

## **Module 9 Chapter 2: Strengths and Needs Assessment**

### **Overview**

This chapter introduces the Strengths and Needs Assessment (SNA) – the third SDM tool – and its components. The Strengths and Needs Assessment helps you identify priority needs for adults and children in the home that must be addressed in a case plan. Some families you work with have many needs; others have fewer needs.

The Strengths and Needs Assessment identifies strengths which are used as foundations to help the family succeed and prevent recurring maltreatment. The tool also incorporates child well-being factors into the assessment process; it eliminates the need for a separate child well-being assessment tool. Each section of the tool is discussed below.

As you and the family prioritize needs, remember to not overwhelm the family. It may be important to focus for a time on a less critical need so the family can achieve some success early in the case, while at the same time addressing child safety concerns.

### **SDM Strengths and Needs Assessment**

Be sure to read the appropriate sections of the Structured Decision Making System for Child Protective Services Policy and Procedures Manual as you move through the next screens.

### **Strengths and Needs Assessment Key Points**

Complete the Strengths and Needs Assessment as a collaborative process with the family whenever possible. Best practice is to review the policies, procedures, and definitions when completing the tool. Use the tool to help develop case plans with the family.

Carefully read the Policy and Procedures and make note of the following key points.

- What – The tool evaluates a family’s areas of strengths and needs; identified strengths can help protect against future maltreatment.
- Why – Identification of strengths and needs is necessary for solid service planning with the family.
- When – In Family Assessment Response cases, the SNA is completed during the assessment phase. Workers have the option of completing the tool for Family Investigation cases during the assessment phase, but are not required to do so. Complete the SNA for Family Investigation cases within 30 days of opening for on-going services but before developing the service plan
- The tool should also be completed 30 days prior to each update of the service plan.
- Decision – The tool identifies priority needs for caregivers and children. It also helps inform appropriate development of the service plan. Plan goals, objectives and tasks should address priority needs. Use identified strengths to meet priority needs whenever possible.

### **Strengths and Needs Assessment Tool**

There are two primary sections to the tool:

- 1) Caregiver Strengths and Needs – items SN1 to SN7 are completed for both the primary and secondary caregiver (if present); and,
- 2) Child Strengths and Needs – items CSN1 to CSN7. Up to six children can be assessed on each tool.

Read the instructions carefully to understand the scoring process. Always consider how cultural and intergenerational factors may be contributing in positive or negative ways to the item. After all items are scored, identify the primary strengths and needs of the caregiver(s) and child(ren). If needs are identified, at least one must be selected as a priority and should be addressed in the case plan.

The Strengths and Needs Assessment can be used throughout the life of the case to reassess strengths and needs as the family makes progress on the case plan. Your classroom training addresses reassessment.

### **Strengths and Needs Identification**

Child abuse and neglect are *symptoms* of other family, environmental, or community problems. Abuse and neglect often occur when families are experiencing personal, environmental, or interpersonal stress. These stressors affect parental capacity to meet the full spectrum of child development needs.

It is best practice to explore identified needs in order to help families understand how their needs relate to the reason for your involvement.

Let's focus on the caregiver assessment items first and identify ways to explore these areas with the family in order to accurately identify strengths and needs, and subsequently collaborate to develop appropriate case plans.

### **Household Relationships / Domestic Violence**

Most families have relationship concerns at some point. Use eco-maps and genograms to determine supportive and non-supportive relationships. If domestic violence is a concern, a safety plan may be needed. Ask about prior contacts or involvement with law enforcement. Remember not to ask questions about domestic violence when both partners are present. If relationships are strained for reasons other than violence, ask about causes and potential solutions.

### **Resource Management / Basic Needs**

Ask whether resources – such as unemployment or other benefits – have been accessed to help meet needs. Ask if referrals to other government and non-profit agencies are needed. Ask if transportation to appointments is necessary. Assist in resource access to the greatest extent possible.

Poverty is a major factor for many families. Know and understand the resources available in your area. Employment status can affect virtually every part of a person's life. If employment is adequate, it is less likely to play a role in child welfare concerns.

Underemployed and unemployed persons often struggle to meet basic needs, survive financially, and feel as though they are making worthwhile contributions to their families. Ask families if they have contacted their landlord to have problems fixed. If they haven't, explore barriers.

Ask the family how you can be an advocate. Perhaps they need a referral to the housing authority, or food shelf. They may need help paying for utilities and referrals for energy assistance or emergency assistance to meet other basic needs. You need signed releases of information to make referrals.

### **Alcohol and Other Drug Use**

Many people deny substance use problems. Ask each person how he or she perceives individual use, and use by other family members. A great follow-up question is to ask the person if anyone has ever told him or her that a problem does exist. Explore responses. Be prepared to make referrals.

### **Mental Health / Coping Skills**

When a parent presents mental health symptoms or identifies a diagnosed condition, ask for his or her perception of how well the problem is being managed. What therapeutic services are being used? Are they working? Is additional help needed? How does the parent think the condition affects parenting and child safety?

Life skills are all about management. How well does the parent perceive himself or herself to be managing all aspects of life? Management areas may include parenting, budgets, housekeeping, personal hygiene, education, all aspects of health, and problem solving.

### **Social Support Systems**

The eco-map is a viable tool in determining available social support systems, the relative health of those systems, and gap areas. Eco-maps not only help families identify healthy support systems they weren't previously aware of, they also help identify ways to strengthen and repair strained relationships.

### **Physical Health**

If physical health is the concern, what are the major problems? What types of treatment have been used or are being used? What supports may provide additional benefits? What does the family think it needs to cope more effectively with the situation? If lack of health insurance is a barrier to adequate care, be prepared to make referrals for medical assistance. Use resources to provide additional supports whenever possible.

### **Parenting Skills**

Talk openly with parents about child development. What do they know? What do they wish they knew? What knowledge do they think they are missing? You don't have to be a parent to assess parenting skills; however, you do need knowledge of child development.

In child welfare, we are concerned about a child's well-being. During assessment and case management we are continually assessing each child's well-being.

Now let's shift our focus to the child assessment items in order to accurately identify child strengths and needs, and subsequently collaborate to develop appropriate case plans. This section of the assessment tool explores developmental strengths and needs.

There are seven child domains:

1. Emotional / Behavioral
2. Physical Health / Disability
3. Family Relationships
4. Alcohol and Other Drug Use
5. Education
6. Peer / Adult Social Relationships
7. Child Development.

Recall what you learned about family dynamics, systems, and stressors as well as child development from WBT 6. Incorporating that knowledge while asking exploratory questions during the child assessment will help you accurately identify the area as a strength or a need for each child in the home.

Remember, each child in the home must be assessed individually for strengths and needs. Be sure to refer to the definitions in the policy manual as you complete each assessment. Referring back to the definitions helps ensure consistent assessment for each child and family.

### **Strengths and Protective Factors**

Every need can also be a strength and protective factor, depending on family circumstances. Many families have sufficient strengths to mitigate identified needs and risks; strengths are part of caregiver protective capacity.

All families have some protective factors; but some families have more than others. Research indicates that when these five specific protective factors are present and active in a family, the risk of maltreatment decreases:

1. Parental resilience – the ability to cope with and bounce back from all types of challenges.
2. Social connections – friends, family members, neighbors and community members who provide emotional support and concrete assistance.
3. Knowledge of parenting and child development – parents have accurate information about raising children, appropriate expectations of behavior, and knowledge of alternative discipline techniques.
4. Concrete supports in times of need – a family has financial security to cover daily expenses and unexpected costs; formal supports may include TANF, Medicaid, and job training, and informal supports come from social networks.
5. Nurturing and attachment – the child's ability to interact positively with others and communicate emotions effectively. This protective factor is also sometimes referred to as

a child's social and emotional competence. It is rooted in healthy parental nurturing and attachment.

Child welfare workers partner with families to support and build protective capacity because increasing the presence and robustness of protective factors strengthens families and decreases the likelihood of future maltreatment. Recall from Module 5 that culture can be a strength and should be assessed as a potential protective factor.

Certain types of questions can help you explore the presence of protective factors in families. From the website an Exploring Protective Factors document can be accessed for examples.

## Summary

The Strengths and Needs Assessment helps you and the family identify priority caregiver and child needs to address through strengths-based service planning. Collaborate with the family whenever possible to complete the tool.

SDM tools are an important part of objective decision making and service planning with families. The tools:

- Are reliable and valid
- Inform case planning and placement decisions
- Reflect progress on case plan goals
- Allow for better, more consistent case decisions that support equitable treatment for all families.

## Next Steps

The Module 9 Transcript is available from the website along with the following document:

- Exploring Protective Factors.

Consult with your supervisor regarding any questions you may have about this chapter and remember to check the website and print any documents labeled for classroom use. You will need to bring those documents to class with you.

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When you are ready, begin Chapter 3.