in every community across America by focusing on the root causes of the most serious problems.

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This series of policy briefs produced by the Family Strengthening Policy Center (FSPC) seeks to describe a new way of thinking about how to strengthen families raising children in low-income communities and how this approach can and should influence policy. The premise of "family strengthening" in this context, and as championed by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, is that children do well when cared for by supportive families, which, in turn, do better when they live in vital and supportive communities. The series describes ways in which enhancing connections within families and between families and the institutions that affect them result in better outcomes for children and their families.

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