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OPERATIONAL DEFINITION: Strengths-Based Approach

Strengths-Based Approach Definition:

The strengths-based approach holds the core belief that all individuals have strengths and resources. The strengths-based approach builds on the individual, family, community, and cultural assets by providing support, resources, and skills to help participants support themselves and contribute to the welfare of their families. The strengths-based approach works to address an individual's problems by focusing on his or her skills, interests, and support systems instead of problems or weakness, thereby providing a foundation for the individual to grow and succeed at positive change. It means that everything you do will help to discover the individual's strengths and resources in the service of assisting them to achieve their goals, realize their dreams, and shed the irons of their own inhibitions and misgiving.

Key elements of a strengths-based approach include:

- A focus on strengths, not weaknesses, problems or deficits
- The person is in charge, and nothing is done without their approval
- The community is a resource, not an obstacle
- People continue to learn, grow and change no matter what their disability

While there are a wide variety of ways to implement a strengths-based approach to working with children and families, many programs that follow a strengths-based approach often emphasize wraparound services, multi-level approaches, and comprehensive mental health models. The most widely assessment tool used by researchers in attempt to standardize strength-based measures is the Behavioral and Emotional Rating Scale (BERS) (Epstein & Sharma, 1998).

The strength-based assessment is founded on four important assumptions:

- All children have strengths
- Focusing on children's strengths instead of weakness may result in enhanced motivation and improved performance
- Failure to demonstrate a skill should first be viewed as an opportunity to learn the skill as opposed to a problem.
- Service plans that begin with a focus on strengths are more likely to involve families and children in treatment. (Epstein et al., 2003)

Research and findings indicate that strengths-based approach on family and children is associated with increased in service engagement, increased in parenting competency and enhanced interaction among family members and can make a positive difference for children and their families. (Refer to links below for detailed research).

One essential element of a strengths-based approach is accepting that solutions will not be the same for every person, and that the strengths of individuals and their circumstances are different. People must be fully involved in identifying their goals and building on their strengths and resources. 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

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used to create service plans based on specific needs and strengths, rather than having families into pre-existing service plans.

The strengths-based approach is a multi-dimensional process comprised of several components. Standard fare is the Employability Measure (EM) which is an assessment tool which structures conversation between a job counselor and a participant around their strengths and challenges. The purpose of the EM is to develop a more relevant Employment Plan which assists the participant in moving towards self-sufficiency. The EM addresses a participant's status in eleven areas of life functioning that have been shown to be related to getting and keeping a job: transportation, dependent care, education, housing, social support, child behavior, financial, legal, safe living environment, health, and workplace skills.

Another example of a strengths-based approach to maximize the effectiveness of interactions between counselor and participant is Motivational Interviewing. The main goals of MI are to establish rapport, elicit change talk, and establish commitment language from the participant.

List of References:

1. <http://maryannroebuck.files.wordpress.com/2011/11/strength-based-approach.pdf>
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3. <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/acloserlook/strengthsbased/strengthsbased1.cfm>
4. <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/acloserlook/strengthsbased/strengthsbased1.cfm>
5. http://humanservices.ucdavis.edu/academy/pdf/strength_based.pdf
6. MFIP Manual (6.3.6) & (6.6)