

ASSESSING STRENGTHS AND STRESSES WITH FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS: AN ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

An ecological perspective looks at families in their environment—it looks at the stresses and strengths of the family and the environment, and the way the family and the environment interact. Does the environment meet the family's needs or does the family fit the environmental expectations?

Environment refers to:

1. The social world of the family (friends, relatives, neighbors, church supports and others) often referred to as the **informal support network**.
2. The community resources available to the family (SSI, Medicaid, Special Education Programs, Child Welfare, Mental Health, Health Services, and others) often referred to as the **formal support network**.

THE STRENGTHS PERSPECTIVE

Some **specific factors** to consider when assessing the strengths and stresses of families with special needs are:

1. The daily living skills requirements of the child including self-help skills in the areas of eating, bathing, toileting and mobility.
2. The need for behavior management especially in cases where the child is self-injurious or dangerous to others. Is the child about to be removed from school or day care program unless the parent "does something"?
3. The safety needs of the child—can the child be left alone unsupervised? Is the child aware of danger and basic safety issues?
4. The medical and health needs of the child—does the parent focus on just keeping the child alive due to complicated and demanding medical problems? Do these medical needs result in frequent crisis? Are health care professionals

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really trying to determine if there is an additional medical problem(s) or are they attributing the symptoms to the developmental diagnosis without fully ruling out other conditions?

5. The ability of the child to relate to the parent—many children with special needs are loving, caring and gratifying children who are responsive to the parent's actions and needs. Other children may be non-responsive due to severe cognitive limitations, sensory limitations or specific diagnostic features.
6. Cultural factors that may help or hinder the parent through the grief process, affect the problem-solving process with regard to the child's needs and the family's help-seeking behavior.
7. The amount of time, energy and financial resources that are required just to keep all the appointments with various professionals. Children with developmental disabilities will require at least one school I.E.P. meeting a year.
8. The family's coping mechanisms—what psychological strategies do they have for coping with expected and unexpected stresses? How do individuals react and how does the family interact in crisis? Are there concurrent mental health or substance abuse problems? How are the siblings doing?
9. The family's informal supports—what are their relationships like with relatives, neighbors, and friends? Is support being offered and accepted from churches or parent support groups?
10. The family's financial resources including SSI, Medicaid, private insurance, and income and other forms of assistance.
11. The community resources that are available and accessible—Is there adequate respite care, are home health care providers reliable, is the teacher adequately trained, are special transportation, day care, and after school care programs available? Are professionals non-judgmental? Do professionals dominate the parent contacts or are they "partners" in assisting families?
12. An able case manager, most often the parent, who can interface successfully with the service delivery system providers. Are people working together?