

The Family Impact

Rationale and Handbook



2nd Edition





Families are a cornerstone for raising responsible children who become caring, committed contributors to a strong democracy, and competent workers in a sound economy. Families financially support their members, and care for those who cannot always care for themselves—the elderly, frail, ill, impaired, and those with developmental disabilities. Yet families can be harmed by stressful conditions—the inability to find a job, afford health insurance, secure quality child care and send their kids to good schools. Public policies are needed to help families effectively and efficiently cope with stressful conditions.

**Keeping the family foundation strong today
pays off tomorrow.**



About

Most policymakers would not enact a policy and most practitioners would not implement a program without asking: “*What is the economic impact of this policy or program?*” This handbook encourages policymakers and practitioners to routinely ask: ***What is the family impact of this policy, program, or practice?***

This question seems straightforward, but it is seldom asked and rarely acted upon.^{1 2} This omission is surprising, given that families are widely endorsed by liberal and conservative policymakers in red, blue, and purple states.³ Sadly, for most policymakers and practitioners, families are not always on their radar. In this second edition, we introduce the concept of the Family Impact Lens and explain the ways that being pro-family is different from being pro-people.⁴ We summarize the research evidence on:

- **WHETHER** families are important to their members and to society;
- **HOW** policies and programs could benefit if viewed through the Family Impact Lens;
- **WHEN** the Family Impact Lens could be raised;
- **WHO** could raise the lens of family impact;
- **WHY** the Family Impact Lens is seldom used; and
- **WHAT** tools are available to keep family impact front and center in the thinking and actions of policymakers and practitioners.

Whether Families are Important to their Members and to Society

Families themselves are among the most private units of society. Yet strong and well-functioning family units are a powerful tool for public good. Families that are able to move up the economic ladder contribute to our collective economic growth. Families being able to care for their members—whether infants or elders—lifts that expense from the community. Families nurturing members' educational and vocational aspirations spur inspiration for the future.

Families enhance their member's social and emotional development, which builds the resilience of our schools, neighborhoods, and workplaces at a time when mental health support is needed on multiple fronts. Families are the cornerstone of every neighborhood, every school district, every community, every state.

Families are better able to perform their functions in a supportive policy environment when:

- schools actively seek parental engagement;
- employers recognize that workers are also family members;
- agencies and organizations are family-centered in their philosophy and operation; and
- laws support the cost-effective contributions that family members make to society as caregivers, parents, partners, and workers.



How Could Policies & Programs Benefit if Viewed through the Family Impact Lens?

Families embody an essential quality found in few other frameworks—commitment to others. In families, individuals make contributions for the good of the whole family unit and for society. The Family Impact Lens counters individualistic, narrow, or self-serving agendas that concentrate on overly specific problems or single solutions. Instead, the family impact way of thinking is more holistic, more multifaceted, and extends from the cradle to the grave.⁵

The Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) is one of our most effective anti-poverty programs for low-income wage-earners, particularly single mothers. Yet if a single mother who earns \$25,000 annually marries another low-income worker with a similar income, they will lose \$4,000 in EITC credits.⁶

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as Food Stamps, is administered in ways that make it challenging to enroll. Participation declines when applications must be completed in person, which requires taking time off work or making arrangements for child care.⁷

The Adoption and Safe Families Act inadvertently resulted in the loss of parental rights among Black parents and increased the placement of Black children in foster care.⁸

Families provide extensive care for frail older members, such as attending doctor's visits, dressing wounds, giving injections, managing medications, and participating in hospital admissions and discharge. Yet despite this extensive involvement, only about one-third (32%) of family caregivers reported that a doctor, nurse, or social worker had ever inquired about what they needed to care for their loved one.⁹

When the Lens of Family Impact Could be Raised

Family impact analysis can be a preliminary process conducted at an early stage when a policy or program is being designed, at an interim stage when a policy or program is being implemented, or at a later stage when being evaluated or reauthorized.



When can the Family Impact Lens be Applied During the Policy Process?

When...

- ...ideas are being debated
- ...policies are enacted
- ...programs are established
- ...practices are implemented
- ...impacts are evaluated

Who Could Raise the Lens of Family Impact?

The Family Impact Lens can be useful to a range of users in several policy and program settings:

01 Policymakers as they consider how policies affect families and whether involving families would result in more effective and efficient policy responses;

02 Family and human services educators or service providers as they strive to identify specific practices and procedures that are more supportive of families in all their diversity across the lifespan;

03 Legislator's staff as they weigh policy options and respond to requests for the family impacts of policies currently under consideration;

04 Policy analysts as they incorporate family factors into their analysis and implications;





05

Executive agency administrators, as they create and evaluate rules and regulations to implement policies that will affect families;

06

Program or organization staff, as they examine their policies, culture, and operating procedures to determine how well they are responding to family needs and supporting family well-being;

07

Policy and program evaluators, as they identify research questions, conceptualize studies, determine samples, select measures, conduct analyses, and draw implications; and

08

Educators (in Cooperative Extension, policy schools, family science programs, etc.) as they teach future professionals and the public how to approach issues in family-centered and evidence-based ways.



Why is the Lens of Family Impact Seldom Used?

Policies and programs affect families in ways that often go unnoticed. Policymakers do not know and cannot be expected to master the vast body of research on families and the many changes of contemporary family life. Family impact analysis organizes this family information into factors and findings with relevance for policy and practice. So why doesn't an analysis of family factors happen more often?

One reason is subpar quality of family impact analyses that are conducted by staff with limited training or narrow expertise. For example, family scientists have substantial family expertise on family forms and functioning, but little policy science background. Policy analysts have critical, in-depth expertise on the specifics of a policy issue, but little family science background. Both are needed to conduct analyses that are family-sensitive and policy-relevant.

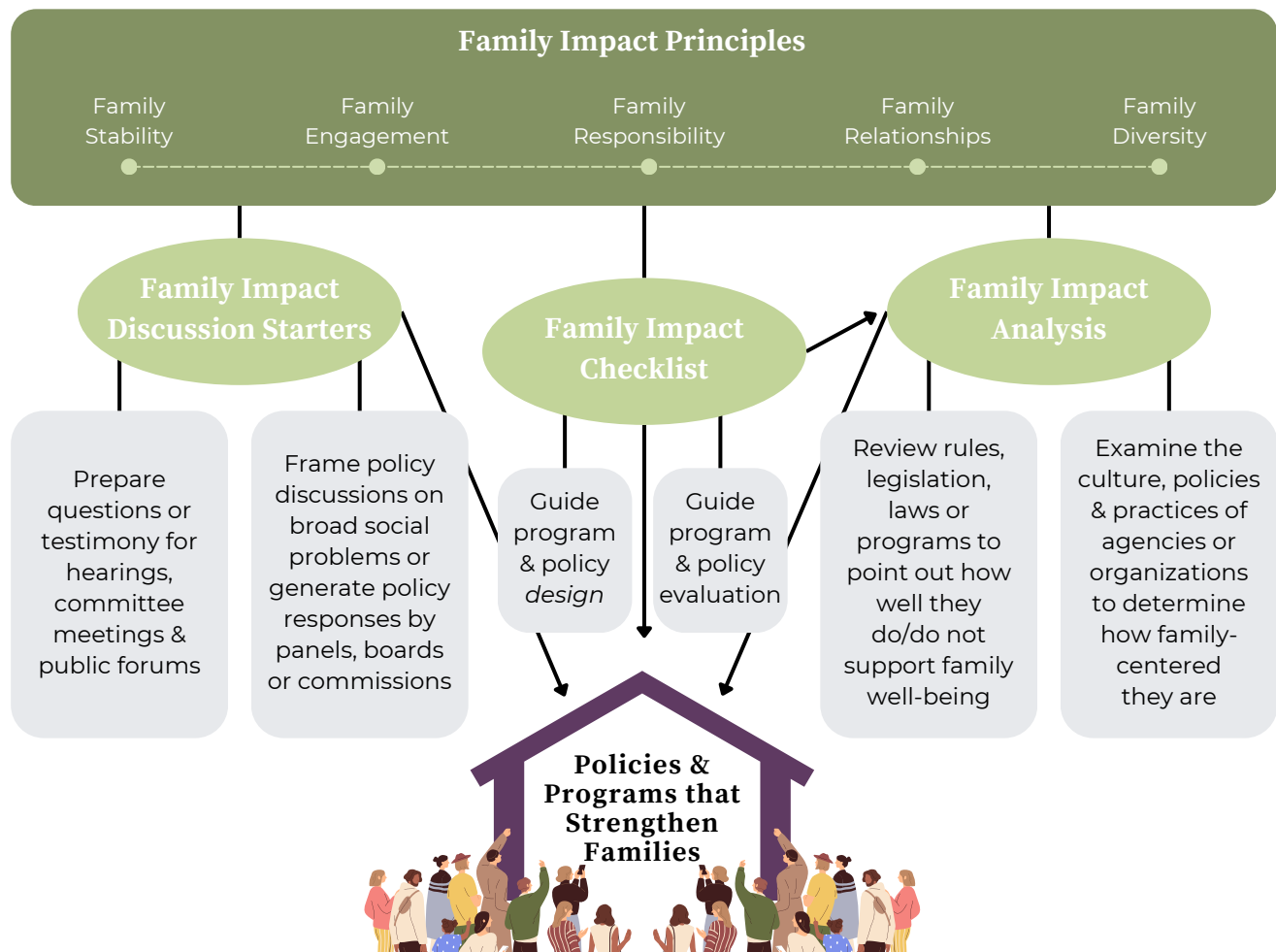
Timing also matters. Effectiveness depends on whether the conditions are right for policy change on the issue. Effectiveness begins with assessing organizational readiness or the political and economic feasibility of policy change.

Effectiveness also depends on choosing the appropriate methods suited to the target audience, the intended use, and the available time and expertise for conducting the analysis.

What Methods Exist to Infuse the Family Impact Lens into Policies, Programs, and Practices?

In an era of political polarization, this handbook offers a nonpartisan toolkit, built around the iconic image of family. Family is a shared value that can be used to rise above partisan politics and come to common ground. This diagram presents three methods arranged from the least to the most time- and resource-intensive: Family Impact Discussion Starters, Family Impact Checklist, and family impact analysis.

The Family Impact Lens in Policy & Practice



Each method uses different procedures for the same purpose: to strengthen and support diverse families across the lifespan. Based on a review of research on families, all three methods are based on the same 5 Principles that form the core of assessing policies and programs for their impact on family well-being: family responsibility, family stability, family relationships, family diversity, and family engagement. The Principles apply to policies or programs (i.e., what policies or programs are enacted or established) and also to practices (i.e., how policies or programs are implemented).

The choice of methods depends on who will be using it and for what purpose.

The Three Family Impact Methods

The Family Impact Discussion Starters Method

Translates each of the five Principles into a single question, which can be used by policymakers to frame thinking about issues or to prepare questions or testimony for hearings, committee meetings, and public forums about the intended and unintended consequences of policies for families.

The Family Impact Checklist Method

Expands on each of the 5 Family Impact Principles with 33 detailed questions that family scientists and policy analysts can use to conduct an abbreviated analysis of how to support and involve families in ways that reinforce policy or program goals.

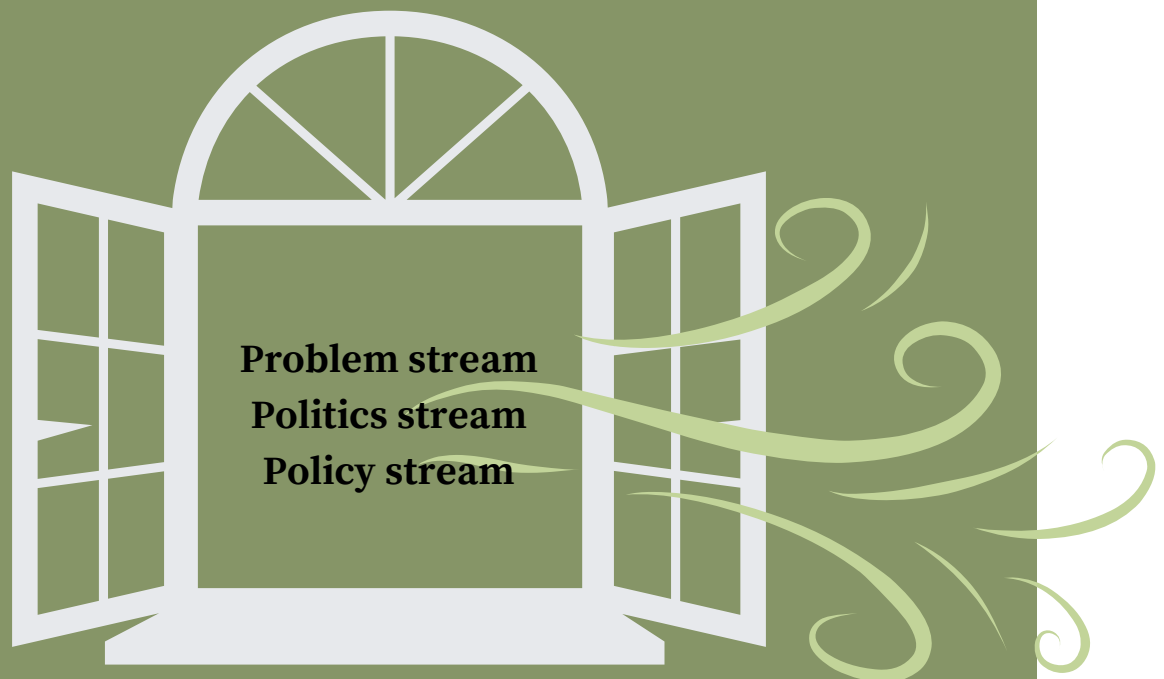
Family Impact Analysis

A formal, in-depth methodology for family scientists and policy analysts to use the Checklist tool for fully examining the extent to which rules, legislation, laws, programs, agencies, or organizations advantage or disadvantage family well-being.

To sum up the role of each player, policymakers identify the issue and determine when it is most politically and economically feasible to advance it. Family scientists and policy analysts use the Checklist to conduct an abbreviated or full family impact analysis.

Regardless of method, the odds of success depend on whether the timing and conditions are right for change on the issue. A policy window opens when problems are recognized, policy solutions are available, and the political climate supports change. When a policy issue is politically and economically feasible, policymakers are willing to invest their time, energy, and political capital because their efforts may pay off.

Learning Moment: The Policy Window



Kingdon's Open Policy Window Theory states that a policy window opens when: (1) policymakers identify which issues would benefit from a Family Impact Analysis, (2) family scientists and policy analysts conduct the analysis and draw family and policy implications and (3) policymakers determine when it is most economically and politically feasible to factor in the results of the analysis and place the issue on the decision-making agenda.¹⁰

Family Impact Discussion Starters

A method designed for use by policymakers is the Family Impact Discussion Starters. Each of the five Family Impact Principles has been translated into a single question, and designed to place families front and center in policy discourse and decision-making. Policymakers raise one or more of these questions as a guide to view societal problems through a Family Impact Lens, and to use this frame as they prepare testimony for hearings and committee meetings, etc. Research shows that policymakers highly value questions that can help them strategically steer the course of policy actions.¹¹



The Family Impact Discussion Starters ask:

How will the policy, program, or practice:

1. support rather than substitute for family members' responsibilities to one another?
2. reinforce family members' commitment to each other and to the stability of the family unit?
3. recognize the power and persistence of family ties, and promote healthy couple, marital, and parental relationships?
4. acknowledge and respect the diversity of family life (e.g., different cultural, ethnic, racial, and religious backgrounds; various geographic locations and socioeconomic statuses; families with members who have developmental disabilities; and families at different stages of the life cycle)?
5. engage and work in partnership with families?

Policymakers in one state applied such questions to prescription drug program eligibility, and subsequently recognized that many elderly couples who chose to marry would likely forfeit their benefits, creating an incentive to live together rather than marry. This is likely an unintended consequence, but one highlighted when the Discussion Starter questions were applied to a real life policy question.¹²

Is it realistic for policymakers to consider these questions within the complexity of their policymaking endeavors? In one study, **9 out of 11** highly-respected and diversely affiliated policymakers said it was feasible to raise Family Impact Discussion Starters at a hearing, committee meeting, or floor debate. One of the dissenters actually advised that asking the questions during floor debate might be too late; questions are more likely to be effective when raised earlier in the policy process.¹³ It seems clear that the Discussion Starters are an efficient way to introduce discourse around the implications of policy on families.



Family Impact Checklist Method

The Family Impact Checklist is a method that expands on the Principles with detailed questions that family scientists and policy analysts can use to guide policy, program, and practice decisions. The Checklist includes the 5 Family Impact Principles and 33 accompanying questions for conducting an abbreviated analysis of how to support and involve families in ways that reinforce policy or program goals. Each Principle is accompanied by questions that tease out whether it exists in the policy, program, or practice. Two of the questions for assessing family engagement are in the box below.

Family Impact Checklists can:

- ✓ help professionals think about a greater breadth of factors and influences that they otherwise may not have.²
- ✓ be applied as stand-alone tools before programs or policies are enacted.
- ✓ help anticipate how families may affect and/or be affected by a program plan or policy proposal.

The Family Engagement Principle:

- asks how well the policy, program, or practice builds on social supports that are essential to families' lives (friends; family-to-family support; community, neighborhood, volunteer, and faith-based organizations).
- acknowledges that the engagement of families, especially those with limited resources, may require emotional, informational, and instrumental supports (e.g., child care, financial stipends, transportation).



Family Impact Checklists can:

- ✓ encourage a focus on evidence-based program components and best practices that may be critical to family well-being and program efficacy.
- ✓ help determine what data to collect, which outcomes to measure, and what criteria can assess if effects differ by family type.
- ✓ organize vast, complex, and fragmented evidence related to families into categories and factors that have special relevance for policy and practice.

Quick Tip:

Several targeted Checklists for assessing family impacts in specific settings (adolescent treatment centers, schools, and communities) and for particular policies (child and family services plans, school funding formulas, and early care and education policies) are available at the [Resource Center](#) and bit.ly/FIHandbook.

MAKING IT REAL:

Applying Family Impact to the Reentry Experience of Formerly Incarcerated Parents

When Parents are Incarcerated

Two-thirds of incarcerated females and one-half of incarcerated males are parents. When one parent is incarcerated, the children left behind are at risk of unhealthy development and all family members face financial stress along with the emotional strain of separation.^{14 15} When formerly incarcerated parents return home, the family can be central to the reentry process.

Not all families have the desire or means to help. Yet in one study, 90% of formerly incarcerated individuals “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that their family had been supportive in the first few months after their release. Those who reported their family was supportive and who stayed substance-free had more success finding employment. Continuing contact with family members during and following incarceration has been found to reduce recidivism and foster reintegration.¹⁶

How Can Justice-Involved Families’ Needs be Taken Into Account?

Policymakers could use the Family Impact Checklist to examine the state statutes and administrative rules that may affect the ease of reentry for those returning from prison and for their families (whether or not a formerly incarcerated parent can access food pantries or homeless shelters, obtain a driver’s license, or qualify for benefits such as food stamps or health care).

Corrections agencies could improve visitation policies, expand the definition of family to allow visits by others raising the parent’s children, and make it easier to maintain phone, video, or Internet contact.

Schools, youth organizations, and family-serving agencies could assess and address special post-release challenges faced by families with a parent or partner impacted by the justice system.^{14 15}

Family Impact Analysis

A full family impact analysis is a formal, in depth methodology that uses a Checklist as a guide to examining the extent to which rules, legislation, laws, programs, agencies, or organizations do or do not support families.

Procedures for Conducting a Family Impact Analysis of Rules, Legislation, Laws, or Programs

01 **Select a policy or program and decide what components to analyze.**

Consider related programs or policies, relevant laws or court decisions, regulations, appropriations, administrative practices, and implementation procedures (e.g., staffing, accessibility, coordination with other programs, family-centered practices, etc.).

02 **Determine which family types might be affected.**

Policies or programs may have different effects on diverse family structure, family life stage, geographic locale, heritage, presence of developmental disabilities, and socioeconomic diversity.

Family types and contexts can vary based on:

Family structure: birth or adoptive family, blended family, extended family, foster family, LGBTQ+ family, multi-generational family, etc.

Family life stage: families with young children or impaired older members, cohabiting partners, etc.

Geographic locale: rural, suburban, urban, etc.

Heritage: specific cultural, racial, ethnic, or religious backgrounds, etc.

Presence of developmental disabilities: cognitive, emotional or physical needs, etc.

Socioeconomic diversity: income, education, occupation, number of wage earners, etc.

Marginalization: stigmatization or a target of discrimination

03 Select a Family Impact Checklist and conduct the analysis. The general Family Impact Checklist can be used for almost any policy or program. Several specific Family Impact Checklists are targeted to particular institutional settings, programs, or purposes. After selecting the Checklist, identify the Principles and questions that are most appropriate for the issue at hand. Not all Principles and questions will be relevant for every issue.

04 Disseminate and apply the results. After the analysis, implications can be drawn about the effects of the policy and its implementation on specific families and particular family functions. These implications raise issues for policymakers and practitioners to take into account in their decision-making, and can reveal conflicts between competing Principles or varying impacts for different family types.

The Checklist questions sound simple, but they can be difficult to answer!

- The Principles and questions are not rank-ordered and sometimes they conflict with each other.
- Depending on the issue, one Principle or question may be more highly valued than another, requiring trade-offs.
- Cost effectiveness and political feasibility also must be considered.

Make a plan for sharing the results with policymakers or professionals who are in a position to apply them to policy or practice. The results may generate interest in and the momentum for developing policies and practices that are more responsive to and supportive of family well-being.

Quick Fact:

The purpose of the family impact analysis is not to plan for the sake of *planning*, but to plan for the sake of *acting*. An analysis seldom results in overwhelming support for or opposition to a program or policy. Instead, it identifies several ways in which a policy does—or does not—support families.

Procedures for Conducting a Family Impact Analysis of an Agency or Organization

Family impact analysis can be used to assess agencies or organizations for their awareness of family needs and support of family well-being. Both quantitative and qualitative methods provide families with a voice for identifying strengths and gaps in family support. Completing quantitative checklists provides families with a confidential and safe way to provide feedback to directors, boards, and staff on whether evidence-based program elements and operational practices exist. Participating in qualitative methods, such as focus groups, encourages rich discussions and creative thinking that generate new ideas not thought about before.

Family Impact Analysis of Child Care Centers

Family impact analyses were conducted in two child care centers serving 112 children and 304 children in towns with populations of 10,000 and 15,000. The procedures for each are described in the textbox. The impacts were evaluated six months after the analysis occurred.

The child care centers changed several policies and procedures. For example, in one center, consistent “closers” were assigned at the end of the day. In this way, parents were dealing with familiar staff when they picked up their child. Breakfast times were adjusted so all children could eat, regardless of their arrival time. The center was so pleased with the feedback that they developed monthly surveys to gather parent concerns on a real-time basis.

After a five-year effort, one director credited the family impact analysis for a positive vote from the congregation to remodel the church basement into a more usable, childcare space. The remodeling allowed private space for staff to talk with families about their children’s development, which



45% of staff had reported was “in need of improvement”. This show of support from the congregation affirmed the center staff, making them feel more valued as professional caregivers rather than babysitters.

Differences of opinions also emerged. Staff felt it would be beneficial to provide parent education classes, whereas parents thought they were getting enough parenting information from conversations with staff.

MAKING IT REAL:

Conducting Family Impact Analysis in Child Care Centers

Planning: Cooperative Extension Staff partnered with the Center Director. The Center Director recruited staff and parents to participate in focus groups of 8 to 12 participants each. The Center Director did not join in the focus groups to encourage a frank discussion.

Implementing: Focus groups were facilitated by a Cooperative Extension Educator and a doctoral student. Discussion questions included how the center supports families, what policies and practices were challenging for families, how the center works with families, in what ways the Center assists and benefits families, and how the center could help make the day-to-day lives of families better. At the end of each focus group, participants completed the “Assessing the Impact of Child Care Centers on Families Checklist” for staff or parents/guardians. Participants were then asked if the checklist raised any additional ideas or comments. Directors completed surveys about family demographics and the family friendliness of the Center’s policies and practices.

Evaluating: The conversations were transcribed and analyzed for common themes. Reports of the findings were prepared for the center, and newsletters were written for parents and teachers. The Cooperative Extension staff and the Director presented the results to the staff and engaged them in a discussion of next steps.

Family Impact Analysis of Parent Involvement in Schools

Family impact analyses were conducted to examine parent involvement in middle school. The research evidence is clear. When parents are involved in their child's schooling, students get better grades, score higher on achievement tests, attend school more regularly, drop out less often, and have higher career aspirations. However, without special efforts, parent involvement drops off during the middle school years. In response, Extension educators and a state specialist developed a three-meeting process that engaged stakeholders to improve parental involvement in middle school.



Different strategies were implemented in different schools. One school passed policies to make it easier for parents to support their child's learning. For example, daily assignments were posted on the school website. Teachers began sending postcards to parents when their child did something well or improved. The same homeroom teacher was put in place in grades 7 and 8; the parent already had a relationship with the teacher and was more aware of classroom expectations and student responsibilities.

Other schools taught parent education programs, established parent resource rooms, and initiated weekly newsletters. A middle school handbook was developed and a directory of community services was distributed.

To facilitate parent involvement at the school, one school hired a parent volunteer coordinator. In one year's time, contributions increased five times. Volunteers contributed 1,503 hours or almost 62 8-hour workdays.

In evaluations, every team member said that they would recommend the family impact analysis process to other schools (N=19, 100% response rate). On a scale of 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent), the process for developing the action plan was rated 4.9 & the strategies that the team selected were rated 4.5.

In an evaluation, team members reported knowing significantly more after the project than before about the importance of parent involvement, the ways parents can get involved, and how other schools have built successful family/school partnerships.

MAKING IT REAL:

Steps for Family Impact Analysis of Parent Involvement in Schools

Identifying the Stakeholders: Each school identified 25 to 30 stakeholders to complete a Family/School Partnership Checklist and participate in the planning process. The team represented the diversity of the community and included parents, teachers, administrative staff, principals, students, PTA members, coaches, extracurricular leaders, maintenance staff, school board members, guidance counselors, community leaders, members of school improvements groups, and so forth.

Planning the Meeting Process: Each team member completed the Checklist ahead of time. The team was divided into subgroups to discuss a section of the Checklist such as home/school communication, volunteer opportunities, involvement in school decision-making, and community collaboration. The subgroups reported their ratings of support for families in each area back to the large group.

Conducting the Family Impact Analysis: A summary was prepared indicating what the school was already doing well to support families and what gaps existed. Team members broke into small groups to develop strategies for how the school could address the shortcomings in support for families.

Developing an Action Plan: The small groups reported their top three strategies to the large group. Members of the large group voted confidentially on the top three strategies. Then concrete action plans were developed to implement the top strategies endorsed by the team. Action plans had clear goals, were comprehensive, addressed potential pitfalls of implementation, and specified evaluation strategies for monitoring progress.

Family Impact Toolkit

The Family Impact Toolkit provides key definitions, key procedures and key tools of use to family and human service educators/professionals, legislative and agency staff, policy analysts, policy and program evaluators, program or organization staff, and others. The Toolkit contains definitions, step-by-step procedures, and key tools.

Case studies applying the Family Impact Lens using different methodologies in varied settings, and examples of family impact analyses are available on the website for the 4th edition of *Family Policy Matters*⁵ and at the [Resource Center](#).



Family Impact Toolkit

Key Definitions

- What is Policy, Family Policy & the Family Impact Lens in Policy & Practice?
- What is a Family?

Key Tools

- Family Impact Discussion Starters
- Family Impact Checklist
- Family Functions & Roles
- Family Diversity & Contexts
- Family Functions Shared with Social Institutions
- Policy & Program Implementation

Key Procedures

- Conducting a Family Impact Analysis of Rules, Legislation, Laws, or Programs
- Conducting a Family Impact Analysis of an Agency or Organization
- Tips for Conducting Family Impact Analysis

Summary

The purpose of a family impact analysis is not to plan for the sake of *planning*, but for the sake of *acting*. The value of a family impact analysis depends on *how* well its findings are communicated and whether opportunities are provided for engaging stakeholders to identify next steps. Its effectiveness also depends on establishing a system for monitoring progress and determining if and how its findings inform policies, programs, and practice.

Supporting families is widely endorsed across the political spectrum. Placing families on the policy agenda is "good policy and good politics." Advancing the Family Impact Lens has the potential to build broad consensus in an era of increasing polarization during a historical time when families have bipartisan political appeal.³ *This family focused, evidence-informed approach can generate momentum for developing policies and practices that can strengthen and support families in all their diversity across the lifespan. In turn, strong families can strengthen the cornerstone of every neighborhood, every school district, every community, and every state.*



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To dive more deeply into the concepts outlined here, please see the companion chapter, “A Toolkit for Infusing the Family Impact Lens into Policy, Programs, and Practice” in the book *Family Policy Matters: How Policymaking Affects Families and What Professionals Can Do*.¹

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