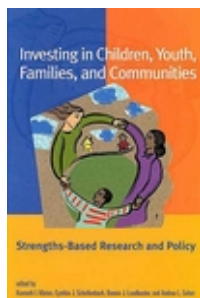




## Tipping the Balance Toward Strengths?

A review of



### **Investing in Children, Youth, Families, and Communities: Strengths-Based Research and Policy**

by Kenneth I. Maton, Cynthia J. Schellenbach, Bonnie J. Leadbeater, and Andrea L. Solarz (Eds.)

Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2004. 380 pp. ISBN 1-59147-062-5. \$49.95

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Reviewed by

[Robyn Boustead](#)

[R. Paul Thomlinson](#)

☰ The President's New Freedom Commission on Mental Health has called for a fundamental transformation of the nation's approach to mental health care. In the report *Achieving the Promise: Transforming Mental Health Care in America* (2003), the commission identifies two principles as the foundation for successful transformation: Services and treatments must be consumer and family centered, building on strengths, and care must focus on coping with and building resilience to face life's challenges. These principles are given legs in *Investing in Children, Youth, Families, and Communities: Strengths-Based Research and Policy*, in which coeditors Maton, Schellenbach, Leadbeater, and Solarz bring together a diverse and expert team of authors to highlight an impressive body of evidence that supports just such a transformative shift away from the deeply ingrained, historical deficits approach and toward a focus on building on strengths and fostering resiliency.

☰ One barrier identified by the President's New Freedom Commission (2003) subcommittee on children as a current hindrance to the implementation of a transforming vision for children's mental health is the gap that exists between "what we know and what we do." *Investing in Children, Youth, Families, and Communities* addresses that gap by identifying the various reasons for this gap (differences in goals, priorities, orientation, methods, and time schedules), pairing as coauthors scholars with expertise in the psychosocial aspects of an issue with social policy expertise, and calling for a strength-based policy approach that shifts from short-term fixes to long-term investments in future outcomes (Chapter 2). This science-to-practice approach, including implications for policy and program development within each chapter, seeks to bring the divergent worlds of policy and research together and should enhance and broaden the book's appeal across a wider audience. While modeling an innovative approach to reducing the gap between "what we know and what we do," there is a sense throughout the book that the policymakers are a stable group of agency administrators and that the gap can be greatly reduced by improved communication. This view does not acknowledge the key role played by state and federal legislatures, their generally short tenure, and their impact on those agency policymakers.

☰ The authors look at the research exploring the efficacy of emerging practice that engages with youths, families, and communities as full partners, focusing on existing strengths or the fostering of new skills of youths, families, and service providers and at learning what supports resiliency to help youths, families, and communities thrive even in adverse conditions. The book is divided into four major sections, with the first section providing a context for a discussion of strengths-based research and social policy. The second section looks at a strengths-based approach in overcoming adverse circumstances affecting individuals and their family, whereas the third section looks at applying a strengths-based approach to support overcoming adverse circumstances in the community and society. In the

final section, the coeditors provide a synthesis of the research findings, make recommendations, and discuss future directions on the basis of the research.

☰ One of the central points made in the book is that there now exists an impressive body of research to support the hypotheses that strengths-based approaches to individuals, families, and communities are effective in fostering resiliency, improved health, and generally positive outcomes. However, a sometimes jarring characteristic of the work is that, even though the primary focus of the book is on strengths-based constructs and approaches, the material is often presented as though the choice between strengths-based and deficit-based views is simply a matter of preference, rather than advocating (on the basis of the research) a shift to a more holistic view of children, youths, and families within a broad framework that includes individual characteristics, family cultural/ethnic characteristics, practices, circumstances, socioeconomic factors, and needs/problems. In a more holistic view, the “problem” still needs to be considered (as the authors note in Chapter 1), but the conversation shifts from “what is wrong” to “what happened.” This allows room for the range of adverse circumstances and events discussed in the book that are usually not part of the deficit-oriented perspective. Another example of this tendency is found when the book points out that “the development of critical cognitive, affective, moral, and behavioral competencies and capacities represents, in and of itself, a socially valuable outcome of programs and policy,” (p. 7) but, again, does not move forward from this to the logical conclusion that our nation needs to fully embrace this approach.

☰ To its credit, the book includes several references to, and advocacy of, the importance of family/consumer involvement at all levels (e.g., Chapters 1 and 19), although the existing research has not been used in support of this involvement. However, what is lacking in the book is the reification and modeling of this assertion through inclusion of youth/family voice either as coauthors, coeditors, or even as cited in the literature (except for Campbell et al.'s 1998 study). Admittedly, the pool of published family-run research is, as yet, sparse, but there are striking examples that fit the purpose and tone of this edited volume very well: in particular, Friesen and Koroloff's (1997) work on family voice and inclusion in the context of mental health systems of care. Additionally, some literature concerning family-conducted evaluations in systems of care is beginning to emerge and would dovetail nicely with the research cited in this text.

☰ This book has many strengths. The inclusion of coauthors from both the research and policy/practice perspectives goes a long way toward increasing the relevance, credibility, and applicability of the recommended policies and strategies flowing from the book. Perhaps these collaborations also allow for a shorter lag time between the emergence of research and its application. Another strength of the book is that it consistently calls for family involvement at all levels of program development, implementation, and evaluation. Further, the authors generally go beyond simply identifying family/child strengths (a necessary but insufficient condition for change) and also give credence to the importance of engaging the unique perspectives, competencies, and capacities of those who develop and implement programs (e.g., teachers and agency staff). That being said, this treatment might have been strengthened by a discussion of the importance of buy-in and strengths-based reframing for direct service workers and of strategies for fostering these changes through effective training and supervision; it is difficult to make progress in infusing a strengths-based approach if supervision continues to come from a deficit-based model.

### Conclusions and Recommended Future Direction

☰ The concluding chapter, by Solarz et al., does an admirable job of summarizing and putting a finer point on the contributions of the book's many authors. In addition to the important and well-articulated conclusions (e.g., “strengths-based approaches can and do make a real difference in promoting healthy development,” p. 346) and “cross cutting recommendations” (e.g., “policymakers, researchers, program developers, and service providers should assess whether they are meeting the criteria for a strengths-based approach...,” p. 350), the chapter offers a helpful discussion of the needed reframing of the perspective of many in the field. Another helpful aspect of this concluding chapter is the setting forth of a set of criteria that may be used by policymakers, funders, service providers, and others to evaluate whether a given policy or program is indeed strengths based. Because this resource is so potentially useful in advancing the strengths-based agenda, the book might have been made more impactful through the inclusion of a reproducible checklist/survey version of these criteria.

☰ Overall, the authors present a comprehensive and persuasive rationale for the universal adoption of a strength-based approach. The book clearly articulates that for a shift of such magnitude to occur, change must occur at all levels and across all disciplines (i.e., policy,

program, practice, and evaluation). Although the authors do not take on the role of change agent, implementing the recommendations put forward in *Investing in Children, Youth, Families, and Communities: Strengths-Based Research and Policy* would truly transform “the capacity of the country to positively influence the well-being of its children, youth, citizens, families, and communities...” (p. 9).

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