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An Individualized, Strengths-Based Approach in Public Child Welfare Driven Systems of Care

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Defining an Individualized, Strengths-Based Approach

An individualized, strengths-based approach refers to policies, practice methods, and strategies that identify and draw upon the strengths of children, families, and communities. Strengths-based practice involves a shift from a deficit approach, which emphasizes problems and pathology, to a positive partnership with the family. The approach acknowledges each child and family's unique set of strengths and challenges, and engages the family as a partner in developing and implementing the service plan. Formal and informal services and supports are used to create service plans based on specific needs and strengths, rather than fitting families into pre-existing service plans. An individualized, strengths-based assessment focuses on the complex interplay of risks and strengths among individual family members, the family as a unit, and the broader neighborhood and environment. The individualized, strengths-based approach is an overall philosophical view supported by policies and standards that encompasses a range of concrete practices of child welfare caseworkers and other service providers at various points from the time the child and family enter the system to when they leave (see [Figure 1](#)).

Historically, child welfare systems (and other human services) emphasized efficient provision of services with little attention to family systems and approached clients from a deficit model. Traditional practices, focusing on what was wrong with the child or the family, resulted in a child welfare system that was punitive and stigmatizing in its approach and often produced passive and resistant responses from clients (Waldfogel, 2000). Beginning in the early 1980s, strengths-based case management was first implemented in community mental health centers (Brun & Rapp, 2001) and since then has been implemented in many other health and social service settings.

A review of the literature suggests at least three pathways by which strengths-based practices benefit clients: 1) by influencing the extent of clients' engagement in program services; 2) by increasing family efficacy and empowerment; and 3) by enhancing families' relationship-building capacity and social support networks (Green, McAllister, & Tarte, 2004).

Although there is limited research on the effects of an individualized, strengths-based approach on child and family outcomes for the population of child welfare clients, prior studies of other service recipients (e.g., early intervention, mental health, elderly services) have found that a family-centered, strengths-based approach is associated with increased service engagement (Green et al., 2004; Shireman, 1998), increased parenting competency (Green et al., 2004; Whitley, 1999), and enhanced interaction among family members (Green et al., 2004; Huebner, Jones, Miller, Custer, & Critchfield, 2006).

Figure 1: Individualized, Strengths-Based Approach and Practices

[Descriptive text of Figure 1](#)

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