SAMPLE MANUAL

Strong Links

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StrongLinks: Facilitator's Guide

Foundation of StrongLinks

The *StrongLinks* curriculum has been conceptualized and developed through the collaboration between developmental psychologist, Gil Noam, Ed.D., Ph.D., (Habil). and PEAR (Partnerships in Education and Resilience). Through theory, practice, and research, *StrongLinks*, along with the other Clover Groups, aim to provide an inclusive, strength-based model of intervention that helps build youth competence and resilience through relationships with peers and positive adult figures, and works in collaboration with families, teachers, school administrators, community programs, mental health professionals and others to support youth success.

About PEAR

PEAR works with schools, afterschool programs, and other youth-serving organizations to update educational practices by taking into account the critical tie between socio-emotional development and health and life success. PEAR redevelops capacity of school systems to assess and address the challenges youth face through assessments, data analysis, professional development and school interventions. Dedicated to building resiliency in young people, PEAR helps schools and after-school programs to know every child, strengthen school support teams, find youth promotion, prevention and intervention opportunities, and use data to drive decision making in school planning.

About StrongLinks

StrongLinks is a curriculum ideal for youth who have a strong focus on social connection but struggle with self-expression in social contexts. The group helps youth connect with one another while practicing ways to safely assert individuality and voice.

Objectives of the Manual

Objective	Description
Social Awareness	We will be aware of the impact of positive and negative relationships and social pressures.
Self-Awareness	We will develop reflective practices to better understand our own identity.
Assertiveness	We will be able to advocate for ourselves by speaking up and taking care of our needs.
Emotion Regulation	We will be able to respond to negative emotions by using coping strategies.

Group Structure and Participant Selection

Group Structure

Below is a description of the basic structure of *StrongLinks*. The group can and should be adapted to meet the needs of your population and the context in which it is being implemented.

Component	Details	Recommendations
Group Size	Small Group	Small group counseling or advisory
Ages	10-15 years old	Age of participants no more than 2 years apart
Number of sessions	12	1-2 sessions per week
Length of session	50-60 minutes	Can customize activities based on time available
Co-Facilitators	1-2	Educators and youth workers

Group Participant Selection

It is important to understand a youth from multiple perspectives in order to determine whether or not they are a good match for the group. Considering all of the following factors, rather than relying on any one, is the best way to determine who will be *StrongLinks* group participants.

- **Key Strengths**: Youth strong in Belonging are very helpful and supportive of others. These youth mediate conflicts and collaborate well with peers and adults. They are highly accepting of others, empathic, caring, in tune with the emotions of others, and highly sensitive to the desires of the group.

- **Key Struggles**: These youth may over rely on others and the group climate for a sense of self. Feeling left out of the group or being bullied may be particular triggers for a precipitous decline in self-worth. They may also be clingy to adults or to one peer. They are apt to be low in Assertiveness.

- **Key Needs**: When the peer culture is supported by adults creating a safe, trusting environment and a respect for individuality these youth will develop a more complete sense of self and be more willing to assert their real selves.

When selecting participants, it is important to use your school/program's policy for guardian permission. PEAR may supply you with a consent form.

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Suggested Materials

The materials listed below are a guide to plan ahead for purchasing and budgeting. **You may not need to purchase all of the materials listed, as there are many activity options in this manual and alternatives can be used.** Please look through the activities to determine which you'd like to run. Within each session's description in the curriculum there is a more specific "Materials" section. Always look ahead at the following session for more specifics about materials needed and preparation. You will need to have access to a printer or copy machine to make copies of materials provided in the manual itself.

Recommended Materials	Amount
Writing materials (Pens and/or pencils)	Enough for all
Drawing materials (Markers, colored pencils, and/or crayons)	Enough for all
Tape, glue & scissors	Enough for all
Paper (white office & construction paper)	Enough for all
Music (Stereo, speakers, or computer to play)	1
Journals (provided in curriculum)	One for each
Suggestion box (optional)	1
Balls (for tap ball)	5
Poster board (Large white board or butcher paper)	
Post-it notes	Enough for all
Movie *Real Women have Curves* (2002), directed by Patricia Cardoso	1
Decorative Materials (glue, glitter, paint, stickers)	Enough for all
Hole punch, string or binder ring	Enough for all
Collage materials (pre-cut magazine/newspaper images and words)	Enough for all
String/yarn	1-3 rolls
Special snack, utensils and plates	Enough for all
Printed photo of group	Enough for all

Session Components

1 Team Poster	2 Check In	3 Team Pledge	4 Team Activity	5 Break It Down	6 Write & Reflect	7 Check Out

1. Team Poster

The purpose of the Team Poster is to allow youth to reflect and share personal insight and information in a written group format. Throughout the 12 sessions, the poster will collect youth's responses to various prompts. Every session starts with the ritual of the team poster. The group will use the same poster every session, adding to the poster by answering the prompts for that session. This activity begins when the first person enters the room and ends once everyone has had a chance to answer the prompt. The prompts become increasingly more in depth over the 12 sessions to prompt more engagement with the group. At the final session, the group will cut the poster into the same number of pieces as group members, and each will take a piece with them as a transitional object, symbolizing that they are taking what they have learned with them.

2. Check In

Once everyone has added to the poster, the group will begin with a check in. The purpose of the check in is to assess the group's emotional temperature, as well as to create a period of centering and transition into the work of the group. The opening check in is meant to be brief and in a turn-taking style (go around in a circle). If someone does not feel comfortable sharing on that given day, they should be allowed to pass. The facilitator may do a second circle, and ask the participants who passed if they would like to share now that others have shared.

3. Team Pledge

The Team Pledge is an agreement that is read out loud every session. The purpose of the Team Pledge is to remind everyone of the reasons they are in this group, introduce the goal of that session, and what the group agreements are. Ideally, each session a different member will have a chance to read the Team Pledge. It is not necessary to review all of the group agreements every session; just choose two or three that you (or the group) feel are most important. The group may also want to choose different agreements every session. It may feel repetitive but keep it up – it helps the group members internalize the agreements, purpose and goals of their time together.

4. Team Activity

The *StrongLinks* group progresses from a focus on strengthening and working from their assets in Belonging within the group, with peers, and with family toward a focus on developing new skills in Assertiveness, including finding ones' voice, determining goals and expression. Each activity is introduced by defining the topic/theme for the session and gathering youth input as to how it connects to their lives. This is the juncture at which the facilitators may draw upon creativity and flexibility to meet the needs of their population.

5. Break It Down

After every Team Activity, there will be "Break It Down" process that will include a youtht-run discussion session using guided discussion cards. This it meant to generate deeper engagement with the purpose of the Team Activity and allow for thoughtful reflection about how the concepts in the *StrongLinks* curriculum can be made relevant to their lives in and beyond group. This activity involves youth using discussion cards and answering the prompts with little guidance from the facilitator in order to continue to develop their Assertiveness and voice.

6. Write & Reflect

At the end of every session group members will have a few minutes to reflect on the day's session in a journal. These are private reflections that peers will not read but allow for more personal, individualized check-ins by facilitators. Youth will work from the same journal every session, adding to it as they move through the curriculum.

7. Check Out

This is an important but brief time to bring the group back together and wrap-up the day's session. During the Check Out, youth can share feedback with facilitators about the session, or take a moment to share a final thought on the day's topic after reflecting in their journals. The facilitator should end the session by reiterating any important messages from the day (about both content of the session and the group's process together) and reminding the group members of their next session.

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StrongLinks Curriculum Overview

Session	Team Poster *5 min*	check In *10 min*	Team Pledge *2 min*	Team Activity *15 min*	Break It Down *10 min*	Write & Reflect *5 min*	Check Out *3 min*
Session 1	Welcome to StrongLinks	Group Juggle	N/A	Group Norms Basketball	Intro to Discussion Cards	Intro to Journal and Challenge Cards	Intro to Closing Ritual
Session 2	Who Are We?	Human Safari	Intro to Team Pledge	The Big Wind Blows	Discussion Cards	Journal and Challenge Cards	Closing Ritual
Session 3	What Do We Like?	Opening Ritual	Team Pledge	Choose one… Snake (recommended) Human Knot (alternate)	Discussion Cards	Journal and Challenge Cards	Closing Ritual
Session 4	A Good Friend Is…	Opening Ritual	Team Pledge	Social Circles	Discussion Cards	Journal and Challenge Cards	Closing Ritual
Session 5	My Role Model	Opening Ritual	Team Pledge	"Real Women Have Curves" **OR** "To be a Man"	Discussion Cards	Journal and Challenge Cards	Closing Ritual
Session 6	I'm Proud Of…	Opening Ritual	Team Pledge	Confidence Banner **OR** "Act Like a Man"	Discussion Cards	Journal and Challenge Cards	Closing Ritual
Session 7	I Am Me	Opening Ritual	Team Pledge	My Personal Mask	Discussion Cards	Journal and Challenge Cards	Closing Ritual

SESSION 4: TEAM ACTIVITY

Social Circles
Time: 15 minutes

Materials
- Copies of "Social Circles" activity for each group member
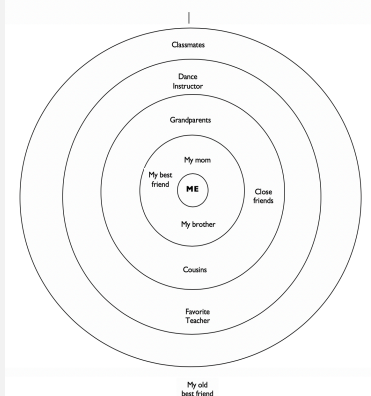- Pens & pencils

Facilitator Guide
- Each member should receive a copy of the Social Circles handout (see end of session).

- The group will be reflecting on different kinds of relationships they have and begin to map how close (or distant) those relationships are to them. There are no right or wrong answers.

- The center circle (with "Me" written inside) represents them and each circle represents different levels or depths of relationships.

- The group members should write the names of people closest to them near the center of the circles, and those they aren't as close with further towards the outside. They can write as many people per circle as they want.

- Remind group members to think about their challenging relationships too, including people they don't get along with.

- Examples of positive or negative relationships to think about:
  - Friends
  - Immediate family
  - Boyfriends/girlfriends/partners
  - Peers/Classmates
  - Teachers
  - Team members

- Give the group about five minutes of quiet time to write names in individually (you could play quiet music while they do the activity). Let them know that they **will not share** their Social Circles with the group, so they can write freely.

Social Circles: Example

- Once the group is done adding people to their social circles, use some of these prompts to have them reflect on their relationships (they can add names during this time if needed):
  - Put a smiley face next to people you can have fun with (laugh, share good news, etc.).
  - Circle the people who you could talk to if you were having a problem in school.
  - Put a star next to the people you could talk to if you were having a personal problem (problem with a friend or at home).
  - Put a sad/angry face next to people you could talk to if you were feeling sad or angry.

Debrief
- Gather group in small circle.
- Share the goal of the activity: **Social Awareness**
- Ask what and so what debrief questions, based on your group's readiness for reflection.

  What?

  Invite group members to share observations, thoughts, and emotions about their thoughts on **Social Awareness** during the activity.

  So What?

  Ask questions about why **Social Awareness** was important in this activity.

Debrief Example Questions:

"The goal of this activity was to enhance our social awareness and understand the impacts of relationships on our lives."

"What does "closeness" mean to you in a relationship?"

"How did you decide which circle to put people in? "

"Do you see a pattern in how close they are to you and the type of relationships they are?"

"Can people move from one circle to another or are these people always in the same circle?"