

## Focusing on Strengths

### Focusing on Strengths Changes the Entire Service System

A strength-based orientation represents a significant shift in the way service providers view and serve families. For the past fifty years, professionals have been taught and reinforced for identifying problems and offering solutions — building a problem-focused approach. Gradually, more and more human service providers are making the shift to a strength-based orientation. The family strengths approach encourages service providers and entire service systems to support and reinforce family functioning rather than focusing on individual or family deficits.

Systems that shift from a deficit-based to a strength-based orientation communicate the following attitudes and beliefs.

1. All families have strengths. Their strengths are unique and depend on the family's beliefs, cultural background, ethnicity, socioeconomic background, etc.
2. The absence of particular competencies within families or individuals should not be seen as a failure or inadequacy on the part of the family or individual. Sometimes the formal or informal human service system fails to promote opportunities for a family to display or learn competencies they need.
3. Families with problems are not "broken" and "needing to be fixed." A strength-based orientation means that families are approached in ways that focus and build on the positive aspects of functioning. Providers not only accept but highly value individual differences among families and family members.
4. The goal of intervention is not "doing for people." The goal is to work with families as partners in order to help them become less dependent on agencies. This means that professionals are not viewed as experts that are expected to solve a family's problems.

## Ways to Categorize Family Strengths

A strength-based orientation requires people to consider strengths in broader categories than they may have previously considered.

1. **Attitudes and Values:** These are the beliefs that characterize each family. They may include the family's expectations for the future and the values that the family teaches its children. There are many examples of family attitudes and values that can be identified as strengths. Some examples are:
  - a respect of the privacy of others
  - a strong sense of rituals and traditions
  - a concern for family unity and loyalty
  - a sense of shared responsibility
2. **Skills and Abilities:** Families' skills and abilities can include "hard" competencies related to the job market or educational goals and "soft" skills related to the families' communication styles. Examples of "hard" skills and abilities can include hobbies and interests such as wood working or auto mechanics. "Soft" skills could include a family's interest in playing together, a family's maintenance of positive rituals, or a family's ability to plan ahead.
3. **Attributes:** These are descriptive statements that can be made about how family members interact with each other. Some examples of family attributes are:
  - ability to express appreciation for small and large things that family members do well
  - effort to spend time and do things together
  - communication with one another that emphasizes positive interactions among family members
  - willingness and ability to solve problems together
4. **Preferences:** Lists of family preferences can include items as mundane as basic likes and dislikes about food, clothing, entertainment, etc. Preferences also can include detailed statements about how a family prefers to have services delivered. Listing family preferences can maximize the voice and choice a family has in subsequent service planning and delivery. Identifying family preferences can build a basis for eventually matching existing family strengths to needs and goals.



# Sample Strength Assessment (page 1)

<u>Family Member</u>	<u>Values/Attitudes</u>	<u>Skills/Abilities</u>	<u>Preferences</u>	<u>Features/Attributes</u>
Kenneth: Father	Loyal: Marriage is forever	Skilled at woodworking	Likes to feel in control	Has maintained sobriety for over twelve months on his own
	Independent: Doesn't like to accept handouts	Able to support family through fixing old appliances	Wants to return to his dad's homestead	Believes he should be able to make it on his own
	Believes parents need to be there for their kids	Controls temper by taking time outs Used to train hunting hounds prior to moving to the city	Prefers time alone or with other hunters	Is able to keep his son in line  Strong advocate: Has disagreed forcefully in the past about treatment plans for Ken Jr.

<u>Family Member</u>	<u>Values/Attitudes</u>	<u>Skills/Abilities</u>	<u>Preferences</u>	<u>Features/Attributes</u>
Mary Lou: Mother	Believes her job is to make a home for her husband	Is able to access help during an emergency	Misses time alone with Ken	Is well liked in her community: Three phone calls from friends during the first meeting
	Wants her kids to do better than she did	Maintains the little kids who are well clothed and well behaved	Likes time for herself with a therapist she can trust	Is emotionally attached to her son: cried when discussing his situation
	Values extended family and listens to her own parents	Is a good cook: Children were looking forward to dinner	Enjoys joining in church activities with older women	Has optimistic outlook: Spiritual base allows her to talk about when things were better with her son
	Is strongly connected to church: Spiritual base	Makes own clothes and maintains Ken's work clothes		
	Values hard work: believes if people work hard they will do okay/runs house on her own	Is able to stretch a dollar		

## Sample Strength Assessment (page 2)

<u>Family Member</u>	<u>Values/Attitudes</u>	<u>Skills/Abilities</u>	<u>Preferences</u>	<u>Features/Attributes</u>
Ken Jr.: Son	Loves his parents and wants to be at home	Good at math: Enjoys money problems	Enjoys playing with the younger children	Has one best friend whom he has known since third grade
	Values good behavior: Thinks if he could just do better he would be able to make it at home	Shoots hoops: Is able to hold his own on the basketball court	Likes to be left alone when he is upset	Hasn't been alone with his younger brothers and sisters in two years
	Independent: Feels that he has to put up a tough front in order to gain respect	Is strong: Good weightlifter	Best worker/ teacher he ever had was a man who allowed him to be physically active	Made it in school until the third grade without needing special services
	Values the notion of family: Sees himself as marrying and having kids someday and thinks families should stay together	Has good sense of humor: Likes practical jokes and has a joking relationship with his therapist	Is anxious about getting his driver's license: Would like to be able to drive to help his dad with appliance repair someday	

<u>Family Member</u>	<u>Values/Attitudes</u>	<u>Skills/Abilities</u>	<u>Preferences</u>	<u>Features/Attributes</u>
Lorraine Matthews: Teacher	Runs a tight classroom	is known informally as the best reading teacher in school	Likes contact with families when there aren't problems/tries to maintain that contact	Classroom is well managed
	Wants to give each kid a chance despite stories and history	Has a reputation of being able to succeed with toughest kids		Has an understanding of age appropriate activities
	Believes academic excellence is the responsibility of the teacher			Challenges her students

## Strength Chats

### Characteristics

an informal conversation that can provide a truly balanced picture of a family and its members.

takes place over several meetings and can occur in different settings (coffee shops, homes, libraries, etc.).

helps make the process feel normal

### Tips

Start with less personal questions and move to more personal questions.

Keep the conversation focused on strengths.

Ask permission to take notes and keep your notes visible to the family. Ask them to review your notes before you leave.

Share some of your own strengths, interests, preferences or hobbies.

- Use open-ended questions, such as:

*What are your family's hopes for the future?*

*What are your family's fears?*

*What are the two most pressing issues right now?*

*What was your life like when your family was doing okay?*

Suspend the strengths assessment if there are immediate crisis needs that the family is experiencing.

Be prepared to explain your reasons for asking any question.

Write 10 questions that you think would be appropriate for a strength chat.

## Observations

Another way of discovering family strengths is to carefully observe the family's behavior and physical environment. Approach the task of strengths discovery as if you were a detective. Try to observe evidence of strengths that the family may take for granted and point them out.

### Tips

Observe family behavior and the physical environment.

Look for hidden strengths.

Comment on the strengths you observe to model examples of what you are looking for.

Imagine that a stranger is observing your family with the intention of discovering hidden strengths. Write some examples of what the stranger might observe.