

# **Building Strong Families: Challenges and Choices Program Focus Group Report**

## **Personal, Family and Relationship Changes Reported by Program Participants**

*by:*

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### **Program Overview**

University of Missouri Extension's *Building Strong Families: Challenges and Choices* Program (<http://extension.missouri.edu/bsf>) is designed to help families find their strengths, build on those strengths, and learn skills to create stronger families, improve relationships, and increase communication. The Program draws from an interactive, 13-module curriculum to provide a series of life skills workshops that are supported by strength-based research.

Building Strong Families targets working families with dependent children. It can be and has been adapted to reach many different families and caregivers. Individual groups can customize the multi-session program by choosing from the following topics: *Family Strengths, Communicating, Managing Stress, Child Self-Care, Food and Fitness, Working, Setting Goals, Positive Discipline, Money Matters, Balancing Responsibilities, Consumer Beware, Healthy House, and Kids & Self-Esteem*. Facilitators offer a minimum of three sessions in a series.

The Building Strong Families program design team has certified 508 Extension specialists and paraprofessionals and community agency educators from Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, Illinois, and Minnesota to implement the program in their local communities. Approximately 5,000 family members have participated in the program since 1997.

### **Focus Group Procedures**

To gain more understanding about the effects of the program on families, Lucy Schrader, Building Strong Families Program Coordinator; Brenda Procter, Consumer and Family Economics State Specialist; and Suzi McGarvey, Extension Associate from University of Missouri Extension, led four focus groups between May 2003 and April 2004. Focus group leaders worked with community agency directors and Extension and agency facilitators to organize the focus groups. Groups came together in four rural towns from

the Northwest, Northeast, and Central regions of Missouri. Social service and Community Action Agencies and University of Missouri Extension participated in the process.

Potential attendees received letters describing the focus group process. Participants attended at least three Building Strong Families workshops and were at least 18 years old. A total of thirty-eight people participated in the four focus groups, which lasted from an hour to an hour and a half each. Lunch or dinner was served before the focus groups.

Focus group procedures were approved by the University of Missouri Campus Institutional Review Board. The focus group leaders read a consent form out loud to all participants. Each person gave written consent to participate. Participants could decline to answer questions or leave at any time. At the end of the focus group, each person got a \$50 gift card to Wal-Mart as a thank-you for his or her time and travel.

See the Building Strong Families Focus Group Protocol (Appendix) for more details about the focus groups and to see examples of the questions that the leaders asked.

## **Building Strong Families Program**

### **About Focus Group Participants**

Thirty-eight total participants attended the focus group sessions. Thirty-two were women and six were men. A majority of people had attended more than six workshop sessions as part of their Building Strong Families series, while some attended all thirteen. Everyone attended at least three sessions.

Participants were in different life stages, from being young parents to being grandparents. Participants' family situations varied; people were married, divorced, remarried, or dating. Focus group participants ranged from having one child to having several children, and one person had no children. Participants' children ranged in age from two months old to forty-seven years old, but the majority had children under the age of 11. Additionally, a few participants spoke of their pets as their "children."

A common theme focus group leaders noticed was the large number of stress factors in the participants' lives, such as divorce issues, balancing job and family, low wages, and the demands of being a parent. While not being able to remove all of the stress factors, Building Strong Families workshops did help many people learn new skills to manage stress better and improve their lives in certain areas (such as talking to significant others, understanding how to make healthier food choices, using more positive discipline techniques with their children, etc.).

### **Workshop Attendance**

Participants gave several reasons for attending the Building Strong Families workshops. Some wanted to learn specific skills to improve their parenting; some wanted to learn

more in general. One participant said that she was “hopeful” to come because she and her husband were having problems, and she thought the classes would make a difference. Another participant mentioned that the workshops were the one time of the week when she had “her” time. She could focus on herself, instead of work or her children. “That was the only time I had of relief.” For one group, the Building Strong Families workshops were part of another program that they were attending. A few were mandated to attend.

For three of the focus groups, attendees mentioned that their facilitators made a big difference in their decision to attend the workshops. These facilitators listened to participants, let them share their life experiences, gave them ideas for activities, showed them new skills, and adapted the program to fit the participants’ needs. One participant shared, “Our teachers have been a big help for us.”

Furthermore, the facilitators took an interest in the participants and wanted them to succeed. Someone excitedly said about her facilitator, “She was great; she made it fun....” The facilitators encouraged participants to come on a regular basis, and the participants felt welcome at the sessions. A participant said about her facilitator, “She didn’t judge.” Another person said, “And she relaxed everybody.... Letting everybody know that hey, it doesn’t matter why you’re here... if you’re here, it’s great....”

Many participants appreciated the time and extra effort that the facilitators took in providing handouts for class and for other family members at home; supplemental materials (e.g., anti-stress kits); and fun snacks and meals during sessions.

### **Workshop Sessions and Activities**

Several participants mentioned that they were initially nervous about coming to the workshops, because they did not know anyone or they did not know what to expect. After coming to the program, they felt Building Strong Families met their needs, was a worthwhile program, and made them want to return. One participant said, “...I definitely think it is a terrific program; it has been one of our favorites. We always look forward to coming on Wednesdays.” Others in this group shared the same sentiment. They even rearranged their schedules to come to workshops on Wednesdays.

Before the workshops started, someone wondered, “Is this just going to be another lame course?” By the time the person completed the sessions, he felt, “it was actually very good...it went very well.”

Many participants asked when the next series would be available, because they were interested in attending additional Building Strong Families workshops.

For a few of the focus group participants, the workshops reinforced information they had previously learned. They felt the program was a good “refresher course” for information they learned in college classes as well as through life experiences. It reminded them of what they needed to work on in their families.

Focus group participants talked about some of their favorite sessions and why they were. These sessions consisted of Communicating to help communicate needs more effectively; Family Strengths to realize strengths children bring to the family; Money Matters to better manage money and prioritize financial needs; Working to reinforce future plans for study and employment; Managing Stress to help make better decisions and balance demands; Consumer Beware to educate themselves about scams, and Positive Discipline to learn ideas about working with different age groups of children and discipline techniques.

These topics seemed to meet the needs in the participants' lives at the time of the workshops. Several said that they did not have a favorite session, because they liked them all. A participant mentioned, "I think the program covers everything, which is really good...I don't think there is anything we haven't talked about." Another participant said, "I can't say I had a favorite one because they all really fit into...the situation that I'm in right now; I can really tell that every one of these has helped me."

They also mentioned the following favorite activities: Legos®, Post-it® Notes, and Strengths in the Bag from Family Strengths; back-to-back drawing from Communicating; stress dots from Managing Stress; group juggle from Balancing Responsibilities; self-assessment from Working; trying new foods in Food and Fitness; ideas for giving children directions from Positive Discipline; and discussion time and group work throughout many of the sessions.

Knowing which activities and modules best facilitated participants' learning helps the program developers update and improve the modules, incorporate new interactive experiences, and revise activities to better suit participants' needs. Participants provided several suggestions for additional workshop topics and new activities, which program developers will use in future curriculum revisions. Participants suggested adding information about working with children with Attention Deficit Disorder, goal setting in a crisis situation, ideas for parents with kids who are picky eaters, and more food ideas for the Food and Fitness module.

Focus group leaders encouraged participants to also share negative comments or concerns about the program. Participants, however, only gave positive comments and ideas for additional topics and activities as mentioned above.

## **Impacts**

Focus group participants reported several changes they made after attending Building Strong Families workshop sessions. Many shared that they feel more confident about themselves, think about situations in a new way, learned new information and skills to help themselves and their families, and make better choices. The change that program participants most often brought up was a positive shift in their parenting style and interaction with their children. Their relationships with their children are much better now than they were before they attended the program.

Several also noted how they are better able to talk to their significant others about issues that were hard to talk about before. Families spend more time together, which has improved how they talk and interact. Several participants reported that they found it very helpful to have a support network of other parents at the sessions who are dealing with similar issues. These participants now help each other outside of class as well.

## **Change in Self**

### **Change in Mind Set**

Many participants talked about coming out of their shells. Coming to the BSF workshops helped them work through some of their shyness. While some of the participants considered themselves “homebodies,” during the Building Strong Families workshops they looked forward to attending class with others. One woman began to feel more confident after attending several sessions, and her stutter improved. Other participants also gained a sense of confidence in what they said and did. One shared:

We've had quite a few people come in and not stay [as part of their larger social service program] and it helps us just being in a group [the Building Strong Families group] and everything has helped us a lot just to be able to talk to other people when they do come in because we are able to explain some of the things we do, and not feel backwards and shy about it and I think that it is really going to [benefit] us a lot whenever we do start college in the fall because we are going to be able to just jump right into the classes and not have no problems.

After the workshops, they felt empowered to express their needs. One woman said that she tells her husband if she feels that he is wrong, when she would not have done this before. Several participants talked about being able to set limits with others. One woman shared her experience about how the program helped her establish some boundaries with her family.

My mom's just always in my business about everything, and I don't raise the kids right, and I just tell her, I don't really want to talk about that, and that's something that before I would never do. And I would tell the kids that too, I don't want to talk about this right now. We can talk about this at a later time. And it's just setting goals and learning to say, you know, this isn't comfortable for me right now, so we can either talk about it at a later time when I want to, or not at all.

Participants shared another change in how they saw themselves. Going through the Building Strong Families workshops raised their self-esteem. They saw themselves more in control of their decisions and were better able to express their feelings. A woman noted that she has seen a “big change” in herself by coming to the workshops. Her “low self-esteem” is getting “a lot better.” A different woman mentioned that she “learned a

lot in all of the workshops” and that her “self-esteem has grown a lot.” This increase in self-esteem spilled over into other parts of the participants lives.

I think it has improved my self-esteem some and I try not to let my feelings be hurt as much anymore when I think there’s something wrong. I need to speak up rather than just hide it.

Not only did participants increase their confidence and self-esteem, many gained insights about what they needed to do to get their families on track. Some were now able to step back and see the bigger picture, which then allowed them to plan for changes they wanted to make. One participant shared:

At the time, I had had a whole pizza in front of me and I was trying to gobble it down all at once...and once I realized that I can take a little piece of that pizza and start chewing on it, I saw a lot more action, it started going more than a piece at a time. But I had to sit back and set goals, I couldn’t think of a whole problem by going at it from all the angles.

Some people had a sense of what they wanted for their families, but they had had the mind set that they could do it all. They were finally able to admit that it is impossible for one person to handle all of the responsibilities of a family, and they realized they needed to ask others for help. One participant asked for help, which she would not have done before coming to the workshops.

I think with the managing stress, it kind of helps me to realize that I’m taking on too much and I had to let my other family members help me out with her [daughter], like my husband’s family and my grandma and my dad, and let them sort of take over some of the responsibilities, when there was just a little too much.

### **Learning New Information and Making Better Choices**

Participants reported that attending the Building Strong Families workshops enhanced their lives. The workshops provided information that helped them do things differently and make better choices in various aspects of their lives, such as in communication, health, home environment and safety, financial and consumer decisions, skills assessment, and managing stress.

For example, many people felt their communication improved. Several said that the back-to-back drawing activity in the Communication module helped them become better listeners and to verbalize what they need. One participant shared, “I’m more able to express my feelings when somebody upsets me...” She now expresses her feelings rather than letting her emotions build up until she yells at the wrong people.

Another mom described how learning to communicate better helped her when she had her daughter. The mom was sixteen, in school, and working full time. She felt

overwhelmed at the time, and the workshop helped her focus on what was important to her and talk to people about those issues. A divorced mom shared that she talks to her daughter better. When she and her daughter have visits, the mom does not “get as upset as easily anymore” and said that now, “I don’t yell at her, I talk to her.” She felt that her overall family communication was better.

Others mentioned that the Food and Fitness module helped them learn about different food choices and eating habits. One mom said that she was able to talk to her husband after the workshop about their daughter’s eating habits. The husband grew up eating a lot of candy. The mom now had specific ideas of what they could give the daughter and the reasons behind eating less candy. Another mom was surprised to learn the harmful effects of soda, and because of that does not give her children soda very often.

She [the teacher] was explaining about how giving kids pop before or after you give them milk doesn't do them any good because it deteriorates all the calcium...I don't give my kids pop hardly any more. Just because of their health and I never ever knew that and I was like WOW that is kind of a shocking detail.

At least two of the facilitators introduced the participants to new healthy foods and cooking ideas. After finishing the Food and Fitness module, many participants incorporated these cooking ideas into their family meals. One mom noted, “I’m making more healthy meals, making it more of a rounded out meal.” Another mom commented, “It helped me with the meal preparations...we have more meat and vegetables than we do the starches or fats.” Others began trying new foods that they had never tried before. One woman realized after she attended the session that she needed to get more exercise and was in the process of buying a bicycle.

Several people talked about what they learned in the Healthy House module. One person said it helped her to talk about safety issues. She learned to keep all chemicals, medicines, and unsafe products under lock and key because she has an infant. Another mom was grateful to get information about vacuuming. Her young daughter has lung problems, and she took the handouts that she got at the workshop and talked to her day care provider and her husband. She was not only able to tell them what irritates the girl’s breathing, but she also had ideas of how to prevent and minimize her problems.

Another topic area that participants discussed is learning about financial issues. One woman who was on a “limited income” explained how the workshops helped her “stretch it” as far as she could. Another person said that it helped her “get out of debt.” Using the information she learned in the Consumer Beware module, a woman was able to evaluate two long distance phone carriers to decide which one fit better into her budget.

Two participants spoke highly of what they learned from the Working module. Both women were going to college that fall. They described how the skills assessment reaffirmed their choices of study. Because of this assessment, both of them were not as worried about attending college because they knew they were on the right track of study.

I wanted to go to college for accounting but I was not for sure if that is what I was going to be good at and when I did all the paper work and I looked at all my interest and everything I really did understand that accounting would be a good choice for me.

Yeah, mine was the same way, I wanted to go to college to be a nurse and that was whenever I did all of that [paperwork], health care came as the highest.

Some participants described how the program reinforced stress reduction techniques that they had learned before. Using this information they are working on handling their stress better. One woman now negotiates with her spouse about household duties, shared responsibilities, and work schedules. By talking to her husband and sharing the load, she is better able to manage her stress and their stress as a couple. Another person allows herself to do things for herself to reduce her stress. She decided that coming to Building Strong Families is “my time” and “more than anything it’s been my stress-release.”

On the other hand, a different group of participants laughed that although they learned what they need to do, they still struggle with managing stress in their lives. Even though they are surrounded by daily stress, they are now at least able to recognize their stressors and plan to keep working on how they react.

### **Change in Interaction with Children**

The change most often reported by participants was their positive shift in parenting. Parents learned new overall ways of interacting with their children, what kids can and cannot do at different ages, and specific discipline techniques. Many people became more consistent in their actions and now talk with their children. As a result of attending the program, several parents reported that their stress levels have lowered because they can interact with their children in a more positive way. In turn the children have responded positively to their parents’ new behaviors. Moreover, several participants realized just how important their children are.

After doing the Post-it® note activity from the Family Strengths module, one mom in particular had an eye-opening realization that changed the way she viewed her children. She realized that her children had strengths that they brought to the family.

You never realize that your children brought strengths into that house too. Just realizing that your children, no matter what their ages are, they have many strengths that they bring into the house also. And that made me kind of look differently at them, and I think that will help a lot.

Parents learned new strategies for discipline, which allowed the family to function more calmly. After a number of the parents made changes in their discipline strategies, some of the children made dramatic improvements in their behaviors.

For example, one mom found much of the positive discipline techniques applicable to her family. She shared, "I found a lot of that useful because both of my kids have ADHD, so it gave me some alternatives of what to do."

Another mom was worried about her daughter because she had low self-esteem and was constantly lying. The mom made a conscious effort to help her change and decided to work on one thing at a time. Using the overall information from the program, she worked with her daughter on the lying problem. As that got better, "everything seemed to just fall in place."

In one family, a mom and her new husband had different discipline strategies and the two families were struggling with adjustment issues. The mom described her husband as an "over-controlling and over-bearing" person who used spanking often and the children as "shy, inward bound." His oldest daughter was especially withdrawn. Due to the father's behavior, his daughter did not have a "release" at home, so she "went haywire and acted out" in public. At home she felt like she had to be the "most perfect child."

The mom shared positive discipline strategies from the workshop and convinced the dad to try different things besides spanking the kids. "The positive discipline really helped out. I've seen not only through lifting up the burden off my kids and the stress off the whole family...and teaching him [the father] different ways to get his way without having to spank loosened up my kids and made them more outgoing." The daughter now gave "twenty million smiles," and the change in her family has helped her do better at school. Even other people outside of the family mentioned that the daughter is "more outgoing and happy."

Another couple was also committed to trying a new discipline strategy. They realized that not spanking takes time and effort. During the transition (from spanking to using other strategies), some things were not going smoothly. Instead of giving up and reverting to their old ways, they made adjustments until their new strategies worked fully.

We'll try it, we'll try it, and of course, we totally stopped spanking for a while and the kids were like hey, we can do whatever we want, we're not going to get a spanking. Mom's ruling the house, this is cool! And at first, we did this the totally wrong way and then we had to stop, spank a little bit to let them realize that we're not totally cutting it out, and then we slowly eased it totally out.

Another mom talked about the strategies she tried with her young daughter. At the time of the class, her daughter was under two, and the mom did not always know what she should and should not do. The mom now felt like her parenting skills had greatly improved. She had been completely frustrated that she could not explain things to her daughter (because the daughter was not old enough to understand). When she used positive reinforcement and redirection, things went much smoother for her and her daughter.

When I used positive reinforcement, when I redirected her attention, she got it a little bit better and it was easier for both of us, it saved us a lot of time. I felt that my parenting skills were getting better. And I feel that they're a lot better now.

Another mom has improved her situation by using another positive discipline technique of setting limits with her daughter.

The positive discipline one that we did, she [the teacher] gave us some different ideas that worked and some with my youngest daughter she's only two; she's never had a spanking yet. Now when I tell her No, No means no, and as bad as I want to give in to her, just telling her NO and sticking with it I don't have to [give in] at all.

Several parents talked about setting expectations for their kids, which helped them understand what they should do. One parent said that she now explains to her kids why they get into trouble and that helps them understand the consequences better. Many parents learned to set limits with their children and to discuss consequences with them.

But being more specific, when you tell children to do things, so they know what's expected of them and not so much just assuming that they're going to do what you expect of them. Going in and saying...I want the toys in the toy box and books on the shelf.

I pay attention to what my kids are doing, even my teenagers; just because they're older doesn't mean they aren't big enough to take care of their stuff. And that's really helped me a lot lately.

Parents learned that by setting consequences for their children's actions, they could help curtail undesirable behavior in their children. Participants shared that throwing fits, screaming, etc., decreased because children learned that these behaviors no longer could be used as leverage against their parents. One mom involved her son in the process by having him choose which toy to give up if he misbehaved. The mom explained that the toy has "to be the one that he plays with, the one he's playing with at that point in time, or one of his good toys. Like his Power Rangers or something like that, and I've got a cabinet and I put it up there and he screams, and yells ...and I say 'well, you've got to stop and then you can have it back.'" Other parents offered rewards for good behavior. "You get to go to St. Louis if you are good."

Many parents talk to their children more and provide choices that allow for their children's involvement in their discipline process. Instead of caving to her children as she normally did when they were throwing a fit, one mom learned to be more consistent and to stand by her decision. She discussed various choices with her kids and over time, her children's behavior improved.

Because I was a type of mom that was always giving in and just gave them what they wanted because they'd yell and scream and cry and throw fits. But I found myself being more consistent with them, and instead of like putting them in time out, or putting them in a corner, I sit down and talk with them.

Another mom agreed, "I'm better with my kids. I sit down more and talk with them."

One person commented that all five of the moms in one of the groups have become stronger parents. They understand more about parenting now, from teaching their kids how to read to making better food choices to using different positive discipline strategies. Another mom felt as if she had become a "role model" for her children by reading more at home. She read the handouts from the program, and her daughter, who could not read, wanted to look at the handouts. By setting this example, the mom feels her children will respect her more.

Someone else added that she now spends more time with her children. She does "more things with them" and teaches her daughter ABC's and how to count. While the mom has made great progress, she noted, however, that she struggles to balance her time between her daughter and son and plans to continue working on this area.

One group of participants specifically reported that their level of stress has gone down because they learned how to interact with their children in a more positive way. They now have ways to reduce their kids bothering each other as much. Furthermore, when the moms do start feeling stressed, they have alternatives of what they can do to feel more in control.

I noticed whenever I first started here we were all really stressed out...kids were throwing toys and beating each other up all the time and everything and we weren't for sure how to stop them from doing that. Then [our teacher] gave us a lot of interesting ideas on different things we can do with the kids, different things we can make to help...keep them from aggravating each other and then different ways to help us when we start feeling like we are stressed out. Just go in another room; go in the bedroom and close the door; go outside, take a deep breath of fresh air or just call a time out for ourselves and I think that has helped us a lot.

### **Effect of Program on Family**

The benefits of the Building Strong Families Program extended beyond the participants themselves. As participants learned new information and made changes within themselves, they became catalysts for change in their families. In several instances, families worked better and spent more time together. Family members' communication and relationships improved. Furthermore, the program made such an impression on many participants, that they were eager to share workshop materials with friends, as well.

As participants gained insights into their own situations, they were better able to develop goals as a family and concentrate their energies on working together. The Building Strong Families program helped one woman refocus the family's priorities. Her family is now working together on a common goal.

When I think back, the family wasn't going nowhere. And I said, we're going to go somewhere, we've got to go, and now we're working for the goal, which we're working toward getting a brand new house. Which has been a goal of ours, and now it is at the top level and we're going to get there.

Some participants realized their children's input is important to the family, and that the kids' views can help the adults think about things in different ways. This input strengthens all of the members of the family and allows the family to move forward in a healthy way. One dad with young children shared that his family started having meetings where everyone, including the kids, could give input. Another participant with grown children told them of her decision to cut back financially by selling her large house. Her children supported her decision wholeheartedly and even told her, "you don't need to have so much stress on your shoulders" [by keeping up with the house]. Their support relieved her worry of being in over her head.

Information from Family Strengths and Communicating and the discussions generated during workshops provided participants valuable insights into family communication. Participants learned that turning off the TV during family meals was a great way to spend more time together. After several participants removed TV from their meal times, family members talked to each other about daily activities and issues that were relevant to each family member. Their relationships deepened as their communication became more open.

One mom said that she and her three kids usually ate dinner together, but her husband would eat in the living room in front of the TV. "But not anymore. He sits at the table with us and...that is when [we] usually get to talk about how everything went and we've actually become closer and closer...." A second mom agreed that turning off the TV made a big difference in her family because they now "talk to each other" and "pay more attention to what we are doing with each other."

Not only did participants share the changes within their families, they also focused specifically on their relationship improvements with their spouses or significant others. Coming to the Building Strong Families Program helped them be more open, communicate more clearly, and take time for themselves as a couple.

After coming through the Building Strong Families workshops, one husband realized that his way of thinking was not the only way to look at situations. This allowed him to open up to other points of view. Instead of assuming his way is always right, he is now more willing to compromise with his wife and consider her thoughts.

And it also taught me to understand her more than I did before... I've got my standards and my wife's got hers. And sometimes they clash, and then we have to cut back—well this didn't work out, OK, that did. And each day it's a different deal, you know, it's a new challenge. And it works for me to take each challenge at a time, like new.

Several participants described a change in their communication process with their husbands. One woman described how “communication has opened up a lot.” Before learning some communication techniques, she had trouble talking to her husband about paying bills. She now feels that she can ask her husband for help and strategies for their financial needs. Another woman had a similar situation with her husband and a lack of communication about bills. After the workshops, she felt more comfortable speaking up about this difficult topic. She gained confidence and was able to take control of the situation when neither one of them wanted to step up and handle it in the past.

Along with a more open communication style in some families, many participants developed a stronger relationship with their spouses. Some spoke of being “closer together.” One wife shared that she and her husband work “as a team” now in dealing with their daughter. One couple realized that they needed to spend time together without their children. “We take more time out for ourselves...I love my kids to death but I have to get away from them sometimes and we both realize it. That helps us on our stress levels, too.”

Although Building Strong Families is designed for the whole family, program developers realize that not all members of a family will attend the workshops. Their hope is, however, that participants will take home what they learned in the session and share it with others. This sharing of materials and activities can then help spark changes both in those who have received the information and in the family.

These focus group findings show that many people did exactly that: they shared what they learned with others. One mom gave her teenage daughter the self-esteem handouts, because she thought her daughter could benefit from them. The mom said the information “helped her [the daughter] open up some.” Furthermore, the daughter went for an audition, which the mom did not think she would have done before.

Another person talked to her husband about the positive discipline information she learned in the workshop. She said he used to scream at the kids. Instead of yelling the next time the kids were acting out, he lowered his voice and got their attention and talked with them. Very surprised, he later told his wife, “It worked!” The wife encouraged him to “try the others [other discipline techniques]. And you know, it really helped.”

One wife said she shared all of the program information with her husband. When asked during the focus group, “Did he read the information?” she responded:

Oh yeah. And if he didn't I read it to him...He did ask me to read several of them while he drove, but he read most of it. And then, of course, he

was more than willing to help. “Anything, anything, whatever you want. If you think it’ll help us, go for it.”

Several people gave information to other family members and friends. They were excited to share the information with others because it had helped them so much. One participant gave her sister information to help her with her kids and with a relationship she was in. Another person passed along to her sister-in-law the importance of good nutrition for kids, and specifically that soda pop is not good for children. This participant also mentioned how helpful it was to be able to refer to the handouts she got during classes. Once she got home and wanted to follow up on the information, she had something to refresh her memory. Another mom said that her older daughter has “gotten into my books and has been reading all of my paperwork and stuff.” One person shared money management skills with someone she knew. Another gave her friend ideas on how to redirect her child.

### **Relationship with Program Participants**

The Building Strong Families Program development team expected participants to gain a secondary benefit attending the program. In addition to learning new information and skills, the team also wanted participants to get to know each other, to support one another, and to create a network that they could rely on.

We found this to be the case in two of the four focus groups. Participants got to know each other in their workshop sessions. They felt much more comfortable with one another, and they had a sense of support from others. They learned that they are not the only ones struggling with family issues or knowing what to do with their children. Some participants continue to do activities together outside of the Building Strong Families workshops. Their children played and interacted with each other outside of class.

The participants in these two groups shared the transformations that occurred within their groups throughout the program series. They reported that they were shy and awkward at the beginning of the series. A few people revealed that they were even “scared” to come to the group because they did not know what to expect and they were afraid people would judge them.

As the group met over time, they shared their stories, got to know each other’s situations, and became comfortable with each other. One woman commented, “When we first started nobody would talk...Now you get us together and we just can’t stop talking [laughter].” Another woman added, “Everyone has become really good friends.”

As participants shared and became more open with each other, they began to help each other in different ways. Some participants became comfortable enough that they were not afraid to share their personal and often difficult experiences during the sessions. Others became willing to offer their support to group participants. One mom said that she finally got comfortable enough to ask for advice on potty training with her child,

which she would not have done before coming to Building Strong Families. Going through the class helped her realize that it was all right to ask for help.

The relationships that were developed between the participants created a level of support that people did not have before. They began implementing the basic principles of the program: focusing on positive aspects of each other. When one woman talked about improvements she made, all of the group immediately affirmed, “She’s such a good mom [now]!”

Some people gained a level of support and validation by learning that others within the group were dealing with similar circumstances. They did not feel as alone in their struggles and realized that they could make it through the situation. One mom stated, “I think it made it easier on you if you’re stressing over something with a child and also finding out that you’re not the only one who’s out there stressing over this...it’s nice to know that there’s others in the same boat as you.” Another mom was reassured that she could “talk to somebody that is going through the same thing you are.” By talking to each other, participants shared ideas of how they handled various situations.

While two of the groups felt much closer to each other than when they started, all four of the groups learned from each other during the sessions. Several participants gave the sense that being able to listen and learn from other people in their groups was extremely beneficial. As people talked, one woman noticed traits she admired in others and then tried to imitate those traits to replace ones she did not like in herself.

Of all of the discussion topics, participants found it most helpful to learn about parenting. More specifically, parents heard ideas for discipline strategies and day-to-day activities with children. For example, one parent got ideas about redirecting her small child when the child was getting into things. Another parent found it helpful to learn how other participants got their kids up and going in the mornings, because her son did not want to wake up for school. One mom gained ideas for bath time with her baby daughter. Various discussions also helped some learn about different ages and stages of children and prepared them for what was to come.

Participants seemed to have an overall feeling of comfort from the discussions that took place. Watching other parents and hearing how others dealt with family struggles helped them feel that they, too, could handle their problems and get through them.

One group in particular got to know each other, became close, and started doing things outside of class together. They met each other at the park to let their children play together. They shared rides for various errands and encouraged each other as they dealt with day-to-day demands. They even planned their college courses so they could be in classes together. Their camaraderie was evident in their actions during the focus group. The women showed great kindness and respect to each other and supported one another.

These testimonies reinforce what the Building Strong Families team members hoped would happen—sharing ideas and supporting one another. Most participants truly

appreciated the discussions during the workshops because they do not always have time to talk to other parents, and many other programs they have attended do not give time for them to share ideas.

Furthermore, participants from two of the four focus groups formed strong support networks with one another outside of classes. The focus group leaders wondered if the facilitators had a role in participants developing close relationships. It is not known if it was the facilitators' teaching style, the circumstances that brought the group together, or other factors, which led to the group members' closeness. This information needs to be studied in the future.

## **Program Outcomes**

The focus groups results served more than one purpose. Not only did the data show us personal and family changes and impacts, but secondarily the data helped program developers look at the program process and evaluation.

Building Strong Families program developers follow a program logic model approach in outlining inputs, activities, outputs, and outcomes for the program. This model clarifies final outcomes so that all programming efforts are focused on achieving the desired impacts. Outcomes are set for families and for facilitators, and this report centers on the family outcomes.

Initial, intermediate, and long term outcomes are that families will use new skills to build strengths, improve communication and relationships, and thrive in communities (<http://extension.missouri.edu/hes/plms/plmpdfs/bsfplm.pdf>).

After analyzing the focus group data, however, the authors found that they need to modify program outcomes to better reflect the focus group results. The findings appear to show that people make changes in themselves first, before the entire family makes changes. Therefore, the initial outcomes need to focus on the individual who attends the program, instead of focusing on the entire family as we currently have in the program logic model. The authors will create a more appropriate model using the new findings.

## **Summary**

In all four focus groups, participants reported changes in themselves, their children, their families, and their relationships. After attending the workshops, they gained a greater self confidence and learned to stand up for themselves. Participants learned new information about various topics. As a family their communication improved, and they developed better relationships with their children and significant others. Many indicated a great improvement in their parenting skills by using new positive discipline techniques. Their stress levels with their children decreased. Furthermore, many participants reported that as a family, they spent more time together.

Participants in two of the four focus groups found a network of support from other workshop participants. This network formed outside of class seemed to be a great asset to them. Not only did they learn new concepts, they also gained support from others that lasted beyond the program series. The program developers will further study this secondary effect, so it can be encouraged for other groups.

Goals of the Building Strong Families program are to include adult learners in their learning process by using hands-on activities, involving the participants in discussions, and making the sessions fun. Participants' feedback from the focus groups reinforces the effectiveness of this learning philosophy.

This report focused on thirty-eight people who attended Building Strong Families workshops in four areas of Missouri. As they shared their experiences, they helped the program developers understand how they used the workshop information and helped their families. Participants identified many key concepts that they learned and incorporated into their lives. As program developers make future updates, they will use this feedback to continue to offer relevant, hands-on activities.

Desired program outcomes currently focus on family changes. These report findings show that some participants actually make personal changes first and then make changes in their families. The authors will consider adding personal changes to expected outcomes.

While these focus groups are a good starting place to see what impacts the program has on families, this report cannot be generalized to all Building Strong Families participants. The findings provide valuable insight to program developers and lay important groundwork for rigorous long-term impact evaluation.

*The focus group leaders give special thanks to Building Strong Families facilitators, community agency directors, and participants who gave their time, effort, and energy and shared their experiences to help us move the program forward. We would also like to thank Extension administrators for providing the necessary program resources.*

## **APPENDIX**

### **PROTOCOL FOR FOCUS GROUPS THE BUILDING STRONG FAMILIES PROGRAM IMPACTS ON IMPROVING FAMILY STRENGTHS**

**APRIL 2004**

This research centers on the University Outreach and Extension's (UOE) Building Strong Families: Challenges and Choices (BSF) program. The objective of this study is to assess the impact of the BSF program on improving family strengths. It is hypothesized that BSF helps families identify and build on strengths and improve relationships.

Objectives: The focus groups will elicit discussion of the BSF Program and the ways in which the BSF program has affected 1) whether families have incorporated recommended practices in their daily lives and 2) if this has resulted in families working together to support each others' needs. Participants will be encouraged to discuss how relationships among family members have changed since participating in the program; describe any changes that they have observed in themselves, their children, or other adult family members as a result of program participation; and explain how these changes came about. Specific discussion areas will include:

- Changes in individual behavior
- Changes in relationships with adult family members
- Changes in relationships with children

Description of the participants: The focus groups will be conducted with BSF participants who attended at least three workshop sessions. Eight program participants in each of four focus groups will be invited to participate, with an objective of including at least six participants in each focus group.

Informed consent: Informed consent forms will be distributed and collected by the focus group facilitators prior to the focus groups. The facilitators will keep the forms and put them in a locked filing cabinet.

Description of the focus groups: The participants and the facilitators will sit in a circle or around a table for the discussion. The facilitators will begin the meeting by introducing themselves and explaining that the purpose of the focus group sessions will be to learn about the impacts of the BSF program on improving family strengths. The focus group meetings will last between 60 and 90 minutes. They will be tape-recorded.

Scheduling the focus group: The focus groups will be held in Spring-Fall 2003-2004 (approximate dates). Two groups will be at urban sites, and two groups will be at rural sites. A meal will be provided (lunch or dinner depending on time of the focus group). Each participant will receive a Wal-Mart gift card as a thank you for his or her time and

to help cover travel and child care expenses. Participants will receive the gift cards whether they stay for the entire focus group or leave early.

Focus Group Discussion Guide: The following questions will provide the framework for the focus group discussions. While questions that are not listed here may be asked in order to follow up on participant responses, the focus group discussion will center on these main questions. The introduction and debriefing statements will be read to participants, or something similar will be said.

### *Introduction*

Hello. My name is [focus group leader name] and I work for University of Missouri Extension. I have worked with [the facilitator's name] on this program. Thank you for letting us come and be here today.

We are doing this discussion group to learn if and how the Building Strong Families Program helped you and your family. You can help us understand what you did with the program information after you finished the workshops.

A discussion group lets people talk about an experience they have all had. I will ask questions and keep track of time so that all questions can be answered. I will be taking notes so that I can be sure to remember your answers.

Everything that you say here will be kept confidential. Your names, the names of your children, the names of other family members, and any other identifying information will not be used in any reports or information.

Before we begin, I need to pass out this consent form.

As I mentioned in the consent form, I am required by law to call Missouri's Child Abuse and Neglect Hotline if anyone shares information with us about child abuse.

I would like you to share your honest feelings about any changes, good or bad, that you have seen in yourself, your children, or other adults in the family from the time you were in the program. There are no wrong answers. Also, you do not have to agree with each other. Each of you can talk about your experience and give your opinion.

You do not have to answer any questions that you do not want to answer. You can say "pass" or "I don't want to answer that." Or, you can leave at any time.

I have a set amount of time (60-90 minutes), so I might have to interrupt from time-to-time to keep things moving.

*Opening question*

1. What is your name, and how many Building Strong Families workshops did you attend?

*Introductory question*

2. What motivated you to participate in the Building Strong Families Program?

*Transition question*

3. Which topic was your favorite workshop? Why do you say that?

**Key questions**

4. Which topic was your favorite workshop? Why do you say that?
5. Did you have a favorite activity from one of the workshops?
6. Did you share that activity with anyone in your family or with friends?
7. Do you have any children? If yes, how many and what are their ages?
8. Do you think that being in the Building Strong Families program has affected your relationship with your child or children (or children that you interact with)? If yes, how?
9. Do you think that being in the Building Strong Families program has affected your relationships with other adult family members? If yes, how?
10. Do you think that being in the Building Strong Families program has affected you as a person? If yes, how?
11. Do you have contact with others from your group outside of class?
12. Did you before the workshops?
13. How did you feel about coming to the BSF program at the beginning? Did this change over time? How?
14. Name 2 or 3 things that you learned in the workshops that you didn't know before that have helped you most.

*Ending question*

15. What do you think are the most important changes in your family since attending Building Strong Families?

*Follow-up questions* will be asked, when appropriate, to gather further information on perceived changes.

*Debriefing*

Thank you for participating in this group. We want to restate that what you have shared with us is confidential. No part of our discussion that includes names or other identifying information will be used in any reports, displays, or other materials coming from this group. Before we end, do you have any questions for us?