FAMILY IMPACT CHECKLIST
Using Evidence to Strengthen Families

Policymakers from across the political spectrum endorse families as a sure-fire, vote-winning strategy. Researchers have demonstrated the valuable role families play in promoting academic success, economic productivity, social competence, and so forth. Professionals who educate or deliver services to families recognize the viability of family-centered approaches for achieving program goals.

Yet family considerations are rarely addressed in the normal routines of policy and practice. Pro-family rhetoric is not enough. The Family Impact Checklist is one evidence-based strategy to help ensure that policies and programs are designed and evaluated in ways that strengthen and support families in all their diversity across the lifespan. This checklist can also be used for conducting a family impact analysis that examines the intended and unintended consequences of policies, programs, agencies, and organizations on family responsibility, family stability, and family relationships. Which types of families are affected? How are they helped or hurt? What steps can be taken to strengthen families' capacity to support their members and the contributions they make to society?

This brief guide provides a four-step overview of how to use a family impact checklist to conduct a family impact analysis. More detailed guidelines and procedures for conducting a family impact analysis are available in a handbook published by the Family Impact Institute at http://www.familyimpactseminars.org.

USING THE CHECKLIST TO CONDUCT A FAMILY IMPACT ANALYSIS

1. **Select the rule, legislation, law, program, agency, or organization and decide what components will be analyzed.** Family impact analysis can be used to review rules, legislation, laws, or programs for their impact on families, and to evaluate the family focus and operating procedures of agencies and organizations. Court decisions, regulations, administrative practices, and implementation procedures can also be analyzed for their impact on family well-being. Family impact analysis can be a preliminary process conducted at an early stage when a policy or program is being designed, at an interim stage when a policy or program is being implemented, or at a later stage when being evaluated or reauthorized.

2. **Determine which family types might be affected.** Families come in many forms and configurations. In beginning the process, it is important to identify which types of families may be impacted by the policy, program, or practice.

    Which types of families does or will the policy, program, or practice affect? _____

    ❑ particular family structures?
    ❑ families in a particular stage of the life cycle?
    ❑ families from particular incomes or educational levels?
    ❑ families from particular cultural, geographic, racial/ethnic, or religious backgrounds?
    ❑ families who have members with special needs (e.g., cognitive, emotional, physical)?
    ❑ those who function as a family even if they are not legally recognized as such?

3. **Select a family impact checklist and conduct the analysis.** Family impact analysis is most incisive and comprehensive when it includes expertise on (a) families, (b) family impact analysis, and (c) the specifics of the policy, program, agency, or organization. Five basic principles form the core of a family impact checklist. Each principle is accompanied by a series of evidence-based questions that delve deeply into the ways in which families contribute to issues, how they are affected by them, and whether involving families would result in better solutions. Not all principles and questions will apply to every topic, so it is important to select those most relevant to the issue at hand.

    These questions sound simple, but they can be difficult to answer. The principles are not rank-ordered and sometimes they conflict with each other. Depending on the issue, one principle may be more highly valued than another, requiring trade-offs. Cost effectiveness and political feasibility also must be taken into account. Despite these complexities, family impact analysis has proven useful across the political spectrum and has the potential to build broad, bipartisan consensus.

4. **Disseminate and apply the results.** A family impact analysis seldom results in overwhelming support for or opposition to a policy or program. Instead, implications are drawn regarding how the policy or program affects specific types of families and particular family functions. Disseminating the results to policymakers and the public may generate interest in and the momentum for developing policies, programs, and practices that are more responsive to and supportive of family well-being.

FAMILY IMPACT CHECKLIST

Principle 1. Family responsibility. Policies and programs should aim to support and empower the functions that families perform for society—family formation, partner relationships, economic support, childrearing, and caregiving. Substituting for the functioning of families should come only as a last resort.

How well does the policy, program, or practice:

Strong	Adequate	Limited	N/A	
❑	❑	❑	❑	help families build the capacity to fulfill their functions and avoid taking over family responsibilities unless absolutely necessary?
❑	❑	❑	❑	set realistic expectations for families to assume financial and/or caregiving responsibilities for dependent, seriously ill, or frail family members depending on their family structure, resources, and life challenges?
❑	❑	❑	❑	address root causes of financial insecurity such as high child support debt, low literacy, low wages, and unemployment?
❑	❑	❑	❑	affect the ability of families to balance time commitments to work, family, and community?

Principle 2. Family stability. Whenever possible, policies and programs should encourage and reinforce couple, marital, parental, and family commitment and stability, especially when children are involved. Intervention in family membership and living arrangements is usually justified only to protect family members from serious harm or at the request of the family itself.

How well does the policy, program, or practice:

Strong	Adequate	Limited	N/A	
❑	❑	❑	❑	strengthen commitment to couple, marital, parental, and family obligations, and allocate resources to help keep the marriage or family together when this is the appropriate goal?
❑	❑	❑	❑	help families avoid problems before they become serious crises or chronic situations that erode family structure and function?
❑	❑	❑	❑	balance the safety and well-being of individuals with the rights and responsibilities of other family members and the integrity of the family as a whole?
❑	❑	❑	❑	provide clear and reasonable guidelines for when nonfamily members are permitted to intervene and make decisions on behalf of the family (e.g., removal of a child or adult from the family)?
❑	❑	❑	❑	help families maintain regular routines when undergoing stressful conditions or at times of transition?
❑	❑	❑	❑	recognize that major changes in family relationships such as aging, divorce, or adoption are processes that extend over time and require continuing support and attention?
❑	❑	❑	❑	provide support to all types of families involved in the issue (e.g., for adoption, consider adoptive, birth, and foster parents; for remarried families, consider birth parents, stepparents, residential and nonresidential parents, etc.)?

Principle 3. Family relationships. Policies and programs must recognize the strength and persistence of family ties, whether positive or negative, and seek to create and sustain strong couple, marital, and parental relationships.

How well does the policy, program, or practice:

Strong	Adequate	Limited	N/A	
❏	❏	❏	❏	recognize that individuals' development and well-being are profoundly affected by the quality of their relationships with close family members and family members' relationships with each other?
❏	❏	❏	❏	involve couples, immediate family members, and extended family when appropriate in working to resolve problems, with a focus on improving family relationships?
❏	❏	❏	❏	assess and balance the competing needs, rights, and interests of various family members?
❏	❏	❏	❏	take steps to prevent family abuse, violence, or neglect?
❏	❏	❏	❏	acknowledge how interventions and life events can affect family dynamics and, when appropriate, support the need for balancing change and stability in family roles, rules, and leadership depending upon individual expectations, cultural norms, family stress, and stage of family life?
❏	❏	❏	❏	provide the knowledge, communication skills, conflict resolution strategies, and problem-solving abilities needed for healthy couple, marital, parental, and family relationships or link families to information and education sources?

Principle 4. Family diversity. Policies and programs can have varied effects on different types of families. Policies and programs must acknowledge and respect the diversity of family life and not discriminate against or penalize families solely based on their cultural, racial, or ethnic background; economic situation; family structure; geographic locale; presence of special needs; religious affiliation; or stage of life.

How well does the policy, program, or practice:

Strong	Adequate	Limited	N/A	
❏	❏	❏	❏	identify and respect the different attitudes, behaviors, and values of families from various stages of life; family structures; and cultural, economic, geographic, racial/ethnic, and religious backgrounds?
❏	❏	❏	❏	respect cultural and religious routines and rituals observed by families within the confines of the law?
❏	❏	❏	❏	recognize the complexity and responsibilities involved in caring for and coordinating services for family members with special needs (e.g., cognitive, emotional, physical)?
❏	❏	❏	❏	ensure the accessibility and quality of programs and services for culturally, economically, geographically, racially/ethnically, and religiously diverse families?
❏	❏	❏	❏	work to ensure that operational philosophies and procedures are culturally responsive and that program staff are culturally competent?
❏	❏	❏	❏	acknowledge and try to address root causes rather than symptoms of the issue or problem (e.g., economic, institutional, political, social/psychological causes)?

Principle 5. Family engagement. Policies and programs must encourage partnerships between professionals and families. Organizational culture, policy, and practice should include relational and participatory practices that preserve family dignity and respect family autonomy.

How well does the policy, program, or practice:

Strong	Adequate	Limited	N/A	
❏	❏	❏	❏	provide full information and a range of choices to families, recognizing that the length and intensity of services may vary according to family needs?
❏	❏	❏	❏	train and encourage professionals to work in collaboration with families, to allow families to make their own decisions (within the confines of the law), and to respect their choices?
❏	❏	❏	❏	involve family members, particularly from marginalized families, in policy and program development, implementation, and evaluation?
❏	❏	❏	❏	affirm and build upon the existing and potential strengths of families, even when families are challenged by adversity?
❏	❏	❏	❏	make flexible program options available and easily accessible through co-location, coordinated application and reimbursement procedures, and collaboration across agencies, institutions, and disciplines?
❏	❏	❏	❏	establish a coordinated policy and service system that allows localities and service providers to combine resources from various, diverse funding streams?
❏	❏	❏	❏	acknowledge that the engagement of families, especially those with limited resources, may require emotional, informational, and instrumental supports (e.g., child care, financial stipends, transportation)?
❏	❏	❏	❏	connect families to community resources and help them be responsible consumers, coordinators, and managers of these resources?
❏	❏	❏	❏	build on social supports that are essential to families' lives (e.g., friends; family-to-family support; community, neighborhood, volunteer, and faith-based organizations)?
❏	❏	❏	❏	consider the whole family (even if it is outside the scope of services) and recognize how family decisions and participation may depend upon competing needs of different family members?

The Family Impact Institute