

# My Safe Harbor Evaluation: Focus Group Discussion Results, 2024

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Strong Mothers ▶ Strong Families

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The Strong Families Institute program at My Safe Harbor is designed to strengthen families by equipping and empowering mothers. It provides them with tools and resources to enhance their family dynamics, personal growth, and community involvement. The program offers a 30-week course, among other activities, that supports participants in navigating personal and familial challenges. It offers a haven where mothers can rediscover themselves, heal old wounds, build stronger relationships with their families, and form a community of like-minded mothers who support each other.

This report strives to capture the heartfelt experiences shared by past and previous participants during three recent focus group discussions. An analysis of the data from these discussions underscores the profound effect the Strong Families Institute program has on the lives of mothers and their families and highlights how the community fostered by the program plays a pivotal role in their transformation. Through its support and understanding, this built community makes the program a safe and nurturing space for mothers. This report details the results of program participation, as perceived by the mothers participating in these discussions. To the extent that these mothers are a representative reflection of Strong Families Institute participants, these effects are likely to generalize to others who participate in the program.



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## Strong Mothers

### A Word About the Participants

The mothers participating in the focused group discussions come from diverse backgrounds. Some completed My Safe Harbor's Strong Families Institute as early as 2009, while others were still participating in it during the discussion. Most who have completed the Strong Families Institute continue their involvement with My Safe Harbor as contributing members, or as participants in many other offerings, the organization provides.

Many arrive at the program feeling overcome, balancing the demands of motherhood, family responsibilities, and, often, personal traumas. They have faced immense challenges, some surviving domestic violence, human trafficking, and emotional abuse, and through the program, they have learned to see their challenges as opportunities for growth. Some who carried the weight of generational cycles of pain believed they had limited control over the patterns shaping their lives. Others were weighed down by cultural expectations demanding they prioritize everything and everyone else over themselves. These mothers entered the program searching for more than just practical tools; they came seeking healing, self-discovery, and, most importantly, a way to reclaim their identities.

These participants speak of the transformation they've undergone because of the program, such as how they've learned to embrace their worth, recognize and put an end to harmful patterns, and reshape how they communicate with their children and spouses. Their participation in the program has significantly affected them as individuals, their families, and their communities. These mothers leave the program with a renewed sense of purpose,

confidence, and the fortitude to pass on the lessons they've learned. The community they form within the program becomes a lasting network of support that continues to benefit the mothers after the 30-week course.

*“We all needed things here, and we’re all working on them. And I say that My Safe Harbor is our home.”*

*“When I come here, I don’t want to leave. This is my second home.”*



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## Beneficial Outcomes of the Program

### Sense of Belonging and Community Connection

My Safe Harbor successfully fosters a sense of community that leads to meaningful relationships among participants, with some describing the group as a "second home." Throughout discussions, participants emphasized the importance of being part of a supportive network where they feel they truly belong. They valued having a safe, judgment-free space for sharing experiences and receiving mutual support, with many expressing gratitude for the friendships and emotional backing they gained, which extended beyond the program itself. This sense of connection was deeply significant for individuals who often felt isolated in their everyday lives.

*“And here is when you let go because you no longer have to explain yourself...”*

*“...when you arrive here, you feel that you have a home and friends you didn’t have before... we’ve formed a community...”*

*“I think something that always impresses me every time I come is how everyone has either made their changes or is in the process of making them. I feel that*

*this is a community where people feel safe because everyone is sensitive to not judging and accepts that each person has their own process.”*

*“We are here; we are not alone. We support each other. We realize that we are vulnerable as human beings...”*

*“For me, it is a pride and a joy to be able, with so many sisters, so many women, here at My Safe Harbor, to contribute and say “we will” and not just “I will.”*

*“...as the newest member, can feel that because when you arrive here, you feel that you have a home and friends you didn’t have before, and now you see the reality that you weren’t isolated in your own world. You truly feel it. In the few months we’ve been in the group, we’ve formed a community where when someone shares something that makes them happy, we all feel happy, and when someone shares something sad, we come together and feel it. It’s really beautiful, that love that forms, and it’s thanks to everything that comes from this and the work we do.”*

*“So, the nice thing about the programs here is that, at some point, we develop such a strong sense of friendship that these friendships become very close.”*

*“...it is also a very nice experience because the groups when women are together we have created a beautiful bond, especially socially and we have seen a lot of love between the women that are participating.”*

*“This is where I belong.”*

The solidarity within the program creates a welcoming environment that changes individual experiences. Participants spoke about drawing strength from one another, helping them to navigate personal and family-related challenges. This shared journey reduces feelings of loneliness and offers a network of understanding peers who face similar circumstances. Many participants noted how observing others’ growth fueled their progress, emphasizing how collective encouragement and a shared purpose became central to their personal journeys. They described the group as a “family,” where acceptance and support are the norm, reinforcing the transformative nature of these bonds.

### **Breaking Cycles and Patterns**

Another important outcome of the program is its ability to help participants recognize and break free from negative patterns often carried through generations. This theme was especially relevant for those with challenging childhoods and past traumas. The program provides tools to help them identify and modify behaviors that no longer serve them. By promoting awareness and self-reflection, participants can disrupt these inherited cycles and adopt healthier family dynamics.

Participants described the freedom that comes with making different choices from previous generations. They noted how they could envision a new approach to parenting and

relationships rooted in compassion, respect, and understanding. This change brings a renewed sense of hope as mothers realize they can create a healthier environment for their children and break cycles that once felt unchangeable. This shift in perspective helps participants replace rigid behaviors with practices that encourage growth and positive interactions within their families.

*“Being a survivor of human trafficking doesn’t make me better or worse; I used to say I felt like a victim, but I am not that victim anymore—I am a survivor...they talk about all the traumas you carry, and this is almost at the beginning—the traumas you bring from childhood. So sometimes when you realize all the baggage you have, you understand why you react the way you do, even if the other person isn’t doing anything to you—it hurts because you’re not healed..”*

*“I began to really discover that I was acting similar to my mother, how my mother cared for us, right? Unconsciously you begin to do this monitoring because you feel that you are fine, that you are a woman who is going to face all the challenged and that you are fine and we think that the education that you experienced is good, right? But I got to the point of hitting my children, the little ones, but I started because well I experienced that, right, in my family, but unconsciously you don’t want to hurt your children but you think, well that’s how I lived, that’s how I grew up and I am fine now, and I think, well that is the education that I have to give, but here I learned this, here I learned to realize that I was acting just like my mother, unconsciously it really bothered me thinking how things went, I was acting just like her, wanting to lose my children with the rude and divisive upbringing, because here they do what I say, but I learned many things here, I realized that in reality we can make changes in life. we can make changes and progress and we can lead a decent family.”*

*“...the truth is doing what it takes, like stopping the normalization of what you had already normalized because that’s how you grew up; that’s how you were always taught. You thought it was the right way, but now that you know the right way, you have to apply it, and that’s when everything starts, like a revolution.”*

## **Self-Discovery and Personal Growth**

Self-discovery is a core focus of the program, encouraging participants to reflect on who they are, recognize their strengths, and identify areas for growth. Many described this journey as enlightening, with the program's guidance allowing them to further investigate their sense of identity and potential. The opportunity for introspection has led to a greater understanding of themselves and a clearer vision for their futures.

For numerous participants, this process of self-discovery catalyzed personal growth, enabling them to see themselves in a new light. They spoke about how, for the first time, they began to embrace aspects of themselves that had been previously undervalued or ignored. This sense of self-awareness has led to lasting changes, allowing participants to

build on their strengths and set meaningful goals. As they progress, they cultivate a more positive self-image and a reinforced sense of purpose that will continue to guide their journeys.

*“So, you come to this program, and you start with the topics, with the topics, and you go little by little, one topic, then another, and you start to develop more self-knowledge and growth.”*

*“I began to understand that I was not broken. I was not broken; I just needed to get to know myself...”*

*“I also learned a lot about myself and discovered all the strength I have, all the good things about myself that I can share with all the women. That was the most beautiful part of the experience for me—discovering within myself how to share it with other women.”*

*“...another thing that also impacted me or that I learned is to be self-aware, to realize your emotions, to recognize what you’re doing right or wrong, and then how you can change it and accept it. “*

*“...this is a very personal program that directly affects you because even if you had to show something else you studied or did, when you get into self-knowledge, which is what this program leads you to, you start to discover many things.”*

*“Even though I had had therapy for my children, here is where I closed a very important chapter in my life.”*

### **Increased Resilience and Mental Health Awareness**

The program’s focus on resilience and mental health awareness equips participants with valuable coping strategies to handle stress and challenges effectively. Learning to manage emotions and establish self-care routines has contributed to participants’ sense of stability and well-being, enhancing their overall mental health.

Participants frequently mentioned how the program’s importance on emotional resilience allowed them to approach life’s hardships with greater calm and self-assurance. Many found that developing these coping mechanisms reduced anxiety and increased their ability to handle daily stresses. This increased mental health awareness has encouraged participants to prioritize their well-being, creating a lasting foundation of resilience. The program's support and guidance offer them a new sense of control over their emotional health.

*“You realize that after that, this SFI program is like opening a window, and you see there are more things out there. So, you start exploring more.”*

*“I felt proud. But it has a lot to do with being empowered from within.”*

***“Another important personal point, and one for everyone, is to know and love ourselves. That is an important point because we don’t give ourselves the value we deserve. We let others tell us what we are, but it’s not true, because we are very important, we are strong, we are the rock of the family.”***

***“I also learned a lot about myself and discovered all the strength I have, all the good things about myself that I can share with all the women. That was the most beautiful part of the experience for me—discovering within myself how to share it with other women.”***

***“...I was surprised, and I was greatly helped by the tool, the resilience, everything that the teacher taught me and that I have learned from each of my classmates, the same as being united, because we all come with the same pain, different, but the same.”***

***“Sometimes, my mind revisits past issues and I feel great anger, but I try to leave those feelings behind and focus on moving forward, day by day.”***

This process has allowed participants to become role models and sources of support for others, showcasing the transformative power of emotional regulation. By learning to listen, think before reacting, and even forgive, these mothers are better equipped to manage daily stresses, from family struggles to personal hardships.

***“I’ve learned to listen and think before insulting. I’ve also learned to forgive both my husband and others. Sometimes, my mind revisits past issues, and I feel great anger, but I try to leave those feelings behind and focus on moving forward, day by day.”***

***“If others can overcome more difficult things, I can also take another step and be stronger. Sometimes, people, even my family, criticize me, but I know that I am valuable and that I can move forward thanks to this program. I am determined to keep seeking more help and continue with this process. It has helped me a lot.”***

Many participants have evinced improvements in their mental health, reporting less anxiety, stress, and depression after participating in the program. The supportive environment and practical tools for self-care and emotional regulation helped them achieve a better mental state.

***“But little by little, I’m changing my mindset, thanks to these classes that teach us and learning from each person by listening, and I say this is something that has helped me a lot to come here to My Safe Harbor. “***

***“When I arrived here, I loved the first class. I felt like a wilted flower that had opened up. I felt hopeful, like I had many opportunities and good things coming my way. It has helped me a lot, both in my family, in myself, and emotionally.”***



*“SFI really made me find the woman who lives with me, who I am, and who lives within me, and that part that starts to walk is very interesting, and that’s why today I feel committed because it’s something very beautiful, but now I understand a bit more about the role of women and why so many women from the past have been rising up, defending life, and seeking to awaken women because this is the moment that women need to awaken and find themselves.”*

### **Increased Confidence and Self-Worth**

The program’s influence on mental health goes beyond reducing anxiety and stress. The supportive environment allows participants to feel heard and understood, which in turn helps to build their confidence and foster a sense of belonging. With these coping mechanisms, mothers no longer feel defined by their past struggles but are prepared to move forward with a positive mindset. The mental shift from "I can't" to "I can" motivates them to pursue personal and professional goals they may have once considered unattainable. Whether it’s continuing their education, pursuing a new career, or simply improving their daily self-care, participants leave the program with a renewed sense of hope and determination, knowing they can achieve their dreams, regardless of the obstacles they’ve faced. The mothers who participated described how the program helped them rebuild their self-esteem and recognize their value as individuals.

*“I swear I felt just so good, just as kind, lovely, and beautiful. I carried all my problems and my broken heart. So here, I started to give myself a little bit of value...”*

*“Sometimes, one feels devalued, but when you come to this place and everyone tells you, 'You can do it, you are capable,' it’s true.”*

*“They teach us that we are valuable and should view ourselves from that perspective.”*

*“For me, it’s mostly about confidence. Sometimes, one feels devalued, but when you come to this place and everyone tells you, 'You can do it, you are capable,' it’s true. It’s just that you don’t hear it enough, and you need to hear it to gradually start believing it and getting it into your head. That’s why I can, and I can, and I can.”*

*“Now, with these classes, I’m learning to be different and to think differently. I now say, “I can do it.” I’m motivated and want to continue my education to become a medical assistant or dental assistant. It has opened my mind, and I know I can achieve my dreams, no matter my age. Empowering ourselves as women is important. I’m very grateful to My Safe Harbor...”*

*“Before, I would get stuck, focus on it, and fall into relapses for weeks or months, feeling like I was worthless, like I didn’t matter as a person. There were many things, but here, I learned about value and self-worth.”*

This sense of self-worth has profoundly changed participants' lives, allowing them to break free from negative self-perceptions and realize their true potential. With this inner strength, many mothers have found the courage to pursue new goals, advocate for themselves, and create a more positive future for themselves and their families. The program enables them to heal from their past and actively shape their path forward, recognizing that they are worthy of happiness and success.

### **Improved Family Relationships**

The skills learned in the program extend beyond the individual. Mothers reported significant positive changes in their relationships with their children and spouses. They learned to communicate effectively, replacing shouting with listening and converting anger into understanding.

*“I thank God and these classes because they have helped me a lot. My son tells me, ‘Keep going to your classes, don’t stop going’ ... I notice that I am trying to change and be different with them. I no longer yell at them or insult them.”*

*“My parenting improved a hundred percent; it took a complete 360-degree turn when I recognized and changed myself. As was just mentioned, no one can change anyone else. By changing myself and being different, everything around me changed. The connection with my children is wonderful. We started to have more communication; they began to seek me out more to talk...”*

*“During the classes while taking and learning, I feel like I was changing. It has not been easy, but it has not been extremely difficult either. By putting into practice what we have learned from the book we are studying, I have improved my communication skills.”*

The program introduces various effective parenting strategies, which participants implement at home. It also helps mothers recognize and change negative behaviors inherited from their upbringing. At My Safe Harbor, the participants learn to avoid punitive discipline methods, which leads to healthier family dynamics.

*“I discovered that I had a lot of love to give to my children, my husband, and to share with them.”*

*“I started learning to listen first and not judge, unlike how our parents used to do to us, saying things like, ‘Why did you do this? What were you thinking? What did you do?’ ‘Be quiet, you don’t understand.’ No. I changed that. I changed that with my children by listening to them and another very important thing was to put myself in their shoes.”*

*“...my 27-year-old daughter told me, would call me and say, ‘Mom, where are you?’ She always called me when I was starting a class. I told her, ‘Honey, I’m in my class, and sorry, sorry, I’m not sending you a picture; I can’t talk to you*

*right now.” And she said, “I don’t know what you’re doing there; I don’t know what you’re studying, but tell them thank you because the change is noticeable.”*

*“I am very proud, I feel that because of the changes from Strong Families because they taught me everything and what I learned I implemented, I think for that reason my children are now professionals, they all have their career...”*

One of the program's most noteworthy outcomes (highlighted above) is improving participants' relationships with their children and spouses. The communication techniques taught, such as listening more attentively and reducing yelling, have reshaped the dynamics in their households. The program gives these mothers the tools to create more understanding and supportive family environments. This shift has been essential in encouraging healthier and more harmonious homes.

*“What motivated me, like my companions, was that there is a void. On the outside, we are cheerful and happy, but inside, we need to be heard and valued in order to give our best to our family and friends. That’s what they have been experiencing day by day.”*

### **Practical Skills Development**

Beyond emotional growth, the program offers practical skills classes in sewing, cooking, painting, and more. These classes teach new skills, provide a sense of accomplishment, and offer avenues for creative expression. A participant shared excitedly:

*“There are many classes that help us as women, for those of us who truly want and need help. It opens doors for everyone... I am grateful to God that I am here. Even after the classes end, I will continue as a volunteer. I like it because after my classes, I volunteer. I do community service hours, and I am very thankful for all of this, for these classes.”*

*“...you also discover your skills; they have classes here for sewing, cricket, makeup, and painting, so you discover, strengthen, or learn new skills. That also motivates me to say, Well, I have dreams ...and I know I can give more, that I can discover, not just encourage my children and help them discover their dreams, but also to discover mine.”*

Another participant stated:

*“I learned some things from those classes and also crafts. Later, you do what you learned at home. Like, I learned to bake cookies. And I involve my daughter...”*

The program encourages participants to set personal goals, providing motivation and a sense of accomplishment.

***“And there you recognize again what you want, what goals you have for yourself and for your family.”***

The result is that participants greatly appreciated the practical skills gained. They then applied these skills at home. Engaging in activities with their children and family enhances family bonds and provides a sense of fulfillment. These practical classes extend into the everyday life of the entire family. The classes also offer creative outlets for mothers who rarely have time for self-expression and are, as such, invaluable.

## **Spirituality and Faith**

For some participants, the program’s respect for individual beliefs allows them to explore or deepen their spirituality, which becomes an integral part of their growth. By providing a space for personal reflection on spiritual beliefs, the program allows participants to draw strength from their faith, nurturing resilience without imposing specific doctrines.

Participants who valued this component described how reconnecting with their spirituality helped them find peace and clarity, particularly during challenging times. Many shared that the program’s open approach to spirituality encouraged them to align their personal growth with their values, allowing them to build a stronger inner foundation. This respect for individual beliefs promotes an environment where participants feel accepted and supported, regardless of their spiritual background, and reinforces the program’s emphasis on holistic, inclusive growth.

***“...a significant part of the program is entering into self-knowledge. And well, from there come many topics that touch on spirituality, where we make that reconnection because many of us are living our faith in our own way, each person in their own religion. And something very nice about this program is that it also has a basis in faith in some way, but it doesn’t try to tell you that you have to come to this church or see this or that. It gives you the freedom, and I think that’s also good about this program, that you feel free to practice your faith, whether you’re Catholic, Christian, or whatever you are, but you come here, and they see the person’s being...”***

***“They offer a lot of classes here, like personal development, emotional intelligence—I don’t know—I’ve grown a lot, also spiritually.”***

***“But what helped me a lot was setting goals, and that helped me a lot spiritually. I felt very distant from God, and starting with that topic brought me closer, which gave me a lot of spiritual peace.”***

***“When I arrived here, I heard the people teaching classes talking about God, saying that even if we don’t know where to find Him, we can experience Him here. They instill in us that to be well in our lives, we must put God first. It’s not about joking or making light of things; there’s always a boundary, and they teach us that we are valuable and should view ourselves from that perspective.”***

## **Leadership and Giving Back**

Graduates of the program often continue to volunteer or lead new groups, contributing to the broader community and helping others with the knowledge they have gained.

*“That’s why there are more programs later on, like being part of the graduated community. You continue to meet up; you come together every month or at certain times to hang out with your peers who have also graduated to keep celebrating and remembering your process and, above all, continuing to stay connected. There are many more things because there are also leadership houses, so there’s much more to it. At some point, if you choose, you can be part of this house. It’s very interesting; it’s not just a mom’s club. It wraps around you, embraces you, and tells you that you’re not alone...Then come the graduated committee meetings, or rather the graduated gatherings, where you continue hand in hand, not just with your group but with others as well, and you keep developing. But everyone gets an opportunity to be part of this house, so you can now be the one to embrace other women who live. So, it’s interesting that it doesn’t all end there; there’s much more, and there will be many more incredible programs. It doesn’t stop there.”*

This dedication speaks volumes about the program’s lasting impression. Many participants feel so connected to the experience and the community that they choose to return to relive their growth and help others on their journeys. Graduates remain involved long after completing the program, volunteering their time, offering support, and taking on leadership roles within My Safe Harbor. Their commitment ensures that the transformative lessons they’ve learned continue to extend their reach, touching new lives and advancing a cycle of encouragement and support.

*“...something learned well and kept to oneself is of no use; it needs to be shared with other women, simply because we are women. That would be the essence of sharing.”*

The mothers often mention that this program isn’t something you leave behind. The bonds formed, and the life skills learned to compel them to give back to the community that nurtured their growth. By continuing to give back, participants strengthen the community’s foundation and create a legacy of support that benefits all members.

*“I feel at home here. Sometimes I don’t even want to go home.”*

*“This is your home, and this is where everything begins. This is the foundation and then comes SFI, where you get to know yourself and realize that you are a person of quality. It doesn’t matter where you come from or what tree you fell from; you bring something with you. Then come the graduated committee meetings, or rather the graduated gatherings, where you continue hand in hand, not just with your group but with others as well, and you keep developing. But everyone gets an opportunity to be part of this house, so you can now be the one to embrace other women who live. So, it’s interesting that it doesn’t all end*

*there; there's much more, and there will be many more incredible programs. It doesn't stop there."*

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## In Conclusion

The personal stories shared by the mothers participating in the Strong Families Institute program illustrate the program's beneficial influence on their lives. What begins as a series of classes quickly becomes a long-lasting, shared experience of self-discovery, healing, and growth. For many of these mothers, it is the first time they've taken the opportunity to prioritize themselves and reflect on their needs.

The changes don't stop with the participants. The skills they develop lead to stronger, more loving relationships at home. Their children benefit from a calmer, more supportive environment. Partners notice the positive changes, and the entire family is affected by these beneficial outcomes. Those who once felt overwhelmed and isolated now feel supported and valued. The bonds they form with one another create a powerful sense of sisterhood that offers ongoing encouragement and solidarity. The fortitude and growth these mothers gain enable them to approach challenges with confidence and resilience, and many continue to give back by mentoring others and staying connected with the program long after graduation.

In a world where mothers' silent struggles often go unnoticed, the Strong Families Institute stands out as a lifeline. It offers practical tools for personal and family growth and a sense of community many mothers have been missing. By empowering these mothers, the program strengthens families, uplifts communities, and helps break cycles of generational trauma. The My Safe Harbor program equips mothers with the skills, support, and confidence they need to build healthier, happier futures for themselves and their families, both spiritually and practically.

*"I felt hopeful, like I had many opportunities and good things coming my way. It has helped me a lot, both in my family, in myself, and emotionally."*



*Photo of My Safe Harbor's Mama's Club, Photo by Steven Georges/Cornerstone Communications*