



# Lawyers Strengthening Families

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With support from the Kansas Children's Cabinet and Trust Fund, Washburn University School of Law's Children and Family Law Center presents a webinar on the Strengthening Families Approach to give insight on how the approach works in changing the lives of families and how it benefits the legal field. This presentation was created by Washburn Law School Students Samantha Erazo and Tina Wenzl. This presentation is one of six in the series. We will be referencing other presentations. Please check out the other presentation on the Washburn University School of Law Children & Family Law Center website.

## Strengthening Families: Three Key Points



WHAT IS IT?



WHY IS IMPORTANT?



HOW CAN THE LEGAL  
FIELD LEVERAGE IT?



This presentation will cover three major points surrounding the Strengthening Families Approach. First, the presentation will define the Strengthening Families Approach. Secondly, this presentation will explain the importance of the approach. Finally, we will give ways on how the Strengthening Families Approach benefits attorneys, judges, and clients in the legal system.

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## What is Strengthening Families?

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### Four Big Ideas

1. An Approach
2. Protective Factors
3. Changes Relationships
4. Developmental Science



The Strengthening Families Approach is a combination of family strengths and enhancement of child development, reducing the likelihood of child abuse and neglect through four big ideas. SF's four big ideas are that it is an approach, not a model; it increases protective and promotive factors, changes relationships between children and parents; and aligns practice with development science.

# History



The original Strengthening Families Program was developed in 1982 on a National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) research grant by Dr. Karol Kumpfer, a former substance abuse psychologist and professor at the University of Utah. The goal of the research grant was to prevent substance use in the highest-risk children by improving parenting and nurturing skills in drug-abusing parents. This SFP utilized a Randomized Control Trial (RCT) when conducting the study.

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# Original Strengthening Families Program

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Parenting skills  
improved

Reduction in  
risk factors

Increased  
protective  
factors

Resilience for  
drug abuse



I am going to give a little background information for a better understanding of the original Strengthening Families Program. Dr. Kumpfer used a Randomized Control Trial. An RCT is a study designed so that it randomly assigns participants into an experimental group or a control group. Dr. Kumpfer's RCT lasted four years and found that the experimental group demonstrated that parenting skills were significantly improved, there was a reduction in family and children's risk factors and there was increased protective factors and resilience for drug abuse. The advantages of the SFP are that there is a "wash out" of any population bias and results can be analyzed with well-known statistical tools. These positive results occurred across different ethnic groups. Children who have experienced maltreatment and parental substance use are more likely to have experienced trauma, witnessed violence and have behavioral problems as compared with children without. Additional versions using SF principles have been tested and have been found effective in reducing multiple risk factors and preventing adolescent substance use and other problem behaviors.

# Family Intervention for Parents of High-Risk Children and Adolescents

## Children Learn

- Social skills
- Emotion regulation
- Effective communication

## Parents Learn

- Supervision
- Family management



The SF approach is a highly structured, evidence-based family skills training intervention with different ages from 0 to 17. The family intervention for parents of high-risk children and adolescents takes on the SF approach. This approach had parents and children participate in weekly two-hour family group sessions for seven to 14 weeks, depending on their risk level. During the first hour, children and parents attended separate classes. The children worked on social and emotion-regulation skills, peer resistance skills, problem-solving, and effective communication skills. The parents learned parenting skills like supervision and family management skills. Then the groups would come together to learn the importance of positive family play and togetherness time. This time was used mainly to reduce stress and conflict within the family. Family engagement for this program was enhanced by removing barriers like transportation issues and babysitting. The removal of barriers was an incentive for attendance and home practice completion.

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# Results of Family Intervention

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## Improvements in behavioral health

- 50% reduction in substance misuse
- 50% reduction in depression/anxiety
- 50% reduction in child maltreatment



The Family Intervention for Parents of High-Risk Children and Adolescents had some remarkable findings. The study found a significant improvement in the behavioral health of the youth participants. These results showed a 50% reduction in adolescent substance abuse, a 50% reduction in depression/anxiety, and a 50% reduction in child maltreatment.

# 4Rs and 2S Family Strengthening



Another Example of the SF approach being used is in the 4Rs and 2Ss. It consists of using a combination of group therapy techniques, family therapy, and behavioral parent training. It also integrates family processes and parenting skills linked to conduct problems from the empirical literature. The targeted skills and family processes are referred to in the curriculum as the 4Rs (Rules, Responsibility, Relationships, and Respectful Communication) and 2Ss (Stress and Social support). This SF approach uses the common elements approach, which identifies common techniques and procedures in existing evidence-based protocols specific problem areas. It also addressed the disproportionality of children of color. Children of color and those impacted by poverty disproportionately experience adverse circumstances related to hunger, exposure to violence, housing instability, and constrained material resources. Researchers have found that these challenges are associated with multiple developmental challenges, specifically childhood conduct problems and behavioral impairments.

# Results of 4Rs and 2Ss

Increased

- Family cohesion
- Family support
- Communication

Decreased

- Defiant behavior
- Child inattention
- Parenting Stress



Results showed that there are many positive benefits of using a 4Rs and 2Ss strengthening families approach. 4Rs and 2Ss showed that there was an increase in family cohesion, support and communication. The results also showed that there was a decrease in defiant behaviors, child inattention, parenting stress, problematic parent-child interactions. Also, there was a significant decrease in the amount of time families stayed in the program.

# Strong African American Families

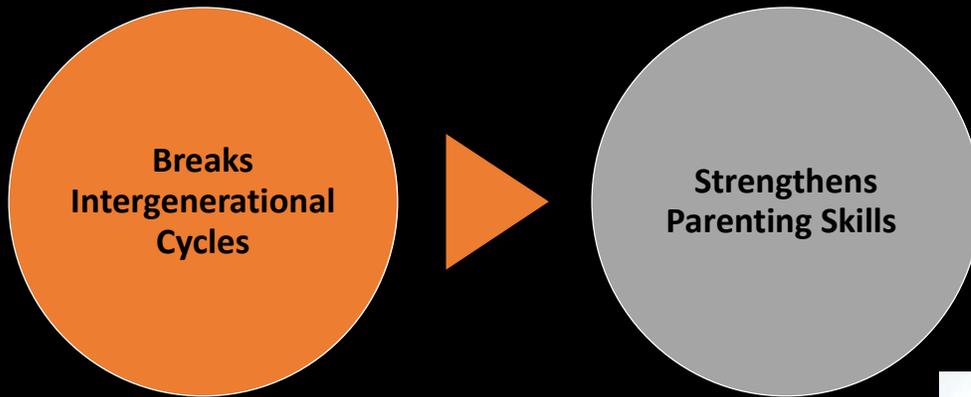
Longitudinal study of a universal intervention

Culturally-specific content



The Strong African American Families Program gives evidence of why culturally specific content should be used and guidance concerning racial identity and racial pride. The SAAF approach modified SF to include matching the ethnicity of the intervention participants and the intervention implementation team. SAAF showed participants nine intervention videotapes for parents and youth that included African-American narrators and actors. The promotional materials used in recruiting families (videotape and brochure) incorporated positive comments, photographs, and videotape segments of families participating in the program. When modified to address families' cultural backgrounds, the hope was that SF could be even more effective with minority populations. Several features of the intervention design and implementation may have facilitated families' acceptance of a program also used for the majority population, such as the inclusion of African-American families on program videotapes, culturally sensitive recruitment materials, African-American facilitators, and participation incentives. SF is compelling for all families but tailoring the program for individual clients' cultural backgrounds will increase positive outcomes for clients, families, and, most importantly, children.

# Why is SF important?



Adolescent substance misuse risk is conceptualized as a “family disease” based on genetic, biological, and environmental family risk factors. The goal of the SF approach is to break the intergenerational cycle of substance abuse by strengthening the family and parenting skills. The SF approach has effectively decreased drug abuse, alcohol abuse, mental health, and delinquency risk factors.

# Provides Protective Factors

Parental  
Resilience

Social  
Connection

Knowledge

Support

Emotional  
Competence



SF approach is based on engaging families, programs, and communities in building five key protective factors. The focus of the SF approach is on the protective factors rather than the risks. The protective factors are parental resilience, social connections, knowledge of parenting and child development, concrete support in times of need, and children's social-emotional competence. SF approach has been shown to improve the parents' and children's strategies, skills, and abilities, and protective factors associated with children can be boosted. Please see The Kansas Cabinet and Children's Trust Project and the Washburn University School of Law Children and Family Law Center on Protective Factors for more information.



## Offers a Compassionate Approach



SF approach has shown to enhance parenting and family processes which enhance behavioral regulation and success by utilizing a compassionate approach. A compassionate approach is the most helpful interaction for positive engagement with participants. Legal professionals should use the compassionate approach. Legal professionals who are empathetic and compassionate encourage increased disclosure by clients about facts, issues, and reasons for behavior, making it easier for the professional to decide which course to take throughout the life of the case.

# Fostering Thriving Communities

Essential/Basic Needs

Social Support and Connection

Racial and Social Justice

Social Contract

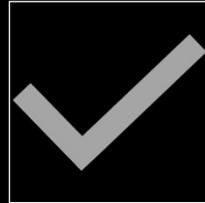


SF approach fosters the community which the legal system should embrace. As discussed, the SF approach gives tools for parents to meet children's essential and basic needs. The community should have a willingness to work toward long-term cultural shifts. The legal field needs to work on fostering anti-racist and equitable social structure and developing norms and practices that "address historical and structural racism." A Social Contract is an implicit agreement among the members of a society to cooperate for social benefits. Fostering a community that looks out for one another is a slight change anyone can make and an easy change for the legal field.

# Proactive



**Proactive not reactive**



**Before emergence of risk factors**



Using the SF approach allows the system, social workers and lawyers, to be proactive and not reactive in the case and SF approach, unlike other approaches, can be used before the emergence of risk factors. Being proactive, being a visionary, draws on the same skills of analysis that all lawyers use.

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“Children do not grow up in programs they  
grow up in families and in communities”

Dr. Urie Bronfenbrenner, Cornell University

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Children do not grow up in programs; they grow in families and communities. Unfortunately, the legal system tends to throw children into programs thinking that these programs will fix the issues children and families are experiencing. Nevertheless, the programs are just a band-aid when the needs of the families are unmet. An attorney can make a difference through effectively advocating for the rights of children and ensuring that children are growing up in families, not programs.



# Role of a Lawyer

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During the rest of this presentation, we will be discussing the important tasks that family lawyers take on daily and how children rights and the rights of families interact with those tasks.

# How Can Lawyers Use SF?



Active partners in the system



Actual needs of the family



Family law lawyers need to be listening to the actual needs of the children and families. The legal system provides legal guidance, but that guidance alone is not sufficient to ensure positive outcomes for children and families. Family lawyers are or should be active partners in the child welfare system. Being an active partner mean finding solutions best tailored to the specific family in question, not merely a blanket response that one size fits all. Family Lawyers can use principles from SF to determine the actual needs of the family. Using this approach will identify the family's strengths and areas where improvement is needed ensure the strengthening of the family unit. The SF approach gives easy-to-understand tools directly to families and children that will help them develop necessary skills in areas where improvement is necessary

# Facilitative Tasks for Lawyers

Preparation

Addressing client behavior

Translating jargon

Bearer of information



The facilitative tasks a lawyer should do are just as crucial as adversarial tasks. The facilitative tasks are assisting with preparation, advising clients regarding behavior, translating legal jargon in a way that the client understands, and informing the client of any developments or changes. Being proficient at facilitative tasks will ensure that a client understands exactly what is going on in their case. Having a client that is more actively involved, is essential to the development of trust between the client and lawyer. Once trust is developed, a client knows that the lawyer has their best interest at heart. Informed clients are better equipped to face the challenges of navigating the complex legal system.

# The Child Client

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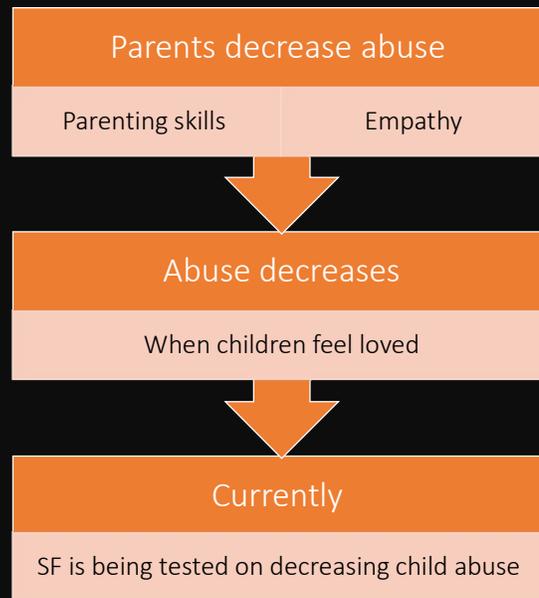
Client's voice  
is heard

Challenge  
matters of  
substance



Adversarial tasks of lawyers are important to child welfare cases. The lawyer should be ensuring the client's voice is heard. When representing children this is especially important. Children had no other means to have their voices heard except through the voice of their attorney and advocates. This can be done by being the representative of that voice and empowering the needs, desires and best interests of the child client. Children also need a lawyer who is willing to challenge matters of substance.

# Child Abuse and SF



Studies have shown that child maltreatment decreases as parents learn better parenting skills, gain empathy, and practice stress and anger management techniques. SF approach is all about teaching parents better skills to interact with their family and children. Skill practice creates new prosocial habit patterns in the brain. With practice parents can improve behavior, strengthen the parent-child relationship, and ensure their child feels loved. SF approach is now being tested to prevent child abuse as an evidence-based program from a grant issued by the Administration for Children and Families (ACF).

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# Children's Rights

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Children have legal rights

Lawyers must adhere to these rights

Failure is inadequate representation



The fact that lawyers confidently portray a particular professional persona focused on advising and representing their individual clients may be part of what allows them to make a positive contribution. A lawyer should have a different relationship with a child client than the lawyer has with an adult client. An attorney's duties to the client arise directly from the client's legal rights. Children have legal rights. Children are entitled to a safe environment, good nutrition, healthcare, and education. Parents must adhere to these rights or will face legal consequences. As children grow, they acquire more rights like limited freedom of speech, and teenagers, at a certain age, have the right to work. Depending on the jurisdiction, a child may be emancipated by acts such as marriage, attaining economic self-sufficiency, obtaining an educational degree or diploma, or military service. Emancipation grants minors most of the rights and responsibilities of adulthood. If a lawyer does not recognize or clearly understand the rights of the child the lawyer could be failing the child by inadequately advocating for their rights.

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# Benefits SF Provides the Legal System

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There are many benefits of using SF to lawyers and the legal system as a whole such as limiting personal bias, making one's job more manageable, and being proactive with solutions.

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# Elimination of Bias

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“An understanding of diverse cultural values and associated rearing practices reveals the strengths of socialization and childcare practices used in diverse cultural groups”



Cultural competence is defined as “understanding and respect for culturally-based values, beliefs, and behaviors. . .uncovering the differences and commonalities in values, normative practices, and child-rearing goals across cultural groups is an important step in developing culturally competent and effective programs and support for parents of all cultural backgrounds in the United States.” Strengthening Families Protective Factors framework as an approach allows for diversity in implementation in different service settings. In addition, the framework is intended to delineate protective factors that are relevant across cultures with respect to describing conditions or attributes that mitigate risk factors and actively enhance well-being in all families. Research suggests that effective intervention services for vulnerable families should reduce modifiable risk factors and promote protective factors by building on family strengths, enabling families to cope with stress. In a strengths-based intervention approach that focuses on building protective factors, parents themselves can identify and build on their strengths to help enhance their parenting capacity. Promoting protective factors may also help professionals working with families to build more positive relationships with clients. By focusing and building on the strengths existing within a family, SF allows the family and individuals interacting with the family through the legal system to see the potential, not just the family's shortcomings. Strength-focused interventions can lessen the impact of unconscious bias by encouraging everyone involved to find positivity in all families.

# Confirmation Bias

“the tendency to interpret new evidence as confirmation of one’s existing beliefs or theories”



Confirmation biases plague many professions, especially in social work but also the legal field. Confirmation bias is the tendency to interpret new evidence as confirmation of one's existing beliefs or theories. As attorneys, it is crucial to understand biases and how to take steps to ensure they do not have unfair or harmful consequences. Luckily, a lawyer who uses principles from the SF approach receives tools for professionals to reflect on their personal biases and make informed decisions based on evidence and not their value systems. This allows lawyers to minimize personal biases and ensure that every client receives effective representation and advocacy

# How can the legal system leverage SF?

Development  
of policies

Reintegration



Judges and lawyers can help implement policies that are developed from the SF approach to ensure the best interest of the child. This is the number one priority in any family law case. If the lawyer finds themselves working on a case in which the child has already been removed from the home, SF approach principles can still be utilized. The strengthening families approach assists legal professional with finding positive solutions and promoting reintegration with families. In cases where children have been removed from their parents and are living in foster homes, the SF approach shortens the length of time a child spends in out of home placements. On average the use of the SF approach reduces the length of time a child spends in foster care by 190 days. In Kansas, this approach is being utilized by KVC. The best interests of children would support expanding the use of the SF approach across the state.

# Leveraging SF in the Legal System



JUDICIAL DECISION MAKING



UNCONSCIOUS BIAS



Judicial decision-making is a critical aspect of all family law. These decisions affect the daily lives of children and families. A decision can be a tremendous help or can be formidable barrier to families. A judge may come into a child welfare case with his or her own bias or knowledge that may affect their philosophy or vision of what child welfare is intended to accomplish. Information that is presented to the court may be altered to fit a narrative, however, the use of SF approach can eliminate an unconscious bias that a judge, lawyer or social worker may hold. Through the use of SFP the judge's philosophy can be altered. No single factor affects positive outcomes for families than quality legal representation.

# Legal Interventions

Removal and delinquency have been found to be an adverse childhood experience (ACE).

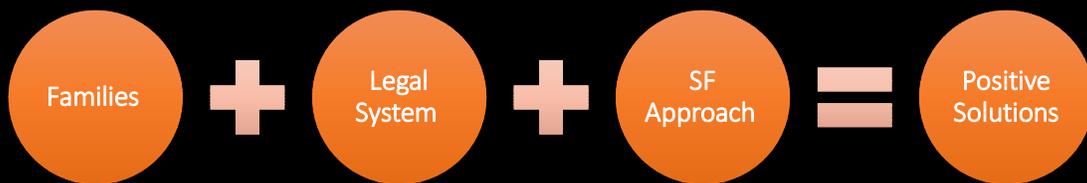
For more information on ACEs please see the ACEs presentation in this video series.

Legal interventions save lives too.



The courts play a principal role in making decisions regarding the protection of children who have been maltreated. Legal interventions and child removal have been found to be an adverse childhood experience or ACE. Having a high ACE score has been shown to increase negative outcomes across the board including physical health. For more information on ACEs, please see ACEs: What are they and why should attorneys care presented by The Children's Trust Project and the Washburn University School of Law Children and Family Law Center. Removal from the custody of parents and legal interventions are sometimes necessary to save a child's life. Programs can be ineffective in initially halting abusive and neglectful behavior or in reducing the future likelihood of maltreatment. One-third or more of the parents served by intensive programs maltreated their children while in treatment, and over one-half of the families served continued to be judged by staff as likely to mistreat their children following termination of treatment. It is imperative for the legal system to work with social services to ensure the best course of action is taken for each family. If the best interest of the child dictates removal or intervention, then the system should focus on increasing the parents' parenting skills. The SF approach increases the likelihood of reintegration and preservation of the family unit. The safety and well being of children is the central goal of the child welfare system. The SF approach increases parental skills allow parents to provide a safe and nurturing environment.

# Families and the Legal System



Families are likely to generate creative solutions for juveniles and families involved in the legal system. Involving families in the planning process allows tailoring to specific family strengths and results in lasting positive solutions.

# Thank You!

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For more from this video series, visit the  
Washburn Children & Family Law website.