



## STRENGTH-BASED WORDS AND EXPRESSIONS

WE'RE A "FAMILY"  
NOT A HOME



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*In the 1940s Johnny Mercer wrote the song "Ac-cent-tchu-ate the Positive" that became popularized by singers like Bing Crosby and the Beatles' Paul McCartney. The song encourages listeners: "You have to accentuate the positive, eliminate the negative, latch on to the affirmative. Don't mess with Mister In-between." Like the song, strength-based language is an effort to eliminate the negative in the words we use to describe children and families and instead focus on the positive.*

*In the 1990s many in the social work profession were looking at alternative descriptions to those that framed people as being sick or well or bad or good. Thus, the "strength-based" approach was created, recognizing that everyone has strengths and something positive about us. Instead of suggesting that people have weaknesses, the alternative would be that we have needs. The idea is to identify and build on what is going well in our lives; and then figure out what our needs are and meet them. Strengths and needs can relate to relationships, abilities, skills, knowledge, networks and communities.*

*In child welfare the move to strength-based language really began in 1991. The National Commission on Family Foster Care, convened by the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) and the National Foster Parent Association (NFPA), asked the child welfare field to make a big program name change: from the historical foster family care to family foster care. The aim was to emphasize the care of children in families. The commission's recommendation took hold.*

*Publications, articles and reports began using the "family-first" language. CWLA incorporated strength-based language in its "PRIDE Model of Practice to Develop and Support Foster and Adoptive Parents as Team Members in Child Protection and Trauma-Informed Care of Children," and many agencies began using the words as well.*

*These words hold special meaning for child welfare's children and families. Therefore, in each issue of *Fostering Families Today*, we will feature a "strength-based" word or expression — what it is and why we use it — to help family foster care providers understand the importance of the words we use as we care for children in foster care.*



# REFRAME FROM FOSTER HOME TO FOSTER FAMILY

This reframe is significant for two reasons. First, it is not the home that will protect and nurture children, but the family living there that will make the difference. A parallel might be if we have to be hospitalized, it is not the hospital bed that will save our lives: it is the medical team — the nurses, the doctors, the support staff — who provides the essential skills and care that make the difference.

There is another significant reason why we need to focus on families instead of homes. Last year's issues of *Fostering Families Today* featured several articles by Dr. Eshel Williams who grew up as a birth child in a foster, adoptive and kinship family. Her research explained the importance of treating every member of the foster family with dignity and respect.

Focusing on the home overlooks that not only are the foster parents significant; every other child in that family will be impacted by fostering

and, in turn, will impact the children who join that family.

So the next time you hear someone say or write "foster home," please take the strengths-based, inclusive approach. Say or write "foster family." Remember: In every home there is a family with feelings, behaviors, strengths and needs. Each member of every family is unique and must be supported. This is our strength-based approach.

Look for another strength-based "reframe" in the next issue of *Fostering Families Today*. You are welcome to share your ideas for more positive ways to talk about children and families. Send your suggestions to Eileen at the email address below. •

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