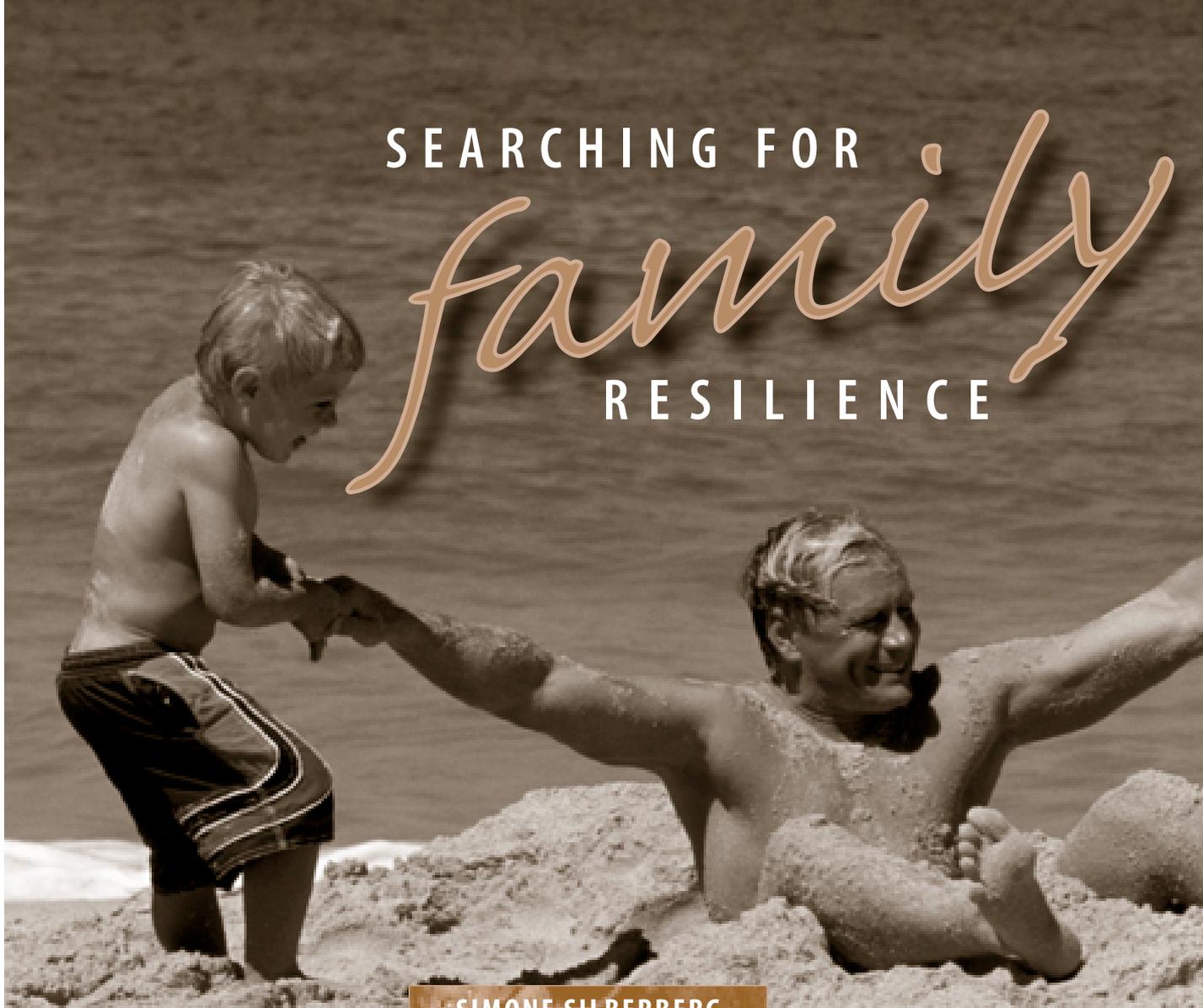


SEARCHING FOR

family

RESILIENCE



SIMONE SILBERBERG

What gives a family the resilience to work through a crisis? Why is it that some families fall apart when faced with adversities, while others thrive and become stronger? What are the qualities of these resilient families? And how do these families establish and maintain these strengths?

The answers to these questions have intrigued a broad range of people, from policy makers to community workers. The federal government has allocated 240 million dollars to its Stronger Families and Communities Strategy with the aim of building stronger family and community relationships. This emphasis on strengths rather than problems can also be seen in community work and family therapy where an increasing number of professionals are applying narrative, assets-based or competency-based approaches.

Likewise, an increasing number of family researchers are opting for a strengths approach in their family and community research. John DeFrain (1999: 13) points out that: "If one studies only family problems, one finds only family problems. Similarly, if educators, community organisers, therapists and researchers are interested in family strengths, they look for them. When these strengths are identified, they can become the foundation for continued growth and positive change in a family and a society."

Over the past two decades, a group of family researchers in the United States have conducted many research projects in the area of family strengths. DeFrain and his colleagues (Olson and DeFrain 2000; Stinnett and DeFrain 1985) have studied family strengths in 27 countries. Their cross-cultural research identified a variety of qualities, which contributed to the family members' sense of personal worth and feelings of satisfaction in their relationships with each other. They have developed several models of family strengths. David Olson's Family Circumplex Model has three dimensions: cohesion, flexibility and communication (Wolcott 1999). Stinnett and DeFrain's (1985) Family Strengths Model consists of six qualities which strong families across the world tend to share: commitment to the family; appreciation and affection for each other; positive communication patterns; enjoyable time together; a sense of spiritual wellbeing and connection; and the ability to successfully manage stress and crisis.

In 1999, under the guidance of John DeFrain, the Family Action Centre initiated the first Australian

Family Strengths Research Project with funding from the Federal Department of Family and Community Services. The aim of this project was to determine which qualities Australian families perceived as family strengths, and the language families used to describe these qualities (Geggie, DeFrain, Hitchcock and Silberg 2000).

The Family Strengths Research Project

To reach the aims of the project, the Family Action Centre developed an Australian Inventory of Family Strengths and a Family Strengths Survey. The inventory consisted of 85 strength statements to which the respondent indicated the degree to which he or she agreed with the statement. The survey consisted of 14 open-ended questions inviting the respondents to write stories and their views on a range of issues relating to family strengths. Furthermore, an interview schedule was developed adopting a format similar to the survey.

Through an extensive national media campaign, families who identified themselves as strong were invited to participate. Participants were asked to fill out the inventory and/or survey, or alternatively to participate in an interview: 605 volunteers filled out the Australian Inventory of Family Strengths, 177 completed the Family Strengths Survey, and 33 families participated in an interview.

The aim of the inventory was to assess whether the participating self-identified strong families agreed with the positive statements. The majority of the respondents (60–100 per cent) agreed with the 85 statements. As high as 98–100 per cent agreed with 33 of the 85 statements.

Some of these statements were:

- We feel strongly connected to each other
- We allow each other to be ourselves
- We enjoy simple inexpensive family activities
- It is easy to share our values and ideas with each other
- We love one another
- We often laugh with each other
- We enjoy helping each other

The Family Strengths Research Project also conducted a qualitative analysis of the surveys and interviews. For this project, 65 of the approximately 200 responses were selected from different socio-economic backgrounds and family types. This sample consisted of 41 nuclear family members (mothers and fathers), 14 single mothers, and ten mothers from “blended” families. Unfortunately, there were no responses from single fathers or fathers from blended/stepfamilies to include in the sample.

FAMILY ACTION CENTRE

The Family Action Centre is located at the University of Newcastle, New South Wales. It is a multi-disciplinary centre with the vision of a truly civil society and a belief that family wellbeing is a cornerstone of healthy communities. The Family Action Centre is fully self-funded, receiving funds from state and federal government departments, philanthropic organisations, and corporate and private sponsorships.

The Family Action Centre delivers support programs, such as Home Start, the Caravan Project, Home Link, and the Men and Boys Program. The Centre engages in research and program evaluation, provides training and consultation, and disseminates information. The Family Action Centre believes that the importance of the family cannot be overstated and builds on strengths already existing in the community.

The Family Action Centre website can be located at www.newcastle.edu.au/department/fac



A theme analysis was conducted to extract recurring themes from the families' stories, which described the strengths, the challenges, and the coping strategies of strong families. Within each extracted family strength theme, a language analysis was conducted to determine the terminology families used to describe this strength. Furthermore, a focused theme analysis was conducted on all the responses from single-parent families (n = 14) and blended families (n = 10) to assess whether themes could be extracted specific to that family type.

The quantitative (inventories) and the qualitative (surveys and interviews) findings were incorporated into a framework, named the Australian Family Strengths Template, the aim of which is to offer a framework from which community resources can be developed and other research projects can be initiated. Furthermore, the Template can be used as a teaching tool to introduce the concepts of family strengths to family health practitioners.

The Australian Family Strengths Template

The Australian Family Strengths Template is founded on eight qualities, which were identified in the studies as family strengths. The qualities are Communication, Togetherness, Sharing Activities, Affection, Support, Acceptance, Commitment, and Resilience. Each quality is defined and illustrated below with quotes from the families' stories.

Communication is a strength when the family interacts with each other frequently and predominantly in an open, positive, honest manner. Some families also mentioned humour as a strength in their communication.

“Communication patterns in our family could best be described as open and honest. We all have input and all get a chance to put our point across. We do a good job communicating with each other because we are aware that you will be listened to.” (Sole parent)

Togetherness is the “invisible glue” that bonds the family and gives the family members a sense of belonging. An important ingredient to this ‘glue’ is sharing similar values, beliefs and morals.

“When someone in our family has a problem . . . we pull together to find the solution . . . We have found that the only way to face life is to do it together no matter where we are.” (Mother, nuclear family)

Sharing activities: strong families like to share and do activities with each other – activities such as sports, camping, playing games, reading stories, socialising together, and sharing hobbies and holidays.

“Over the years we have done a lot of family activities – skating, camping, walking, boating, swimming, etc. We believe this is helping our children catch the idea of strong family bonds.” (Mother, blended family)

Affection is a strength, when family members show love, care, concern and interest for each other on a regular basis through words, hugs, kisses, and thoughtfulness. Expressions of affection are often ritualised in families – for example, with greetings and farewells, bedtime story reading, and during celebrations such as birthdays and Christmas.

“The affection we show towards each other is simple stuff, like a cuddle in the morning, or just a pat on the head. And a question on how things are going, how you slept and what’s on the agenda for today, and being genuinely interested in the answers.” (Father, nuclear family)

Support is assisting, encouraging, reassuring each other and looking out for each other. It is strength when family members feel equally comfortable to offer or ask for support.

“Being a strong family unit means if one of the family has a challenge, there are many family members to listen, advise and support them through this time.” (Sole parent)

Acceptance means showing respect, appreciation, and understanding for each other’s individuality and uniqueness. Acceptance is a strength when family members acknowledge, value and tolerate each other’s differences, and when the members allow each other space.

“We see each other as individuals, and respect and celebrate our differences.” (Mother, nuclear family)

Commitment is showing dedication and loyalty toward the family as a whole. Strong families often view the wellbeing of the family as a first priority. Commitment is expressed in many ways, to the family, the partner relationship, children, the extended family, and/or the community.

“Each of us, whether consciously or instinctively, has an enormous level of commitment. We believe in ‘family first’. Whether the problems are physical, emotional, philosophical or merely domestic, we

‘galvanise’, and solve by action and discussion.”
(Father, nuclear family)

Resilience: the above attributes are encompassed within the concept of family resilience. Froma Walsh (1996: 261) defines family resilience as “the ability to withstand and rebound from crisis and adversity”. Strong families are able to adapt to changing circumstances and have a positive attitude towards the challenges of family life. They deal with these challenges by means of communication – talking things through with each other; supporting each other in times of need and/or seeking outside support when it is beyond the family’s capability to deal with the situation; and togetherness – pulling together to form a united front and to find solutions.

“We rally together in crisis. In our time together we have encountered several trying situations, which have had the capability of tearing us apart, but which have in fact bonded us together.” (Mother, nuclear family)

Just another family strengths model?

Is the Australian Family Strengths Template just another family strengths model with eight qualities rather than three or six? Indeed, the qualities of the Australian Family Strengths Template correspond conceptually with other models of family strengths. Family strength models may differ in detail and the number of strengths they list, but in general the strengths tend to describe similar qualities. “All family strengths are interrelated, overlap to some degree, and interact with each other” (Olson and DeFrain 2000: 570). This similarity supports DeFrain’s theory that essentially the family strengths concepts remain fairly stable across cultures and family types (DeFrain 1999).

The purpose of most family strengths models is to offer a framework from which the concepts can be introduced to people foreign to the material. Furthermore, the Family Action Centre proposes that the Australian Family Strengths Template can be used as a guide to develop resources and programs to assist family health practitioners in their work with families. These resources and programs would be developed to help families rediscover their strengths in order to strengthen their resilience.

It is important to place family strengths models in the context of their function – that is, as a teaching tool or a resource and program development framework. It would be a mistake to view any model as a blueprint of a resilient family. Family resilience can not be found by simply ticking off a list of qualities. Family strengths models offer only descriptions of qualities and outcomes, but they “do not explain why it is that some . . . families are able to create a stable, nurturing and satisfying family environment, or cope with changing circumstances with resilience while others fail to thrive” (Wolcott 1999: 26). Walsh (1998: 22) rightly points out that “rather than proposing a blueprint for any singular model of ‘the resilient family’, our search for family resilience should identify *key processes* that can strengthen each family’s ability to overcome the challenges they face” (italics added).

It was through the qualitative analysis of the family stories in the Family Strengths Research Project that some of these *key processes* came to the fore.

Strong families versus troubled families

In any discussion about family strengths and the key processes that facilitate these strengths, it is easy to categorise families as strong/functional or troubled/dysfunctional. Indeed, some family strengths research is based on this dichotomy proposing that the study of strong families and their strengths will provide a format from which we can educate troubled families on practices used in stronger families.

An inherent quality of all dichotomies is that this either/or proposition blinds us from possible shades of grey. We run the risk of imposing cultural assumptions on family life, and overlooking the existing skills within the family. Rather than teaching families a set of strength practices, our task is to facilitate families in the process of identifying their own strengths. This process empowers families to regain faith in their own capabilities to rebuild resilience. Family resilience is an inherent property of families that can be nurtured and mobilised by approaches ranging from family therapy to social policy (Walsh 1998).

Furthermore, being a family is not a static configuration, but a constantly evolving process. To be a family requires constant action and maintenance. Families are neither strong nor troubled by default, but will go through stages of strength and instability. In unstable times, some families lose sight of their strengths and become immersed in their problems. When they seek assistance from family health practitioners their problem-saturated

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stories are often thickened by the conventional models of deficits and pathology.

Professionals who work from a strengths perspective – such as narrative therapy, solution-focused therapy and asset-based community work – focus on *what is working* in the family rather than what is not. This is not to say that these professionals minimise the family’s issues, it is to say that they avoid pathologising or labeling the family into categories of deficit, disorder or illness. The focus is on the qualities that a family may already possess that can be drawn on to help them manage the problem. “The strengths perspective accepts and acknowledges the resilience of people, their ability to endure extreme hardship and to survive seemingly insurmountable problems” (Gray 2000). The very fact that a family is seeking outside assistance is a strength in itself.

Although the families who participated in the Australian Family Strengths Research Project had identified themselves as strong families, they often referred to the unstable times to illustrate their strengths. Half of the families indicated that they became aware of their strengths when they were confronted with a challenge.

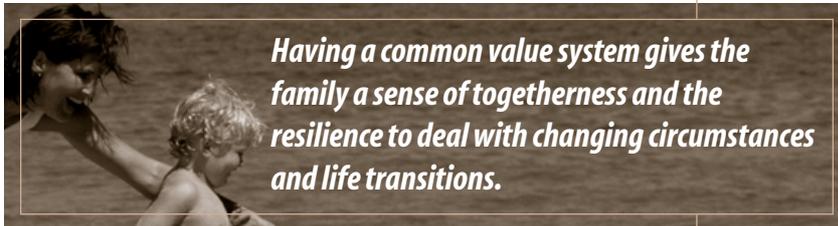
Although the adversities may strain the relationships initially, it is in hindsight that families acknowledge how the crisis has strengthened their bond.

“In hindsight, this experience was a pivotal one for our family. We emerged stronger, calmer, happier, thankful for our remaining children and the love we share each day, together.” (Mother, nuclear family)

Despite the family type or the strength of the family, the participants considered communication breakdown, parenting, and relationship dynamics as the three major challenges. To cope with the challenges they faced, participants referred to the qualities they had also identified as strengths – Communication, Support, and Togetherness. Additionally, several families emphasised the importance of having a positive, constructive attitude toward challenges and viewed challenges as a normal part of life and as passages in time. All these coping strategies strengthen the family’s resilience.

What strengthens a family?

Some families are more capable of dealing with crises than others. DeFrain (1999) suggests that the strategies used by these families to weather crises are: pulling together rather than apart; reframing the crisis in a more positive, manageable light; and seeking help. To these could be added that families have key practices in place that assist them, especially during adversities – practices such as having a family meeting when a decision needs to be made, giving each other time out when the need arises,



Having a common value system gives the family a sense of togetherness and the resilience to deal with changing circumstances and life transitions.

and dedicating a time every week just for the family. The success of such practices will largely depend on the degree to which the family members share the same values.

Respondents in the Family Strengths Research Project indicated in various ways that sharing a value system strengthens their family and helps them cope with adversities and challenges. The shared values of the family members may be expressed through their religion and/or through their ethical and moral belief system.

“We share our beliefs and this adds to our family strength.” (Father, nuclear family)

“I think sharing the same beliefs, based on a choice, rather than having things pushed onto you, strengthens a family enormously. To be able, during good and bad times, to put beliefs into practice – for example, thanking God whatever is happening and being aware of the bigger picture, instead of resorting to ‘what ifs’ or ‘whose fault is it’ that lead to bitterness and regret – is incredibly positive. (Mother, nuclear family)

“Although we have faced many battles we have stood strong in our morals and values, and have

developed integrity and character.” (Father, nuclear family)

Sharing similar values not only gives the families the resilience to face challenges, it also bonds the family together.

“I would describe our belief systems as spiritual in nature – ethically sound, full of compassion for those who are marginalised, strong sense of social justice, etc. This above all has been a congealing factor in our family.” (Mother of a nuclear family)

The respondents’ stories indicated that having a common value system induces a sense of togetherness or belonging which in turn gives the family the resilience to deal with changing circumstances and life transitions. Furthermore, most families in the study had rituals to reinforce this sense of belonging and to emphasise their family values. Some of the rituals they mentioned were having set meals together, having a special family evening on a regular basis, celebrating birthdays and Christmas according to family traditions, and expressing affection at set times (such as bedtime and with farewells and greetings).

Some of the parents explained how, through communication or role modeling, they passed on to their children the values they considered essential.

“We are concerned with the drugs, alcohol and other negative influences that would face every parent. We hope that with a lot of open discussions our children know what these negative elements can do to a person’s moral, spiritual, social, ethical fibre.” (Mother, nuclear family)

“We talk a lot about respect, kindness, acceptance, understanding, tolerance, and because we do try to treat each other with these values, I think by example the children absorb them. We talk as well about how special and unique they each are, and

how this is true of others. I believe firmly that spiritual and ethical values are not taught through preaching, rhetoric, or adherence to any one doctrine, but through actions.” (Mother, nuclear family)

“Family values are very definite. First, caring about others is really important and my children seem to have always had that value. It wasn’t something I had to teach them with words. They just knew. I’ve always felt that the way to teach children is to model or be an example then trust that they would figure it out.” (Mother, blended family)

It appears that sharing a value system facilitates processes that strengthen families, and these processes entail rituals and practices that emphasise the importance of family.

Family strengthening practices

The proposed link between sharing similar values and family strengthening practices offers further insight into family resilience in alternative family types. Traditionally, family practices and values were passed on

and maintained across generations. In today's society, traditional family types have a framework to work from. They can adhere to practices and related values from their family of origin, and often have a range of role models to refer to.

However, the social institutions of marriage and traditional families have met with many social challenges and changing value systems. The traditional nuclear family is now one of many forms of family in Australian society. There are now nuclear families based on an egalitarian partner relationship, sole parents, blended and stepfamilies, and same-sex families. Some of the traditional family practices are in conflict with the values of these alternative family types. These families face the challenge of developing new practices which reflect their alternative values, often without any role models to work from.

When we looked for strength themes specific to sole parents in our study, we extracted two strength themes – Support from extended family and friends, and Positive co-parenting arrangements. These families had developed practices to include regular support from extended family, friends and co-parents. Extended family and friends played an intricate part in the weekly routine – for example, the grandparents picked up the children every afternoon, or a friend would babysit once a week. This support gave the mother the resilience to face the challenge of sole parenting her children.

One-third of the sole-parent families referred to the strength they gained from having positive co-parenting arrangements. These families had developed practices that involved the co-parent in the day-to-day life of the family. Co-parenting practices were based on the shared beliefs that the children would benefit from developing relationships with both parents, although they lived apart.

Similarly, blended families indicated practices that were specific for that family type. The primary challenge for blended families was the relationship dynamics between the family members, especially between the stepfamily members. To face these challenges, it seemed that the commitment to the partner relationship and the stepfamily played a pivotal role. Practices were therefore developed that signified this commitment. Furthermore, all the blended families referred to Acceptance as a strength, which could indicate the importance of this quality when dealing with the integration of two sets of family values and experiences.

The stories also revealed the importance of building a history as a family unit, which in time induces togetherness and a sense of belonging.

Conclusion

In the past, the main approach has been to identify the deficits in families in order to deliver services that could cater to the needs of families. An increasing number of family and community organisers, educators, researchers, and therapists are moving away from this somewhat disempowering approach, and are embracing a strengths perspective in their work.

A family that is classified as troubled and needy is more likely to find itself on the receiving end of all sorts of services and programs designed and delivered by outside experts. This model of service delivery positions families as passive recipients. On the other hand, a family that is depicted as resourceful and skilled is

more likely to become actively engaged in the process of addressing their issues and solving their problems. In the strengths-based model of service delivery, it is the family who sets the agenda for their path of recovery rather than the outside expert.

In her opening address at the Australian Institute of Family Studies Seventh National Conference in July last year, the then Minister for Family and Community Services, Senator Jocelyn Newman (2000: 55) noted that the main premise behind the government's Stronger Families and Communities Strategy was the belief "that strong and healthy families form the best social welfare system there is, and that strengthening families represents a very sound investment in Australia's future".

This article proposes that we strengthen families and communities through a strengths-based approach in which we focus on the available resources and skills within the family and community, and empower the family and community to use those assets in building resilience. The article has also offered a framework of eight strengths, which occur in some combination in families who experience themselves as strong. This framework, the Australian Family Strengths Template, is not a blueprint of a "strong family", but a teaching tool and a guide for those working and teaching in this area of interest.

The Family Strengths Research Project, especially the qualitative analysis, offers some insight into the importance of sharing a similar value and belief system in regards to family life. Sharing similar values makes the process of developing family strengthening practices a lot smoother, and induces a sense of belonging. In turn, these practices increase the family's resilience.

In our present social environment – a time of changing family values and alternative family forms – families seek or need assistance to develop positive, constructive practices. It is our role to provide this assistance by expanding the family's existing resources and skills without imposing conventional family values, and to explore with the family how their values can form the basis of strengthening practices.

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Simone Silberberg is the Research Manager at the Family Action Centre at the University of Newcastle, New South Wales, and coordinator of research and program evaluation within the Centre. Email: simone.silberberg@newcastle.edu.au.