

Building Strong Families: Challenges and Choices Program Focus Group Report Summary

Personal, Family and Relationship Changes Reported by Program Participants

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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.

To gain more understanding about the effects of the Building Strong Families 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, which was approved by the MU Campus Institutional Review Board.

Focus group 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. Participants were in different life stages, from being young parents to being grandparents. Their family situations varied (married, divorced, remarried, or dating). They ranged from having one child to having several children, and one person had no children.

This summary presents an overview of the focus group findings. For the full report with complete findings, see the Building Strong Families: Challenges and Choices Program Focus Group Report (<http://extension.missouri.edu/bsf/evaluation/index.htm>). The following table introduces major themes, impacts and quotes from participants about changes in themselves, interactions with their children, their families, and relationships with the facilitators and with program participants after attending the program.

Building Strong Families Focus Group Themes
Change in Self
<p>Change in Mind Set</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Came out of their shells • Worked through shyness • Gained more confidence • Expressed their needs and feelings • Felt more in control of their decisions • Saw the bigger picture for their families • Asked for help <p style="text-align: center;"><i>...[The program] has improved my self-esteem...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.</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>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.</i></p>
<p>Learning New Information and Making Better Choices</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved communication with family members • Learned about healthier eating habits • Improved household safety and indoor air quality • Improved financial and consumer decision making skills • Learned about personal skills and abilities for college and work • Reduced stress <p style="text-align: center;"><i>[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....</i></p> <p>A mom of a daughter with lung problems shared vacuuming handouts from the Healthy House workshop with her day care provider and husband to prevent and minimize the daughter's breathing problems.</p>

Change in Interaction with Children

- Had a positive shift in parenting
- Interacted with children more positively
- Learned about children's ages and stages and expectations for each stage
- Learned specific discipline techniques
- Stopped spanking
- Implemented positive reinforcement, redirection and setting limits and consequences
- Became more consistent in their actions
- Discussed choices with children
- Spent more time with children

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.

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.

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.

...I was a type of mom that...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.

Effect of Program on Family

- Worked better together
- Spent more time together
- Improved communication and relationships
- Shared workshop materials with others
- Refocused priorities
- Developed goals as a family
- Included children's opinions in decisions
- Turned off the TV
- Took time for themselves as a couple

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....

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.

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.

Relationship with Facilitators

In three of the focus groups, attendees mentioned that their facilitators:

- Made a big difference in their decision to attend the workshops
- Listened to participants and let them share their life experiences
- Helped them learn new skills
- Adapted the program to fit the participants' needs.

Participants said about their facilitators:

She was great; she made it fun....

She didn't judge.

And she relaxed everybody.... Letting everybody know that hey, it doesn't matter why you're here... if you're here, it's great....

Relationship with Program Participants

In two of the four focus groups, participants:

- Got to know and supported one another
- Created a network that they could rely on
- Did activities outside of class

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.

In all four of the focus groups, participants:

- Learned from each other
- Gained a sense of strength from others going through similar situations

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.

Program Outcomes

Program Structure

- Focus group data reinforced the effectiveness of the program's philosophy of involving adult learners and using experiential learning

Program development

- Shift Program Logic Model outcomes to reflect focus group results. (Findings appear to show that individuals make changes first in themselves and then in their families.)
- Use feedback from participants to update modules

Future Research Areas

- Assess the impact of facilitator teaching style on group dynamics
- Evaluate family relationships and communication more in-depth
- Continue long-term follow up with families

These findings help program developers and facilitators understand how the program affected some families. Participants identified many key concepts that they learned and incorporated into their lives. As program developers update the program, they will use this feedback to continue to offer relevant, hands-on activities.

The network formed outside of class by participants in two of the groups, 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.

Desired program outcomes currently focus on family changes. These 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. Findings cannot be generalized to all program participants. They do 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.