



## BRYCS BRIEF

Fall 2010

### Supporting Refugee Families: Adapting Family Strengthening Programs that Build on Assets

*"Children belong to the extended family, society, and friends.  
Decisions are based on those ties. No one is left behind."  
-- Aline, a Burundian mother<sup>1</sup>*

Refugees generally come from countries where the family and local community are far more integrated—and central to identity, meaning, and survival—than is typical of the more individualistic culture prevalent in the U.S. today. However, by definition, refugees have endured forced uprooting from their communities, frequently losing family members through death or separation during their flights to safety.

How can service providers in the U.S. effectively build on the family and community strengths that refugees bring with them, including generations of parenting know-how, while also helping ease the transition to a very different cultural context in which to raise their children? Many refugee service providers have begun to adapt national "Family Strengthening Programs" that range from prevention to more intensive interventions addressing some of the most challenging health risk behaviors for youth, such as substance abuse and crime. This BRYCS Brief provides resources, "promising practices", and suggestions for adapting family strengthening programs for use with refugee populations.

#### The Family Strengthening Approach

By providing effective support to families, we ensure that children have the love, care, and sustenance they need to thrive. Strong families are essential for healthy communities both now and in the long-term, since healthy children grow up to create their own strong families and communities. These are the major concepts behind the family strengthening movement that began in the 1970s.<sup>2</sup> Since then, a number of programs have been developed that have been through rigorous testing for effectiveness. For example, the [Strengthening Families Program](#) (SFP), developed by Karol Kumpfer, PhD and a team at the University of Utah, has consistently been found to increase family strengths and resilience and to reduce risk factors for problem behaviors in high risk children, including emotional and academic challenges and health risk behaviors. The SFP has been adapted to a number of refugee and immigrant populations with similar levels of success. These results are consistent with other well-researched family strengthening programs.

Family strengthening is a "deliberate process of giving parents the necessary opportunities, relationships, networks, and supports to raise their children successfully, which includes involving parents as decision-makers in how their communities meet family needs." (Annie E. Casey Foundation, as cited in [Family Strengthening Policy Center](#), 2004, p.3)

<sup>1</sup> Bridging Refugee Youth and Children's Services. (2007). *BRYCS Parenting Conversations: Aline, a Burundian Social Worker*. Accessed from [http://www.brycs.org/documents/upload/BurundianSocialWorker\\_Interview.pdf](http://www.brycs.org/documents/upload/BurundianSocialWorker_Interview.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Family Strengthening Policy Center. (2004). *Brief No. 1: Introduction to Family Strengthening*. Accessed from <http://www.nassembly.org/FSPC/documents/PolicyBriefs/Brief1.pdf> and <http://www.nassembly.org/FSPC/PolicyBriefs/>.

## Evidence-Based Practices, Promising Practices, and Practice-Based Evidence

All three of these approaches are represented among family strengthening programs and all are important for advancing effective practice.<sup>3, 4</sup>

- **Evidence-Based Practices** bring together the best available research with service provider and family experiences, ensuring that these practices are effective for the populations they serve.
- **Promising Practices** are interventions that experts believe are effective, but which have not yet been adequately supported by research.
- **Practice-Based Evidence** approaches are those used in a specific geographic area or population and which are believed to be effective based on community experience.

## Choosing an Evidence-Based Family Strengthening Program

The following Web sites provide searchable databases of programs that have been shown to benefit children, youth, and families, and include program descriptions and their criteria for selection:

*Promising Practices Network on Children, Families, and Communities:* <http://www.promisingpractices.net/>

*SAMHSA's National Registry of Evidence-Based Programs and Practices:* <http://www.nrepp.samhsa.gov/>

### Advantages of Choosing Evidence-Based Family Strengthening Programs

- **Effectiveness:** Funders frequently prefer or even require that grantees use programs and materials that have already demonstrated effectiveness in producing program goals.
- **Cost-effectiveness:** Program design and materials have already been developed and tested.

### Other Considerations

- **Time and Cost:** Some programs are more expensive than others, so be aware of the costs of curricula and other materials, required trainings, and follow-up, and ensure these meet your program resources.
- **Adaptability:** Ensure that the intervention fits your community's identified needs, strengths, cultural values/beliefs, and practical concerns. While some programs may only be available in English, others may have been translated into several languages and tested with a number of cultural groups.

## Adapting Family Strengthening Programs

1. **Involve refugee families, community leaders, and other agencies in your program from the start.** Create an avenue for continued input such as through a Community Advisory Group. This regular involvement will help ensure that your program resonates with the community as a "felt" need and increases their engagement, investment, and participation in the program. It will provide an ongoing avenue to ensure that the program remains culturally relevant; that materials used reflect the literacy level and language used; and that services are accessible. This group can also assist with implementing and understanding an initial needs/assets assessment as well as final evaluation.
2. **Engage the program's developer.** Since developers and Principal Investigators are invested in their program's ongoing testing, they are frequently willing to work together with those interested in their program and can help guide your adaptation of the intervention as well as the evaluation. Developers sometimes make their materials available free or at a lowered cost to non-profit community agencies.
3. **Identify what can and cannot be changed.** Generally, the *core components* (see side box) cannot be changed. You usually *can* change:
  - The program or curriculum name.
  - Outreach strategies, incentives, and timeline to match those you are serving and your program's resources.
  - The illustrations and language used in the program materials. It is typically important to use the existing materials, without adding or subtracting from them. However, they must be adapted so as to be understandable and meaningful to those served.

**The Core Components** of a program:

- Represent the theory and internal logic of the program
- Are responsible for the program's effectiveness
- Must be kept intact and implemented with fidelity for the program to produce the same outcomes as the original research. (Fixsen, et al, 2005, p.24)

<sup>3</sup> NASMHPD Research Institute, Inc. (n.d.). *Promoting an Evidence-Based Culture in Children's Mental Health: A Resource Guide*. Accessed from <http://www.systemsofcare.samhsa.gov/ResourceGuide/docs/ResourceGuide.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> Fixsen, D.L., Naoom, S.F., Blase, K.A., Friedman, R.M. & Wallace, F. (2005). *Implementation Research: A Synthesis of the Literature*. Tampa, FL: University of South Florida, Louis de la Parte Florida Mental Health Institute, FMHI Publication #231.



## Promising Practices in Family Strengthening for Refugees

The following programs have successfully adapted national family strengthening programs to refugees:

**Promising Practice:** [The Refugee Youth Program of Catholic Charities of Tennessee, Inc.](#), in Nashville has provided services focused on integrating refugee youth into the U.S. school system while maintaining close ties with the family and native culture since 2004. The program currently serves 200 youth and 100 parents each year from all refugee groups by providing refugee youth and parent orientation to the schools, school liaison and case management services, youth tutoring and mentoring, training for the schools, and a variety of cultural enrichment activities. In addition, this program provides family strengthening workshops and has [adapted the curriculum "Family Wellness: Survival Skills for Healthy Families"](#) by [Family Wellness Associates](#). This adapted curriculum is available for free download from the BRYCS Web site: <http://www.brycs.org/documents/upload/familywellness2.pdf>. The Refugee Youth Program has received national recognition for its work by winning the 2010 Catholic Charities USA/Annie E. Casey Foundation Family Strengthening Award as well as the 2008 "Making a Difference" award from the Center for Non-Profit Management's Salute to Excellence.

**Promising Practice:** [Heritage Multicultural Youth and Family Program, Inc.](#), based in Northern Virginia and Washington, DC, developed the [Strengthening and Preserving our Families in Transition \(SPOFIT\) Program](#) in 2005, using a curriculum adapted from the national [Strengthening Families Program \(SFP\)](#), developed by Karol Kumpfer, PhD and a team at the University of Utah. Focusing on the family as a unit and youth as individuals at a critical life juncture, the program emphasizes a holistic and culturally relevant approach to strengthening families in transition. This 14-16 week groupwork model is led by culturally relevant and trained facilitators. Topics include: connecting with one another using caring communication; creating generational and cultural continuity; building trust and positive identity rooted in the family; constructive and effective conflict resolution; and problem-solving. The program currently serves refugee and immigrant families from West and East Africa, although it can be adapted to other cultural groups. SPOFIT was developed and is directed by a Psychologist who is an immigrant from Sierra Leone herself. The program enjoys strong community engagement and support, and has made a positive difference in the lives of refugee youth and families.

For more examples of family strengthening programs developed for refugees and immigrants, see this [list of additional programs](#) from the [BRYCS Promising Practices Database](#).

BRYCS-authored resources on family and community strengthening can be found on the [Publications page](#), including our most frequently-downloaded resource, [Raising Children in a New Country: An Illustrated Handbook](#). Additional practical and research-related publications can be found on the Highlighted Resources lists on the BRYCS [Family Strengthening page](#).

For technical assistance on developing family strengthening programs for refugees, [contact BRYCS](#).