Research article

"Someone will notice, and someone will care": How to build Strong Communities for Children ☆

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	Derived from the recommendations of the U.S. Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect, Strong Communities for Children is a universal community-wide approach to prevention of child maltreatment. It is intended to change community norms—to facilitate informal support for families and to strengthen parents' belief that they can improve the quality of life for their own and their neighbors' families. A phased intervention, Strong Communities begins with recruitment and mobilization of volunteers, initially to spread Strong Communities' messages and ultimately to provide direct assistance to families of young children. Principle-driven, Strong Communities uses assets in the community to expand and strengthen networks of supportive relationships and, in particular, to increase support to parents. At least in concept, Strong Communities appears to be applicable in highly disparate communities and societies. © 2015 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Introduction

Derived from the strategy proposed by the U.S. Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect (1993; see also Melton & Barry, 1994; Melton, Thompson, & Small, 2002), Strong Communities for Children is a comprehensive community-wide initiative for the promotion of family and community well-being and prevention of child abuse and neglect. The underlying premise is that, to be effective, child protection must become a part of everyday life—"embedded in the settings where families live, work, study, worship, and play" (Melton, 2014b, p. 333).

The ultimate goal of Strong Communities is to *keep kids safe* (prevent child abuse and neglect) by strengthening participating communities so that *every child and every parent knows that if they have reason to celebrate, worry, or grieve, someone will notice, and someone will care*. Strong Communities involves the whole community through voluntary assistance by neighbors for one another, especially for families of young children. Community organizations and individual volunteers join to *leave no family outside*. All are guided by the principle that *people shouldn't have to* ask—that help should be built into community settings in a manner that is "natural," responsive, and non-stigmatizing.

The process used in Strong Communities is designed to promote *normative* change in perceptions, beliefs, and behavior. As illustrated by the statement of penultimate goal, *caring* is at the heart of Strong Communities. By reform and, in some instances, creation of community settings to make *noticing* others' needs and triumphs easier and expectable, Strong Communities promotes *attentiveness* to the experience of young children and, even more so, their parents. Of course, "noticing" makes a difference in young families' lives only when it is paired with "caring." Thus, through messages repeated often in

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diverse settings about the opportunities for application of the Golden Rule, Strong Communities promotes *neighborliness* as a community value and behavioral expectation.

By facilitating broad community engagement, Strong Communities also is designed to enhance *optimism* about the situation for children and families in the community. The experience of observing and, better, directly participating in community activities to promote child and family well-being reinforces the belief, individually and collectively, that action on behalf of families will be effective. Such experiences stimulate the perception that the community is a welcoming and supportive place and the expectation that the experience for families in the community will be positive.

Such optimism is believed to translate ultimately into norms for *action*. Thus, Strong Communities is intended to promote a local culture typified by a moral norm: the belief, individually and collectively, that the possibility of effective action on behalf of families *should* be expressed through such practical activity. Such a widely held moral norm, when given life through action, builds the belief that such practical activity *will* occur, because it is the thing to do, a social norm that pervades life in the community.

With at least partial replications now planned or underway in selected communities in Colorado and Israel, the single instance of full implementation of Strong Communities was in a portion of the Greenville, South Carolina, metropolitan area. In an extensive multi-method program of evaluation research, Strong Communities was demonstrated to stimulate large-scale community engagement, with deepening and increasingly diverse participation by thousands of volunteers and hundreds of organizations across the participating communities (Berman, Murphy-Berman, & Melton, 2008; Haski-Leventhal, Ben-Arieh, & Melton, 2008; McDonell, Ben-Arieh, & Melton, in this issue). Activities followed principles outlined later in this article, but their form varied, in order to match divergent community assets and needs (Murphy-Berman, Berman, & Melton, 2008). Such activities had a high level of personal meaning to volunteers (Haski-Leventhal et al., 2008) and sometimes were truly transformative at both community (Murphy-Berman et al., 2008) and individual (Hashima & Melton, 2008) levels. Such community mobilization was especially potent in communities with relatively limited social and economic resources (McLeigh, McDonell, & Melton, in this issue).

With changes measured across time and relative to matched communities (McDonell et al., in this issue), surveys of parents of young children in the participating communities showed increased social support, collective efficacy, and parental efficacy and decreased parental stress. Parents in the participating communities also were more likely to report use of household safety devices (e.g., baby gates), and they also became more attentive and less neglecting toward their children. This self-report was corroborated by changes in the frequency of substantiated cases of neglect (in child welfare archives) and diagnosed child injuries possibly resulting from abuse or neglect (in hospital archives).

This article is intended to provide an overview of principles and strategies used in Strong Communities. Such information should be useful in interpreting the evaluation results and planning further implementation of the service model.

In that regard, although Strong Communities was designed as an intervention for prevention of child maltreatment, it may have wider application, given the evidence that it can improve family and community well-being (McDonell et al., in this issue), perhaps especially in low-resource communities (McLeigh et al., 2015). Thus, Strong Communities may be useful in improving overall quality of life. Strong Communities applies "our highest aspirations to the seemingly inconsequential actions of everyday life. Communities in which children feel safe, in which they are heard, in which they and their parents are treated with respect, and in which there are strong norms of caring and mutual assistance would be fine places to live" (Melton, 2005, p.656).

In short, the steps that must be taken simply to implement Strong Communities—for example, engaging many people across a community in building resources for families—are *goods in themselves* that arguably should be undertaken even if they could not be demonstrated to result in a reduction in child abuse and neglect (Melton, 2013). Accordingly, Strong Communities is a high-value intervention in itself. The changes observed in improved safety for children are important additions to that intrinsic value.

This emphasis on both building and capitalizing on community assets is compatible with the argument that prevention efforts would be more effective if they moved from a singular focus on prevention of the particular problem to full acceptance of the need to promote healthy development (Daro & Benedetti, 2014; cf. Wald, 2015). It goes even further, however, to posit that community-building will create the conditions that sustain families and, by so doing, ensure children's safety, promote their sense of security, and enable their development as full participants in community life.

The Strong Communities Approach

Overall Strategies

The mounting evidence that adequacy of social and material support are critical to children's safety (Pelton, 2015; Thompson, 2015) has been accompanied by increasing interest in community interventions to prevent child maltreatment (see, e.g., Dodge & Coleman, 2009; Molnar & Beardslee, 2014). In that context, Strong Communities is distinctive in that it is universal, comprehensive, and dependent on the engagement of volunteers and primary community institutions (e.g., businesses; child care centers; civic clubs; local governments; neighborhood centers; public safety agencies; religious organizations; schools).

The linchpins of Strong Communities are community outreach workers. They implement two general strategies. First, they facilitate community engagement and leadership development to enable communities to accept responsibility for parent