



**North Hartford Ascend**  
**Strengthening Families Protective Factors Framework**  
**Community of Practice (CoP)**  
**Summary Report for the Spring (February-May) 2026 Cohort**

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# Strengthening Families Protective Factors Framework (SFPFF) North Hartford Ascend Spring 2026 CoP - 1

## Executive Summary

In February 2026 Childhood Prosperity Lab (the Lab) facilitated a Strengthening Families Protective Factors Framework Community of Practice (CoP). The CoP brought together eight practitioners from six North Hartford Ascend affiliated organizations to deepen their understanding of the protective factors and strengthen everyday practice. Over the course of six learning sessions and three collaboration sessions, participants engaged in hands-on activities, reflective dialogue, and peer learning that connected theory to the realities of working with children and families.

The Lab facilitated the CoP through experiential learning, storytelling, and real-time application of skills and strategies that created a space where participants could explore new ideas, test small but meaningful changes, and build confidence in using strength-based strategies in their roles.

Participants reported exceptionally high satisfaction with the quality of the sessions and the clarity of facilitation. They described gaining a stronger grasp of the protective factors, the importance of culture, and the power of strength-based language in shaping family experiences. Survey data showed notable increases in participants' self-perceived knowledge and skill to apply the Framework, as well as their ability to identify protective factors in real-world scenarios.

This CoP not only strengthened individual knowledge and skills but reinforced the need for a comprehensive, coordinated, and integrated prenatal-to-career ecosystem.

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## Introduction

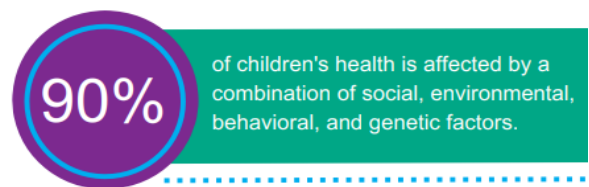
[Childhood Prosperity Lab](#) (the Lab) launched a Strengthening Families Protective Factors Framework Community of Practice (CoP) for North Hartford Ascend (Ascend) in February of 2026. The CoP aimed to provide a collaborative and engaging platform for organizations and programs affiliated with North Hartford Ascend to learn about and explore core principles of the Strengthening Families Protective Factors Framework and how it can be leveraged to support the well-being of children and families living in the North Hartford Promise Zone. Through collaborative learning and mutual support, participants enhanced their understanding of the five protective factors that comprise the Framework, learned the science behind why they matter, and practiced integrating the protective factors more intentionally into their work to help children and families thrive. This effort highlights the commitment of both the Lab and Ascend to help children and families thrive where they live, learn, work, play, and pray.

### *Childhood Prosperity Lab*

Research shows that 90% of children's health is driven by the complex interplay between social, behavioral, environmental, and genetic/epigenetic factors (McGinnis et al., 2002). Established in 2015, Connecticut Children's [Childhood Prosperity Lab](#) (the Lab) is one of seventeen community-oriented programs in the [Office for Community Child Health](#) supporting the development and impact of strong child- and family-serving systems and sectors. The Lab focuses on advancing [social innovations](#)<sup>1</sup> by:

- 1) **Co-designing with Families and Communities:** families and communities are engaged in the design, implementation, and evaluation of social innovations they are intended to access, utilize, and benefit from.
- 2) **Advancing Systems Thinking and Change:** changemakers use systems thinking to understand how their innovation fits within the network of supports and services available to children and families, understand how their innovation might generate change, and then work across organizational and sectoral boundaries to lead change.
- 3) **Strengthening Protective Factors:** social innovations strengthen protective factors, including parental resilience, social connections, knowledge of parenting and child development, concrete support in times of need, and social-emotional competence of children.

The Lab offers a range of services in support of each of these core components, including Mastermind Sessions, technical assistance, and other training opportunities. Team members of the Lab are certified to provide training on the Strengthening Families Protective Factors Framework.

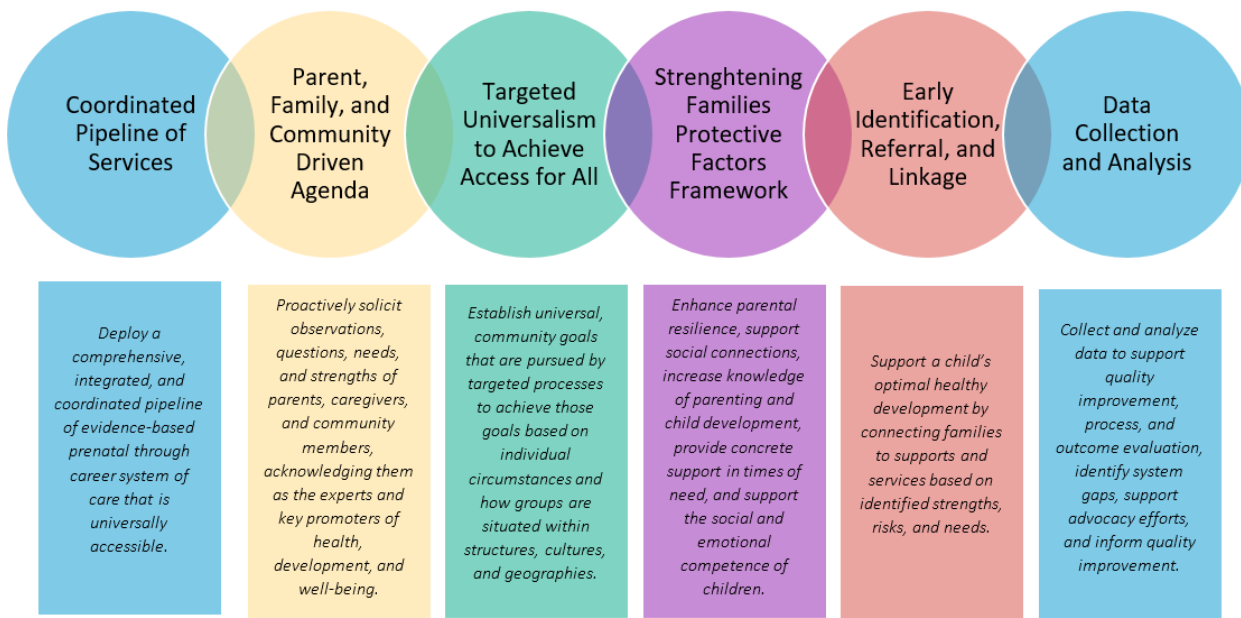


<sup>1</sup>Childhood Prosperity Lab defines social innovations as creative strategies that support the health, development, and well-being of children, families, and communities. Social innovations: 1) are implemented where children and families live, learn, work, play, and pray to support accessibility; utilization, and impact; 2) build upon the existing strengths and assets of families and communities; 3) are developed in partnership with families and communities to ensure they align with their lived experiences, goals, preferences, and needs; and 4) are integrated into existing organizational- and community-level infrastructure, relationships, and systems.

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## North Hartford Ascend

[North Hartford Ascend](#) is a prenatal-to-career initiative designed to ensure children and families living in the North Hartford Promise Zone, which includes Clary Arsenal, Northeast, and Upper Albany, have the support they need to reach their full potential. Facilitated by Connecticut Children’s and its Office for Community Child Health, Ascend’s affiliated organizations are working to create a comprehensive, integrated, and coordinated network of programs, services, and other resources that are universally available to children and families. Funded by a U.S. Department of Education Promise Neighborhoods Grant, Ascend promotes systems transformation by focusing on six core components, as outlined in Figure 1: Ascend Core Components (below).



## The Strengthening Families Protective Factors Framework

The Strengthening Families Protective Factors Framework (SFPFF) is “a research-informed approach to increase family strengths, enhance child development and reduce the likelihood of child abuse and neglect” (Center for the Study of Social Policy, 2023). In 2003, The [Center for the Study of Social Policy](#) (CSSP) developed the Framework as a resource for programs helping children, families, and communities to build protective factors in their everyday lives.

According to the CSSP’s Theory of Change, when systems and practitioners build adult capabilities and strengthen the conditions surrounding families, protective factors increase. As protective factors grow, families are strengthened, optimal child development is supported, and there is a reduced likelihood of child abuse and neglect. Together, the five protective factors create the conditions for children, youth, and families to thrive.

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Table 1: Protective Factors<sup>2</sup>

Parental Resilience	Managing stress and functioning well—facilitated by individual, relational, community, or societal factors—when faced with stressors, adversity, or trauma.
Social Connections	Healthy, meaningful, trusting, sustained relationships with people, institutions, communities, or a higher power that promote a sense of connectedness, belonging, and mattering
Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development	Identifying, accessing, advocating for, and receiving high-quality and equitable support including the basic necessities everyone deserves and specialized services to address specific needs.
Concrete Support in Times of Need	Learning about prenatal, infant, and child development, and using developmentally and contextually appropriate parenting practices.
Social and Emotional Competence of Children	Providing environments and experiences—grounded in early relational health—that build positive social skills; enable children to regulate thoughts, emotions, and behaviors; and promote effective communication, problem-solving, and decision-making skills.

## Strengthening Families Protective Factors Framework Community of Practice Approach

The Lab defines a CoP as a facilitated approach to disseminating promising, evidence-informed, and/or evidence-based social innovations to new settings, contexts, and/or communities. Key activities that underpin the Lab’s approach to Communities of Practice include:

- **Learning Sessions:** curriculum-based, interactive workshops that provide a foundational understanding of the Strengthening Families Protective Factors Framework and each protective factor while allowing participants to practice emerging skills in a peer-to-peer setting;

<sup>2</sup> Strengthening Families Protective Factors Framework (The Center for the Study of Social Policy, 2023)

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- **Collaboration Sessions:** application-based workshops that support participants' practice change and active skill-building via peer-to-peer learning and semi-structured discussions, including the implementation of Plan-Do-Study-Act cycles (PDSA's)<sup>3</sup>; and
- **Data Collection and Analysis:** a data collection and analysis strategy that measures knowledge change through pre and post surveys, a practice change through PDSA, and participant value & satisfaction feedback survey administered towards the end of the session.

## North Hartford Ascend Spring 2026 Community of Practice

In February of 2026, The Lab launched its fourth Strengthening Families Protective Factors Framework CoP with North Hartford Ascend. A total of eight participants registered for the CoP, representing six different agencies/organizations affiliated with Ascend. The following are their details:

- Adriana Sowell - Connecticut Children's
- Deidra Cali - Connecticut Children's
- Paxton Splitorff - United Way of Central and Northeastern Connecticut
- Raul Bracetty - Clay Arsenal Community Development Corp
- Katy Clayton - United Way of Connecticut
- Adjovi Simpini - United Way of Central and Northeastern Connecticut



Most of the participants were direct service providers, back-end administrative staff or program implementers of their organization.

## Implementation Approach

The Lab's implementation model includes six 90-minute learning sessions and three 90-minute monthly collaboration sessions. The learning sessions, which consist of an introduction followed by five sessions focused on each protective factor, are designed to build participants' foundational knowledge of the Protective Factors Framework. The collaboration sessions are intentionally structured to support and accelerate practice change. Practice change includes the translation of knowledge to everyday actions. The collaboration sessions are a distinguishing feature of the Lab's CoP and informed by adult learning theory, which highlights the importance of collaborative reflection, iterative testing, and continuous feedback loops to move from understanding to meaningful practice change.

<sup>3</sup>PDSAs are defined as a four-stage model for improvement. The tool provides structure for testing a change by developing a to test the change (Plan), carrying out the test (Do), observing and learning from the outcomes (Study), and determining what modifications should be made to the test whether that is abandoning, adapting, or adoption the change (Act).

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The Lab emphasizes that knowledge change needs to be supported by practice change for strong and intentional implementation. Collaboration sessions create a peer-to-peer, semi-structured space where participants reflect on their work, share adaptations, and discuss how tested strategies can be strengthened or scaled. Between sessions, participants use a PDSA cycle template to plan, test, and monitor their practice change. The Plan, Do, Study, Act (PDSA) model provides a structured approach for rapid-cycle learning. Participants identify a change to test (Plan), implement it (Do), observe and reflect on what happened (Study), and determine whether to adopt, adapt, or abandon the change (Act).

Table 2: Community of Practice Structure and Timeline

Date	Activity	Theme
Feb 20, 2026	Learning Session and Feedback Survey	Introduction
Feb 27, 2026	Learning Session and Feedback Survey	Resilience
Mar 6, 2026	Learning Session and Feedback Survey	Social Connections
Mar 13, 2026	Learning Session and Feedback Survey	Concrete Support in Times of Need Guest Speaker: Terren Thompson, <i>The Village for Children and Families</i>
Mar 20, 2026	Learning Session and Feedback Survey	Social and Emotional Competence of Children
Mar 27, 2026	Learning Session and Feedback Survey	Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development Guest Speakers: Kirsten Carlone, <i>211 Child Development</i>
Apr 2, 2026	Collaboration Session & Feedback Survey	Strength-Based Theory & Positive Childhood Experiences
May 1, 2026	Collaboration Session, PDSA Report Out, & Feedback Survey	Active & Reflective Listening Skills

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May 29, 2026	Collaboration Session, PDSA Report Out, & Feedback Survey	Strengthening Families Jeopardy
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## Innovative Teaching Methods

The Lab applied a range of innovative and interactive teaching methods that made learning active, reflective, and grounded in real practice. Engagement tools included whiteboard padlets and sticky notes so that participants could write their responses, react to peers, and participate in collective thinking in real time. Small and large group discussions invited participants to analyze scenarios from the curriculum, share lived experiences, and connect concepts to their everyday work.

Experiential learning activities such as the Building a Healthy Brain exercise, adapted from the [Brain Architecture Game](#), allowed participants to observe how positive experiences like access to early care resources, negative experiences generated by toxic stress, and a lack of resources can shape children’s brain development for better or worse. Visual learning methods were used to make abstract concepts and ideas immediately visible and relatable for participants, helping them connect complex concepts to real experiences. For instance, videos like the Still Face Experiment and scenes from the movie *Inside Out* helped illustrate emotional development, co-regulation, and the protective factor of Social & Emotional Competence. Art-based learning methods encouraged participants to use drawing, symbol-making, creative movement, and storytelling. One example, activities such as A Star is Born, was a quick, playful activity where participants received a prompt on protective factors and they acted it out for the group. Inclusion of such activities helped deepen reflection and supported multiple learning styles.



The varied teaching methods created a participatory learning environment that helped strengthen knowledge, build skills, and incorporate multiple learning styles.

## Value and Satisfaction

CoP participants were asked to complete a feedback survey after each learning session and each collaboration session to document perceptions of value and satisfaction while supporting continuous quality monitoring and improvement.

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## *Feedback From The Learning Sessions*

The feedback reflects high levels of participant satisfaction and meaningful learning across the CoP:

- 94.4% strongly agreed they were satisfied with the quality of the sessions;
- 97.2% strongly agreed the facilitators effectively communicated session content and guided discussion.

Participants also demonstrated strong conceptual uptake:

- 77.8% strongly agreed they understand the importance and role of using strength-based approaches in North Hartford Ascend;
- 94.3% strongly agreed they understand the importance of culture in strengthening families' protective factors;
- 100% strongly agree they can make small yet significant changes to strengthen families' protective factors in their role.

Based on the feedback provided by the participants, these findings tell us that CoP helped build confidence, deepen shared understanding, and equipped partners with practical strategies to strengthen protective factors across the Ascend ecosystem.

When asked about the most helpful ideas, concepts, or theories from the session series, participants reported:

- "The arts and craft activity was a creative way to learn."
- "I found the strength-based approach and how to effectively use it more very helpful!"
- "Learning about more resources that are available through families, especially the resource map."
- "It was helpful thinking more about culture in terms of how it can affect interactions with different families/parents."

## *Feedback From The Collaboration Sessions*

The feedback indicates exceptionally strong participant endorsement of the collaboration sessions:

- 92% of respondents strongly agreed that these sessions increased their confidence in applying the Strengthening Families Protective Factors Framework within their daily work.
- 92% strongly agreed that they learned something helpful from another participant or from the facilitators, reinforcing that the sessions are functioning as true peer-learning environments.

This suggests that the sessions are not only resonating but are directly strengthening partners' ability to bring a practice change.

When asked about the most helpful components of the sessions, participants reported:

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- “I am thinking about how I would integrate the protective factors framework into my everyday work to make little changes that have great impact,”
- “Advocate to change the language on our call scripting to make it more accessible for everyone.”
- “Use more strength-based statements when speaking with parents.”

## Evidence of Knowledge & Practice Change

### Knowledge Change

To understand whether the CoP impacted shifts in knowledge, the Lab administered a baseline and end-of-project survey. The measures of the survey remained consistent to monitor changes over time. The survey assessed the following of participants:

- Understanding of the importance of protective factors as it relates to child-, youth- and family health and well-being outcomes;
- Participants' understanding of strength-based theory;
- Understanding of self-perceived knowledge and skillset to apply the Strengthening Families Protective Factors Framework;
- Understanding of tools and strategies they can leverage to strengthen child-, youth- and family health and well-being outcomes;
- Degree to which they can correctly identify protective factors, as measured by an exercise that prompts them to match a fictitious scenario of a “protective factor in action” to one of the five protective factors that comprise the framework (see Appendix A).

Data from participants who completed both the baseline and end-of-project survey were analyzed. Based on the data, all participants reported a notable increase in their self-perceived knowledge and skill set to apply the Strengthening Families Framework; the importance of protective factors; and the importance of recognizing family strengths.

### Practice Change

The CoP participants were prompted to explore, integrate, and understand the impact of *small but significant* practice changes throughout the project. At the end of each learning session, participants were asked to identify one small but significant practice change they intended to focus on the following week. At the start of the next learning session, participants provided an update indicating if they

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incorporated the *small but significant* practice change and if so, what they observed upon its implementation.

As described previously, PDSA cycles were a core activity of collaboration sessions 1 and 2. PDSA cycles served as a more formal mechanism for participants to commit to, document, and understand the impact of *small but significant changes* (see Appendix E).



## Evidence From The Learning Sessions

When asked about what they might do differently as a result of participating in the learning sessions, participants reported:

- “I will integrate this understanding into our Readers program foundation for our volunteers to also become knowledgeable in this.”
- “Encouraging deeper conversations in existing and new social connections, being more cognizant of where people are and what they need to feel supported in a social connection.”
- “Consider how ACEs affect stress levels in children and may affect their social-emotional development.”
- “Consider the cultural iceberg more in my work and think about how I can use strength-based language in community-facing writings.”

## Evidence From The Collaboration Sessions

At collaboration sessions, participants were asked to share examples of how they integrated the concepts, theories, and skills from the Framework into their practice. Approximately 5 examples of practice change were documented in these sessions. Themes that emerged from the collaboration sessions as it relates to practice change include reimagining team dynamics and community-based partnerships to strengthen social connections, and intentionally and meaningfully connecting families to services to strengthen concrete support in times of need.

A few examples are highlighted below.

Organization/Agency	PDSA
Connecticut Children’s - North Hartford Ascend	The participant organized and led an Early Childhood Community Conversation event that helped families understand key services available in the community, program deadlines, and developmental milestones. They provided clear guidance on how to access services efficiently and shared tools to support early learning at home. By offering real-time support and concrete next

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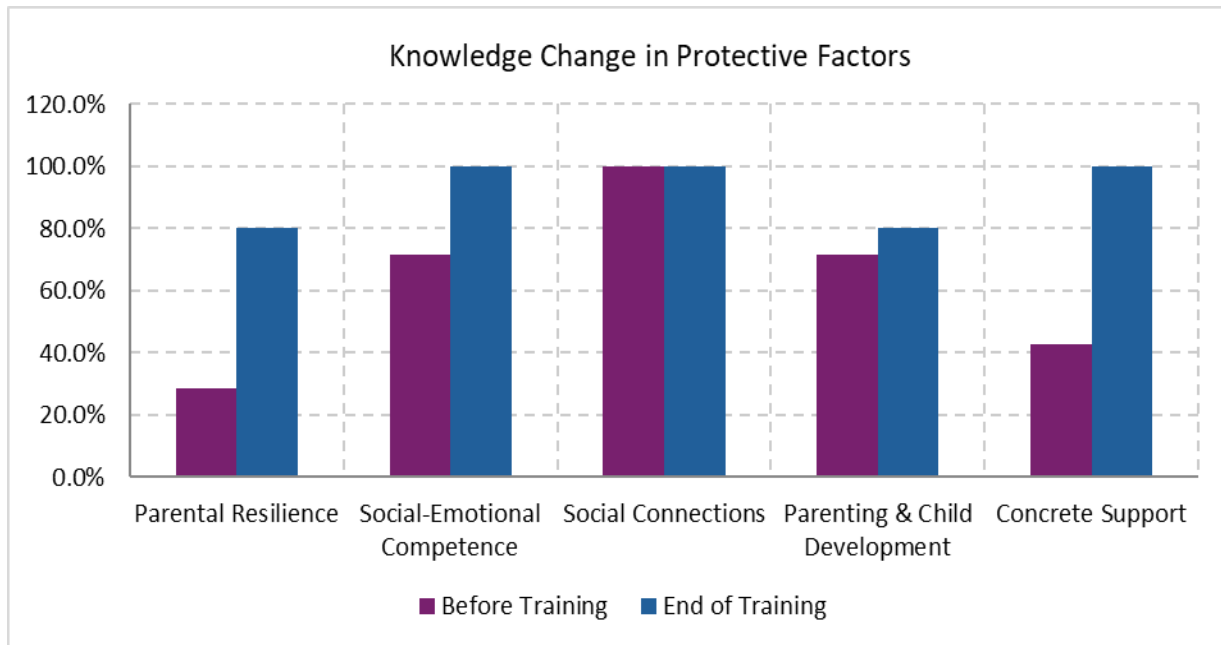
	steps, the participant strengthened families' confidence in navigating early childhood systems by connecting them with available resources and information.
Connecticut Children's - North Hartford Ascend	The participant is responsible for content creation at their program. The participant began intentionally reviewing their social media content calendars to ensure that each month's posts highlighted at least one protective factor from the framework. Moving forward, they will be analyzing KPI engagement data to identify which protective factors resonate most with families, using this insight to better understand community needs and guide future content.
United Way of Connecticut 211 Child Development	The participant plans to spend more time actively listening to families and keeping the needs of the whole family in mind. They will ask more open-ended questions and create space for families to share their experiences in their own words. The participant also intends to bring these insights to leadership to recommend procedural changes that could strengthen the intake call process.

## Stay connected

- **Email:** [childhoodprosperitylab@connecticutchildrens.org](mailto:childhoodprosperitylab@connecticutchildrens.org)
- **Facebook:** Connecticut Children's Community Child Health
- **LinkedIn:** Connecticut Children's Office for Community Child Health
- [Advancing Kids Blog](#)

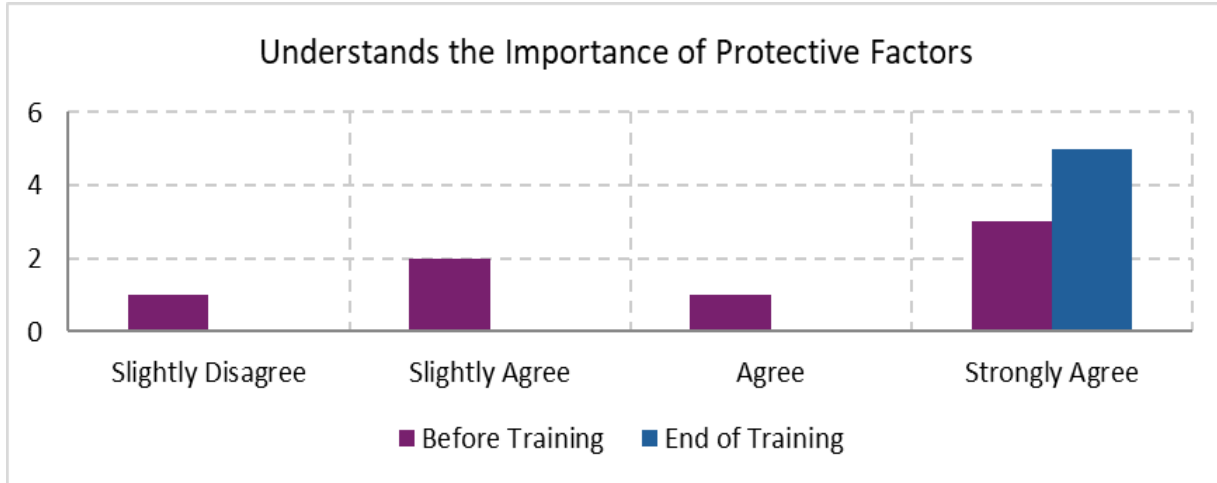
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**Appendix A:** The section of the baseline survey that measures knowledge of the individual protective factors using fictitious yet relevant scenarios.

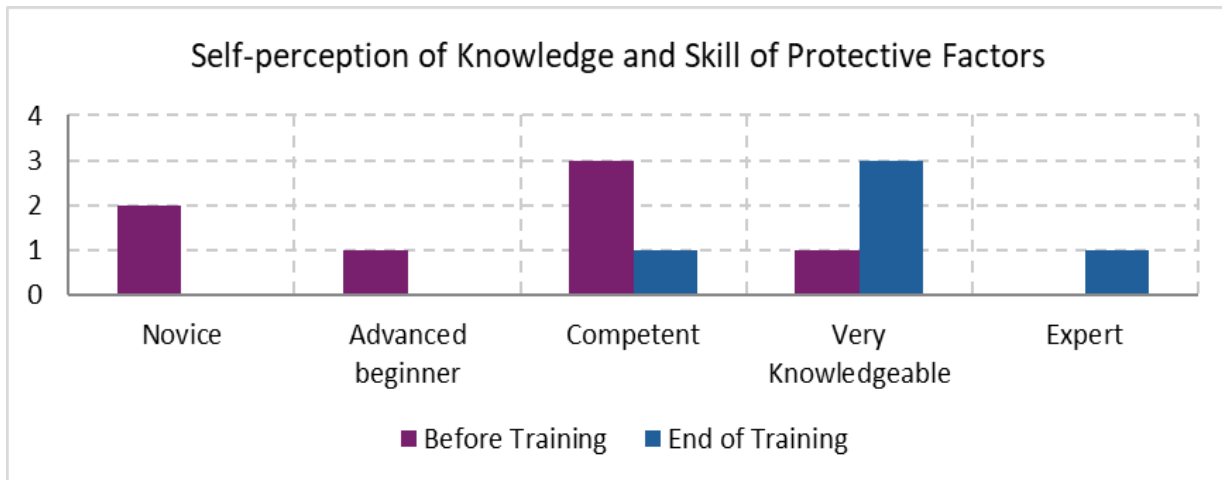


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**Appendix B:** Responses from participants who completed the baseline and end-of-project survey on identifying the importance of protective factors in their work.

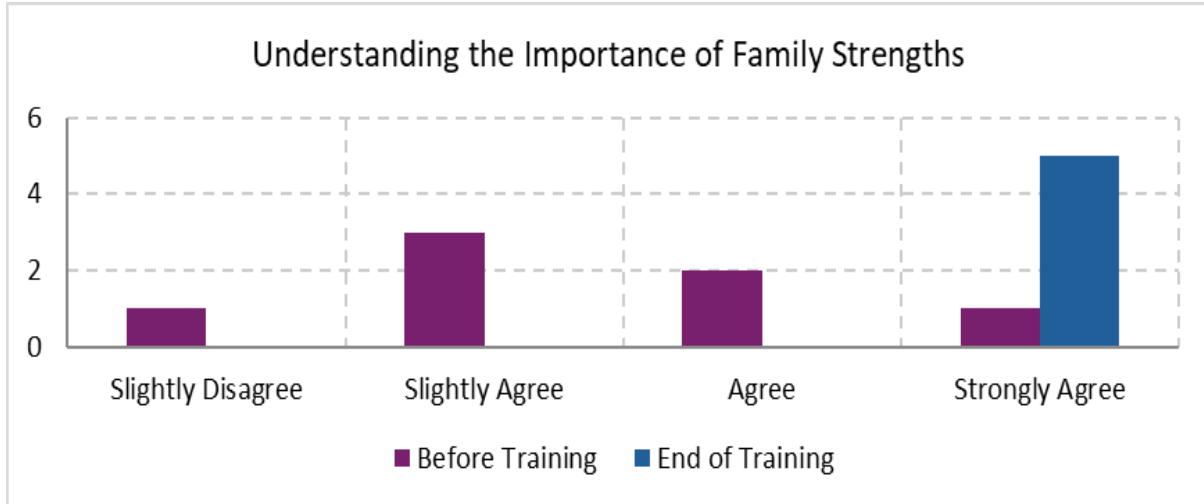


**Appendix C:** Responses from participants who completed the baseline and end-of-project survey measuring their self-perceived knowledge and skills applying the Framework.



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**Appendix D:** Responses from participants who completed the baseline and end-of-project survey measuring their self-perceived understanding of the importance of recognizing family strengths.



**Appendix E:** The PDSA template that participants used to document and track practice change.

## PDSA #1

Beginning Date for Test: April 7th  
Completion Date for Test: May 5th

<b>PLAN</b> Who, what, when, where	<b>DO</b> Record data and observations. What are the implications?	<b>STUDY</b> What happened?	<b>ACT</b> Will you abandon, adapt, or adopt the strategy? What did you learn?