

Strengthening Families, Strengthening Communities: The Impact of the Utah Valley University's Stronger Families Project

Julie K. Nelson¹, Kaicee Postler², and Rachel Arocho³

¹ Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences, Utah Valley University, USA

² Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences, Utah Valley University, USA

³ Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences, Utah Valley University, USA

Corresponding E-mail: Julie.Nelson@uvu.edu

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Abstract

Families need support so that communities remain strong. The Stronger Families Project (SFP) at Utah Valley University is a unique and powerful resource in the communities surrounding the university. Families attend a free, eight-week, evidence-based family life education program aimed at teaching skills to parents, teens, and children that are necessary for healthy family life. The program is rooted in Family Systems Theory, offering tailored age-based classes and a whole-family class to address mental health and developmental wellbeing of both the individual and family unit. Classes are taught in English and Spanish by interns from family science and related majors, and the program is further supported by service-learning students performing community service hours. In more than 15 years of service, SFP has supported over one thousand families and trained hundreds of students to deliver effective and impactful family programming to their communities. Ongoing research measuring positive outcomes for community participants shows statistically significant results for all variables.

Keywords: Family Life Education, Community Programming, Mental Health, Parent and Relationship Education, Family Systems, Community Impact, Cultural Relevance

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Overview

The health of our community begins at home. Unfortunately, too many families face destabilizing challenges that can lead to dysfunction. Financial hardships, mental health struggles, and behavioral issues can strain relationships and create unhealthy communication patterns. Many families want to improve their situation but need structured guidance and support.

The Problem We Are Addressing

Communities are strengthened by families who contribute to the healthy functioning of their society. If an individual within the family suffers, the family suffers. When families cannot find or afford the resources to cope with challenges, this negatively impacts our communities. In Utah, there is a critical need for mental health professionals at all levels to address social service disparities.

Social Service Disparity

According to the recent report from the Office of Professional Licensing and Review (OPLR, 2023):

1. Nearly 530,000 Utah residents are currently receiving mental health care.
2. An additional 210,000 to 515,000 residents need mental health care but are not receiving it.
3. Approximately 73% of mental health care in Utah is provided by master's level clinicians.

Utah Valley University (UVU) addresses this need by equipping parents, teens, and children in a unique free program with the skills that are necessary to foster healthier family dynamics.

Program Description

The Stronger Families Project (SFP) is an evidence-based, nationally recognized program that empowers families to build on their strengths and develop new skills to enhance mental health, personal well-being, and relationships. The program is structured around an 8-week curriculum, which students are certified to teach through the Family Wellness Associates (Family Wellness, 2024).

UVU's Social and Behavioral Sciences Department trains students to serve as behavioral health/family science interns in SFP. These interns teach the curriculum twice yearly and provide essential services at no cost to support individual and family well-being. The project serves a dual purpose: prevention—helping families develop healthy habits before problems escalate—and intervention psychoeducation, equipping children and parents with tools to replace destructive behaviors with positive ones. The goal of this project is to teach parents, teens, and children how to improve their interactions and emotional patterns within the family. The SFP Mission Statement is: “Elevate the family as the fundamental source of happiness and well-being by teaching parents, teens, and children how to improve their interactions and emotional patterns within the family” (www.uvu.edu/sfp).

To enhance the quality of life for disenfranchised Latinx families, SFP has translated the curriculum, and all classes can be taught in Spanish using cultural-responsive pedagogy. These families are oftentimes new immigrants, lower income, in need of peer collaboration and referrals to other social services—exactly the community of care that SFP fosters.

Theoretical Framework

The Family Systems Theory (Helm, 2021) emphasizes that individuals and behaviors are best understood within the context of relationships. A basic premise of the theory

suggests that changing one family member affects the entire system, reinforcing the importance of Family Life Education (FLE). SFP operates under this holistic approach. During weekly sessions, undergraduate students are supervised by clinically trained faculty to deliver lessons on:

- Conflict resolution and communication
- Emotional regulation and stress management
- Mental health awareness
- Family values and one-on-one parent-child time
- Protective factors that reduce dependence on drugs or alcohol

In addition, UVU undergraduate students in service-learning classes assist interns on-site, working directly with families and earning academic credit for their 20+ hours of service hours work per semester.

Impact and Data Analysis

An evaluation of the SFP was started in Spring 2023, with ongoing data collection for short and long-term outcomes in participants. SFP adult participants completed pre- and post-program surveys via Qualtrics, measuring key indicators of family functioning. Using validated instruments, including the Family Wellness Evaluation (Family Wellness, 2025) and the General Functioning Subscale from the Family Assessment Device (FAD) (Epstein et al., 1983), preliminary analysis of data from individual semesters shows encouraging results (Bergeson et al., 2025; Day et al., 2025; Postler et al., 2024) with Results showed statistically significant results for all variables.

- General Functioning
- Communication
- Coping Skills
- Problem Solving
- Couple Relationship Skills

Key Objectives and Measurables

Family Participation:

- 2–3 weekly class sessions (1.5–2 hours each)
- 12–15 families per site/night (up to 70 families per year)
- 8–9 age-specific classes per week
- 2–3 family classes per week

Student Contributions:

- 560 home contacts per year (coaching, data collection, community resource referrals)
- 152 individuals per week benefit from in-class lessons
- 28 students annually provide 4,200+ hours of service

Family engagement metrics:

- Attendance at 7/8 weekly sessions
- Completion of weekly assignments
- Demonstrated progress on family goals
- Weekly check-ins with a family advocate
- Response to emailed mental health tools
- Submission of a satisfaction survey

Program Completion Benchmarks:

- 85% program graduation rate
- 90% participation rate

Validating Long-Term Impact

The Family Wellness Associates' five-year study—sponsored by the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services—further reinforces

the effectiveness of this curriculum. Conducted by Mathematica, the study analyzed 879 couples (predominantly Hispanic, low-income families) and found that the program significantly improved all five relationship dimensions studied (Wu et al., 2021).

SFP's long-term impact is evident in its 15-year history. The total number of families served to date is 1,132 with 163,528 hours donated by faculty and students and \$171,000 external dollars donated to the program.

Community Voices and Engagement

Intern testimonial examples are as follows:

"The Stronger Families Project helped me grow so much, personally and professionally. I learned listening and creating win-win situations—things I now use every day as a couples and family therapist. I'm incredibly grateful for the Stronger Families Project. It truly shaped who I am."

-Rachel

"The Stronger Families Project gave me the confidence to work with families—something I'll carry with me forever. You don't just learn theories; you apply them and see how real families grow when they're given the tools to thrive. I heard powerful stories and witnessed real change."

-Liam

"One part of the Strong Families Project that has really impacted me was working with and educating families. This experience grew my desire to pursue graduate school and become a therapist."-Lindsey

Past participant quotes:

"Our family went through a really traumatizing year last year and we were needing

something to help us refocus and reunify. This program has been perfect for that. It has helped us work through some of the difficulty of last year, and we are such a stronger family now. This program has been such a blessing."

"I've learned a lot about communication and working with my children to accomplish goals. We still have a long way to go before we can fully implement a lot of these techniques, but I'm really enjoying the educational and social support that I've received through this program."

"I'm so thankful for all the classes, for the people that show their love and support, for their time, for pausing their lives to help us have a better life. I really feel the love they have for us. Best program ever!"

"I think about the things that we've been learning in this class almost daily. I have loved thinking about how I can be a better listener and spend more time with my children with one-on-one time. I feel like we've learned that even though we have problems, we can solve them compassionately through listening in an honest way."

"We really loved the classes. It was very clear that everyone involved had a real passion for their work and cared about us as a family and as individuals. I have already recommended you many times. Thanks so much!"

Conclusion

UVU's Stronger Families Project continues to bridge the gap in family life education and mental health services through hands-on education and community engagement. By training the next generation of behavioral health professionals and equipping families with sustainable life skills, SFP fosters long-term resilience, strengthening both families

and communities.

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Author Bios:

*Julie K. Nelson is an Associate Professor and has taught at UVU since 2007. She is the Family Science Field Coordinator for all student internships, locally and internationally, and Faculty Supervisor of the UVU Stronger Families Project, a community family life education program. www.uvu.edu/sfp She is the author of two books, a contributing author to a 3rd book, and has been featured in or written for academic journals and other media such as *ksl.com*, *Deseret News*, *Family Share*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *Parents.com*. Her professional teaching certifications include Senior Fellowship with the Higher Education Academy (International) and a Certified Family Life Educator from the National Council on Family Relations. She has developed courses, both face to face and online, and received the UVU Faculty of the Year for the 2019-2020 year and Best Online Course at UVU in 2018.*

Kaicee Postler, Ph.D. is an Assistant Professor of Family Science in the Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences at Utah Valley University. Dr. Postler earned both a master's degree and Ph.D. in Human Development and Family Science at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Since joining UVU, Dr. Postler has taught courses related to human development across the life span, family policy, and parenting. Additionally, Dr. Postler has enjoyed the opportunity to serve as a faculty representative for the Stronger Families Project (SFP) at UVU. Dr. Postler has led a team of undergraduate research assistants (RAs) and faculty collaborators to evaluate the efficacy of SFP since 2022. Through this project, Dr. Postler has mentored eight undergraduate RAs through quantitative and qualitative research studies investigating SFP. To date, this team has over 16 professional research presentations and three published papers with an additional two under review. Dr. Postler loves working

with SFP and looks forward to continuing to see the community and educational impact of this wonderful program in the future!

Rachel Arocho, PhD, CFLE, SFHEA is Associate Professor of Family Science and Department Chair of Social and Behavioral Sciences at Utah Valley University. Prior to joining UVU in 2019, she was a Postdoctoral Scholar at the Carolina Population Center of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Dr. Arocho earned her PhD in Human Development and Family Science from The Ohio State University and completed her undergraduate education at the Uintah Basin Regional Campus of Utah State University. She is a Certified Family Life Educator through the National Council on Family Relations and a Senior Fellow of Advance HE. At UVU, Dr. Arocho teaches courses on contemporary families, family demography, research methods, and family science as a profession. She has served as a faculty representative for the Stronger Families Project and loves mentoring students in this important service and educational experience.

Special acknowledgement to Allie Stratton and Rebecca Greenwood in graphic design.

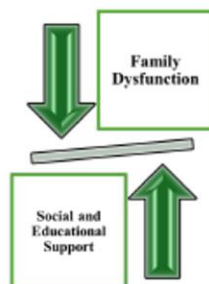
APPENDIX: INFOGRAPHIC FACTSHEET VERSION

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UVU Intern working with a family during a SFP session

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SFP's long-term impact is evident in its 15-year history



Community Voices: Testimonials & Engagement

UVU SFP Intern	Intern Testimonial	Participant Quotes
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	"The Stronger Families Project gave me the confidence to work with families—something I'll carry with me forever. You don't just learn theories; you apply them and see how real families grow when they're given the tools to thrive. I heard powerful stories and witnessed real change." - <i>Liam</i>	
	"One part of the Strong Families Project that has really impacted me was working with and educating families. This experience grew my desire to pursue graduate school and become a therapist." - <i>Lindsey</i>	<p>"Our family went through a really traumatizing year last year and we were needing something to help us refocus and reunify. This program has been perfect for that. It has helped us work through some of the difficulty of last year, and we are such a stronger family now. This program has been such a blessing."</p> <p>-Past Participant</p> <p>"I've learned a lot about communication and working with my children to accomplish goals. We still have a long way to go before we can fully implement a lot of these techniques, but I'm really enjoying the educational and social support that I've received through this program."</p> <p>-Past Participant</p>



SFP Interns teaching a parent community class



SFP Intern teaching a children community class

Conclusion

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Participant Quotes

"I'm so thankful for all the classes, for the people that show their love and support, for their time, for pausing their lives to help us have a better life. I really feel the love they have for us. Best program ever!"

-Past Participant

"I think about the things that we've been learning in this class almost daily. I have loved thinking about how I can be a better listener and spend more time with my children with one-on-one time. I feel like we've learned that even though we have problems, we can solve them compassionately through listening in an honest way."

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