The Family Strength Wheel: A Strength-Based Visual Tool for Families

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I would like to thank Dr. Yan Xia for her continued support and mentorship.
The Family Strength Wheel: A Strength-Based Visual Tool for Families

Genese Clark¹

INTRODUCTION

DeFrain (1999) and DeFrain and Asay (2007) identify six domains that influence the strength of families: appreciation and affection, commitment, enjoyable time together, positive communication, spiritual wellbeing, and the ability to manage stress and crisis effectively. The American Family Strengths Inventory (DeFrain, 2002), consisting of these six domains, is a global measure for determining a family’s strengths. It is designed to assess a person’s perception of how present these factors are in their life. These scores remain consistent indicators of family strengths among families of different cultures and locations—including those of African descent.

In the late twentieth century, researchers conducted a sizeable global examination of strong families from the western and eastern hemispheres; participants included families from Australia, Botswana, China, Greece, India, Mexico, South Africa, and the United States (DeFrain, 1999). Their research showed striking similarities among successful families despite diverse backgrounds. Though families face varying struggles, the traits that help them to prepare for and overcome them and to sustain healthy relationships are relatively consistent across cultures (DeFrain & Asay, 2007). Some characteristics are evident and readily observable; others, like spiritual wellbeing, are harder to identify. Specifically, in western cultures, spirituality can be a more private experience, while eastern cultures share a more public expression of religion and spirituality (Dias et al., 2011). Because the Family Strengths Model is built on patterns that exist within diverse populations, it remains culturally relevant across varying demographics.

In 2017, the author collected data from 59 African Americans living in the northeastern United States to investigate the saliency of six family strength domains. The study results highlighted an emerging domain, Leadership, and led to the development of a visual family strength tool adapted from DeFrain’s (2002) American Family Strength Inventory for family practitioners. With a supplemental worksheet, the Family Strength Wheel provides a self-rating scale illustrating baselines for strength-based family functioning while simultaneously showing benchmarks for improvement. The Family Strength Wheel offers immediate insight into individuals’ perceptions of their family’s functioning, opening areas for dialogue between family members and practitioners.

Abstract. In 2017, data was collected from 59 African Americans living in the northeastern United States to investigate the saliency of six family strength domains. The study results highlighted an emerging domain, Leadership, and led to the development of a visual family strength tool adapted from DeFrain’s (2002) American Family Strength Inventory for family practitioners. With a supplemental worksheet, the Family Strength Wheel provides a self-rating scale illustrating baselines for strength-based family functioning while simultaneously showing benchmarks for improvement. The Family Strength Wheel offers immediate insight into individuals’ perceptions of their family’s functioning, opening areas for dialogue between family members and practitioners.
offering benchmarks for improvement. A supplemental worksheet with adapted prompts from the 2017 study's belief statements provides additional guidance for self-scoring. The author recommends that practitioners use the supplemental worksheet, but it is not required. This article gives an overview of the development of the FSW, its application, and its goal: prompting family discourse.

THE DEVELOPMENT AND USE OF THE FAMILY STRENGTH WHEEL

Though the theoretical premise of the FSW has its foundation in the family strength model (DeFrain, 1999), its design is also guided by the circumplex model's emphasis on balance. The circumplex model is a multidimensional model designed to assess a family's functionality within the dimensions of cohesion, flexibility, and an overarching communication continuum (Olson et al., 2019). According to this model, balanced families are flexible in their approaches to challenges and feel emotionally bonded to one another. They share quality time together and allow each other to do things independently. Balanced, strong families use positive communication to negotiate resolutions to important issues (DeFrain & Asay, 2007; Olsen et al., 2019), transform areas of weakness into areas of strength and continue functioning in ways that work for everyone in the family. The strengths described in the family strength model and the development of the FSW resemble the benefits of balanced flexibility and cohesion depicted in the Circumplex Model—promoting the enrichment of family relationships.

The FSW includes the six previously established family strength domains and the new Leadership domain. These seven domains capture traits like the ability to adapt through crisis, togetherness, and positive communication. The FSW appears like a pie chart, accentuating the goal of balance; the pie chart consists of seven sections—one for each family strength domain—and are divided into levels 0–10 to clearly illustrate whether a system is balanced or unbalanced (Figures 1 and 2). A level 10 score denotes optimal family functioning in the corresponding domain; a level 10 in any area indicates perceived total satisfaction. Research suggests that balanced couples and families, reflected by scores at or near 10 in each domain, are likely to be happier and more successful, have more positive communication, and adapt family functioning to stress and change more effectively than those families with unbalanced systems (Olson et al., 2019; Turkdogan et al., 2019).

![Figure 1. Blank Family Strength Wheel.](image-url)
Family Strength Wheel

The supplemental worksheet, completed before the wheel, helps the user understand each domain in greater detail by offering belief statements adapted from the American Family Strength Inventory (DeFrain, 2002; Clark, 2017; Appendix). After each belief statement (Table 1), the worksheet provides additional statements to consider; these may help individuals explain their scores. Each of these other statements references a quality that contributes to the corresponding domain. For example, Commitment statements include references to honesty, trustworthiness, dependability, thoughtfulness, and sharing. The worksheet guides individuals to reflect on other qualities that add to their family’s strength in that area. Each individual then scores their perception of their family’s strength or weakness in each domain on a scale of 1–10, where 10 indicates total satisfaction. The worksheet presents each domain identically; it includes, in order:

1. an overall belief statement,
2. statements for additional consideration,
3. individual reflection on family strength in that area, and
4. score.

Once individuals complete the worksheet, they fill in their FSW to make a visual representation of the scores in each domain and the overall balance between domains (Figure 2). The worksheet does not need to be completed in its entirety; however, reviewing the belief statements or considerations before completing the wheel may provide the user with a clearer understanding of the areas being assessed.

Figure 2 depicts a completed FSW. The FSW displays an individual’s perception of their unbalanced family functioning; however, the tool also reveals areas where the family functions well. Low scores (i.e., scores of 1–5) across domains may characterize disengaged or rigid families. Lower scores may also indicate overlooked or unaccentuated areas within the family. Higher scores represent areas of strength within the family. It is likely that individuals whose strengths are highlighted after completing the FSW experience greater motivation for change (Jones-Smith, 2016). Hence, interventions using this wheel may benefit from family science practitioners who elevate areas where individuals perceive their family functioning to be operating well despite unbalanced domains.

Each family member can complete the FSW when developmentally appropriate. The finished wheels and worksheets are not meant to provide an accurate assessment of family functioning. Instead, it is a perception-based tool designed to provoke self-reflection and promote discourse between family members. In this way, the application of the FSW with families is discourse-dependent—it requires communication when reviewing scores. Family science practitioners working with families can support the practice of positive communication by encouraging individuals to share their feelings, give compliments, and agree to disagree without placing blame (DeFrain, 1999).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Belief Statement</th>
<th>Family Strength Domain</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In our family, it is important that we value each other and are committed to our</td>
<td>Commitment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wellbeing as a family.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In our family, it is important that we have appreciation and affection for each</td>
<td>Appreciation and Affection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>other and let each other know this.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In our family, it is important that we listen to and share our feelings with one</td>
<td>Positive Communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>another in a respectful way.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In our family, it is important that we have adequate time for each other, and we</td>
<td>Time Together</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>enjoy the time we share together.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In our family, it is important that we have a hopeful attitude toward life; we</td>
<td>Spirituality/ Spiritual Wellbeing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>feel connected to our ancestors, nature or the world around us; we share and</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>benefit from the belief in a higher power.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In our family, it is important that we support one another, and work together to</td>
<td>Ability to Cope with Stress and Crisis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>solve very difficult family problems, while looking at obstacles as opportunities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>for growth.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CONCLUSION

The Family Strength Wheel (FSW) offers families a visual tool that displays member’s perception of the family’s balance between Appreciation and Affection, Communication, Time Together, Positive Communication, Spiritual Wellbeing, the Ability to Manage Stress and Crisis, and Leadership. Family Science practitioners, Extension specialists, and educators working with families can use the FSW to set goals for improved family function by applying the worksheet statements as a guide. For example, if a family scores low in spiritual wellbeing, practitioners may use the phrase “we share similar values” to begin a conversation exploring personal and family values. Families can also discuss areas identified as strengths, share what is working in those areas, and discuss how particular family members contribute to healthy family functioning. The completed wheels can serve as a visual reminder of goals for the future and highlight previously-unrecognized strengths.

REFERENCES


Figure 2. Completed unbalanced Family Strength Wheel.


Family Strength Wheel Worksheet

On a scale from 1 to 10, with 10 being total satisfaction, how would you rate your family’s strength in these areas.

Commitment
In our family, it is important that we value each other and are committed to our family’s wellbeing.
Consider:
- I can trust my family.
- I am honest.
- My family can depend on me because I do what I say I will do.
- I think about how my actions will affect my family.
- I share what I have with my family.

Reflect on other qualities that add to your family’s strength in this area:

Score: □

Positive Communication
In our family, it is important that we listen to and share our feelings with one another in a respectful way.
Consider:
- I can share my feelings with my family.
- My family says nice things about one another.
- I avoid blaming my family when things that I don’t like happen.
- I consider other’s feelings and work together to find a solution to a challenge.
- We can disagree in my family without staying mad at one another.

Reflect on other qualities that add to your family’s strength in this area:

Score: □

Time Together
In our family, it is important that we have adequate time for each other, and we enjoy the time that we share together.
Consider:
- I spend a great deal of quality time with my family.
- I enjoy my family’s company.
- My family has fun together doing simple things.
- I eat breakfast, lunch, or dinner with my family.

Score: □