

## THE AMERICAN Family Assets STUDY

### Building Family Assets in Your Community:

#### IDEAS FOR ORGANIZATIONS THAT CONNECT WITH FAMILIES

COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS AND INSTITUTIONS PLAY VITAL ROLES IN HELPING TO BUILD OR REINFORCE FAMILY ASSETS. THEY ALSO CAN BENEFIT FROM STRONG FAMILIES. BELOW ARE SOME STARTING POINTS FOR HOW DIFFERENT TYPES OF ORGANIZATIONS CAN USE FAMILY ASSETS TO STRENGTHEN THEIR CONNECTIONS TO AND SUPPORT FOR FAMILIES.

#### FAMILY SERVING ORGANIZATIONS AND AGENCIES

- **Engage families in assessing the balance of what you offer.** Examine your existing programs, services, and opportunities to determine how much they focus on family deficits versus family strengths or assets. How might you adjust your offerings to reinforce or highlight the Family Assets? Listen to the families you seek to engage, and design opportunities with them that emphasize their own priorities and strengths.
- **Examine your assumptions about diverse families.** Reflect on whether or how your programs or communications might emphasize the risks or problems that some families might face based on their structure or demographics—or assumptions that some families are better off because of these factors. Instead, focus more on the ways family *processes* are foundational for diverse families' health and thriving.
- **Listen for and encourage focus on Family Assets.** When welcoming new families to your organization, pay as much attention to identifying their assets or strengths as you do to their challenges and stresses. When working with families facing challenges or stress, encourage them to tap their strengths and to focus on defining their hopes for the future rather than looking primarily at the factors that contributed to family problems in the past.
- **Emphasize relationships within and around families.** Focus on building strong relationships among the parents, children, and other family members who participate—as well as focusing on building relationships between staff and all family members. In some cases, the quality of those relationships can be as important as—or more important than—the information and services you offer. Finally, find opportunities through your programs and services to reinforce and strengthen families' informal and formal social networks and supports.

For information on the research behind the family assets, visit [www.search-institute.org/familyassets](http://www.search-institute.org/familyassets)

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- **Engage families around their particular interests, circumstances, or transitions.** Families are most open to new opportunities when they touch on specific characteristics, transitions, or challenges the family faces. Whatever the circumstances, help families recognize and celebrate the strengths and opportunities that are present, even if they may have to first focus on a specific challenge.
- **Empower families to take action.** Support families to work together to tackle issues that are important to them in their community and society. This can include intergenerational service and justice projects, or organizing families to develop their own vision, strategies, and plans for making a difference and tackle a problem together in your organization, neighborhood, or community. Visit <http://www.parentfurther.com/parenting-matters/family-volunteering> for more information.

### SCHOOLS

- **Introduce the findings from The American Family Assets Study to school administrators, teachers, and other staff.** Discuss how the Family Assets reinforce or challenge how they think about, and work with, families in your school. Encourage them to think about how they might reinforce families' assets in their interactions with students, parenting adults, and others in the community.
- **Seek first to understand.** It's easy to jump to conclusions about why parenting adults don't attend school meetings or other events. Too often, the assumptions educators have about whether, and how, families support their children's education are inaccurate or incomplete. Asking students and parents about their families' strengths, challenges, hopes, and goals can offer an entirely different perspective that becomes a new starting point for a family-school partnership for a student's educational success.
- **Highlight the role of Family Assets in enhancing student engagement.** A significant way families contribute to children's educational success is by being strong, asset-rich families, even when they are not focusing explicitly on educational or school issues. Offer asset-based information and ideas to families as a resource and source of encouragement. Reinforce family's efforts to be strong and healthy, even when they are facing challenges or problems.

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- **Link your learning objectives to the assets students experience in their families.** For example, when you address challenging subjects in the classroom, provide discussion-starter questions that students can take home (or you can send via e-mail directly to parents) to discuss with their families. This reinforces at least two Family Assets: Positive communication and Openness about tough topics. You might also ask students to write about strengths they experience in their families, or invite them to share their family traditions around milestones or holidays in ways that build mutual understanding and respect across diversity.
- **Take time to build relationships with families.** Too often, the only time parents hear from the school is when there is a problem or when the school wants to share information. Those are important connecting points, but they do not necessarily build the kind of relationship of trust, mutual support, and partnership that is key for students' learning and growth. Some teachers, counselors, and administrators make extra efforts to reach out to families early in the school year with a word of encouragement, knowing that a positive connection can go a long way in enhancing the family-school partnership and reducing the difficulty of confronting problems later.
- **Host opportunities for families to do things together.** Too often, school events are just for parenting adults or just for students. Think of creative ways to host families in spending time together and with other families. This can include sponsoring family celebration dinners or parties to welcome students back to school, or sponsoring a family service project that benefits the school or neighborhood (and ties into the curriculum as a service-learning experience).

### YOUTH-SERVING ORGANIZATIONS

- **Find ways to strengthen specific Family Assets with youth in your programs.** Think about ways leader and volunteers can build (or already build) the Family Assets through their existing relationships, programs, and services. For example, your programs might help young people develop communication skills that help them talk with their families, or you may help them develop leadership skills that help them contribute to family decision making and how the family addresses challenges that come up.

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- **Reinforce Family Assets when describing your youth programs.** In making appeals to the community for volunteers or support, avoid sensationalizing family's problems or positioning your programs as "fixing" problems caused by families. Instead, focus on how your efforts reinforce and complement the strengths and resources that families offer to their children and teens. Even when families are particularly troubled, highlight the small ways they hold things together by drawing on their families' assets.
- **Expect program leaders and other staff to build relationships with both young people and parenting adults.** Except in extreme cases, a youth program should not become a substitute for family strengths; rather, it should be a resource that complements and reinforces the family's assets. Leaders need to recognize families as their partners in supporting young people's healthy development, not just volunteers who can bring refreshments or provide transportation when asked.
- **Work with families to balance commitments and expectations for program participation with family time and other commitments.** This may include coordinating activities with other institutions (schools, sports) so that families have time each week when they are not expected to be anywhere. It can also help to offer activities for the whole family so they can have family time together while participating in programs.
- **Tap specific Family Assets to enrich your programming.** Participating youth may be part of families that have particularly meaningful family traditions. Or they may be actively engaged in issues of service and justice, involving significant contributions to the community. Or they may have faced and adapted to particular challenges. Each of these strengths could be tapped to inspire young people and their families while also teaching them important skills.
- **Reach out to new families.** Let them know how family members might get involved in enriching activities through your program. Learn about their interests and their Sparks as starting points for building a relationship with them.

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### FAITH COMMUNITIES

- **Invite youth and adults to reflect on how your church, mosque, synagogue, or temple reinforces particular Family Assets.** Similarly, reflect on ways the faith community might inadvertently undermine certain assets with certain families because of other priorities, scheduling issues, or gaps in how the congregation engages with families. Examine your congregation's activities—from worship to religious education to social events—to determine if they reinforce or undermine Family Assets.
- **Connect Family Assets with your faith tradition's values and writings.** In what ways are the types of interactions within families that are articulated in the Family Assets framework reflected in the stories and sacred writings of your tradition? What other strengths are highlighted as part of your tradition?
- **Offer intergenerational learning opportunities using the Family Assets.** Bring together intergenerational families (including people from all generations) in the congregation to reflect on the assets from their own experiences, beliefs, and values, to tell stories about how they have experienced these assets in their own families, and ways members of the faith community can support each other in reinforcing their Family Assets.
- **Connect with families facing challenges.** Be intentional in reaching out to and including families that may be struggling, including single-parent families and those facing economic stress. Be aware that, under stress, families are more likely to isolate themselves than to reach out for the support they need.
- **Link families in the congregation for mutual support.** Faith communities can be vital resources for Family Assets for many families. Many of the “connecting to community” assets can be readily developed and strengthened within a congregation, including relationships with others, enriching activities, and supportive resources.

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- **Build a vision and action plan for how your congregation can be a resource to strengthen assets for families in your neighborhood or community.** This might include offering a helping hand during a difficult time or a transition. It might include encouraging congregants to strengthen relationships with their neighbors. Or it might include coordinating programs, opportunities, and services with schools, family-serving organizations, and others to ensure that all families have access to the resources and supports they need.

### BUSINESSES AND EMPLOYERS

- **Introduce the Family Assets to your employees and other stakeholders.** Encourage them to reflect on the assets in their own families as well as other ways their families are strong. Offer lunchtime learning sessions for employees that focus on the Family Assets as a tangible way of supporting your employees and their families.
- **Talk with employees about what your company could do to support Family Assets.** Though some ideas may not be feasible, studies have found that some simple or inexpensive benefits and supports (such as flexible scheduling) can make it easier for employees to strengthen their family, and may be valued as much, or more, than more lavish benefits.
- **Provide supports to employee families, particularly during times of transition or crisis,** recognizing that employees will long appreciate the support from your company. For example, ensure that support for families is part of employee assistance programs for times of particular stress. Encourage employees to support each other during challenging times.
- **Offer flexibility for employees in ways that both meet your business objectives and also allow them to be available for their families.** A growing number of companies are finding that flexible hours, telecommuting, job sharing, and other forms of flexible work options not only increase employee productivity and engagement, but also increase the employee's sense of family well-being. If your employee base includes lots of shift workers, explore how you can plan schedules further ahead (for example, on a monthly basis) so that families can plan their schedules a few weeks, not just days, in advance.
- **Support school and community efforts to build Family Assets through community partnerships, employee volunteer programs, and corporate philanthropy.** Develop guidelines for community supports that emphasize recognizing and building strengths in families, rather than focusing only on addressing problems and deficits.

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