

## **A Promising Program: Building Family Strengths**

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### **Abstract**

The Building Family Strengths program takes a holistic approach to help families cope with the stresses of society. The program combines the experiential learning activities for adults and children, allowing them to learn together. The curriculum has been packaged according to age level and includes preschool, elementary, middle/junior high, senior high, and adult modules. Building Family Strengths program materials are available for distribution to other states and agencies. A research and evaluation project is currently being designed to determine long-term program effectiveness.

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Family and Consumer Sciences and 4-H build on the strengths of individuals and families. Extension has traditionally taught “parenting” to parents and “life skills” (self-esteem, communication, resiliency) to youth – but separately. The uniqueness of The Building Family Strengths program is that it takes a holistic approach that combines experiential learning activities for adults and children. The comprehensive age-appropriate delivery mode allows for the adults and youth (preschool through high school) to learn together. The concepts remain constant throughout the curriculum. The identified strengths are: optimism, communication, spirituality, self-esteem, values, contentment, humor, family history, unity, and resiliency.






The Building Family Strengths curriculum was developed, tested, revised, and marketed by team members. The program is based on ethnographic research conducted by state specialists that identified ten common family strengths in South Carolina families. The curriculum has been piloted in a variety of settings that have included EFNEP, Day Care Providers, Department of Social Services Youth Services, Faith Based Organizations, 4-H School Clubs, 4-H Special Interest Clubs, and Family and Community Leaders (Extension Homemaker Clubs). The curriculum is accompanied by eleven Extension publications highlighting each of the ten strengths. Family and Consumer Sciences and 4-H agents use the lessons with preschool,

elementary, middle, high school, or adults. The lessons are age appropriate, and handouts are designed with diversity, learning styles, and ability levels addressed. Each family strength is presented in a lesson format that includes an Introduction, Purpose, Objectives, and Advanced Preparation. Each lesson is designed in an experiential outline that includes suggested “Do”, “Reflect,” and “Apply” activities. Each section has activity sheets designed for individual, group, or family settings. Some activities are designed as “take home” to be completed with others at a later time.

The Building Family Strengths curriculum is a holistic approach that addresses family development needs over the entire family life span. The Building Family Strengths team includes 4-H agents, Family and Youth Development State Specialists, Family and Consumer Sciences agents, a Family Information Network Data Specialist, and the Children Youth and Families (CYFAR) coordinator. The youth focus has provided agents with new curriculum in 4-H family living, self-esteem, communication, and character education. The lessons on family history instill personal pride and allows for a better understanding of cultural and ethnic differences. The success of this program is based on the premise that we must focus on the *positive* qualities of families and empower families to use the existing strengths of their family to cope with the increasing challenges of today's society. *Prevention through empowerment* is the key to strengthening families.

The Train the Trainer delivery method has equipped members of the Department of Social Services, student teachers, guidance counselors, and social workers with the training and curriculum to use in delivering the program to audiences that include, prisoners, day care workers, foster parents, teen parents, and court-ordered parents. Two urban American Red Cross Chapters have adopted the curriculum for use in their family education programs and are offering trainings to their volunteers. In addition, Building Family Strengths is being used as the Family Strengthening component of the South Carolina Children Youth and Families at Risk (CYFAR) program focus that targets at-risk populations.

The marketing and promotion of the curriculum is the current focus of the team. The initial research that identified the ten common strengths for South Carolina families was originally conducted in 1988, replicated in 1995, and further research is scheduled in 2002. Findings from the pilot feedback resulted in a new packaging format, clearer directions for preschool activities, and the elimination of stated age levels on the activity sheets. This suggestion allowed for a wider use of the activities at different age and functional levels. Icons for each age level are used for the instructor's benefit on all materials, as illustrated below.

Age Level	Icon
Preschool	
Elementary	
Middle/Junior High School	
High School	
Adult	

A research and evaluation project is currently being designed to evaluate long-term program effectiveness. The design of the curriculum is currently being evaluated by using the experiential National 4-H Curriculum model. In addition, a CD is being developed that will include a sample pre/post test for each strength. The pre/post test can be edited to meet the evaluation needs of those using the specific curriculum components. Funding is being sought for a Spanish translation of the materials to address a rapidly growing segment of the population.

Building Family Strengths curriculum notebooks are available for distribution to other states and agencies. The curriculum has been packaged according to age level and includes preschool, elementary, middle/junior high, senior high, and adult modules. Curriculum sets have been purchased by seventeen states and various state agencies. Organizations that purchase the curriculum can request customized Building Family Strengths trainings that are presented by the team members. Ordering information and sample lessons can be found on the Web site <http://fyd.clemson.edu/building.htm>.

Building Family Strengths program gives family life educators most of their program materials in one central location and allows them to adjust the lessons to almost any audience and time frame. Future budget and personnel shortages in Family and Consumer Sciences will necessitate more programs with these versatile design features.

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