

PROTECTING CHILDREN BY STRENGTHENING FAMILIES



WAYS TO KEEP FAMILIES STRONG
THROUGH EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION

The Problem

In the 40 years since child abuse and neglect became a recognized problem in the U.S., there has been no sustained success in reducing the incidence of child maltreatment.

The Research

The Center for the Study of Social Policy spent two years investigating protective factors to keep children safe. They reviewed research in the field of child abuse and neglect and family resiliency, conducted a national study of 21 exemplary early childhood programs, and interviewed hundreds of experts, researchers, practitioners, and parents. For the very first time, they linked research about the prevention of child abuse and neglect with information on the practices and benefits of early childhood education. That in-depth investigation led to a breakthrough:

We now know that the way to prevent child abuse and neglect is to strengthen families—and to support families so that they can keep themselves strong.

From that knowledge, a new strategy for preventing abuse and neglect was born.

The Strategy

Strengthening Families is an initiative that involves early childhood centers working with families to build protective factors around children in order to reduce abuse and neglect. Illinois is one of seven states selected to pilot this innovative,

cost-effective, proven strategy to keep children safe.

This is a truly ground-breaking approach. It doesn't just identify families at risk of abuse and target them for risk-reducing services. It works through an existing system and builds on the concern early childhood educators have for all young children and the uniquely intimate relationship parents have with those caregivers.

"I thought I was getting child care. I didn't know I was getting care for myself, too."

~Keisha's Mom



6 Ways to Keep Families Strong

1. Enhance Parental Resilience

Parents need to be strong and flexible in order to deal with the stresses of life. They need to be able to shore up their resources and have the resilience to bounce back when adversity hits. If parents were treated harshly themselves as children, they may need role models, resources, and encouragement to be able to deal with challenges while nurturing their children.

Trusting friendships between parents and early childhood program staff can help parents—and staff—stay healthy and resilient. These relationships help individuals find and use the strengths inside them. Staff can contribute to parents' emotional health and well-being by creating a welcoming atmosphere and being available to parents for informal conversation or formal problem solving. Additionally, staff can provide time, space, and opportunities for supportive relationships to develop among parents. Mental health consultants working in child care settings also help parents develop resilience, by encouraging them and providing them with concrete strategies.

2. Develop Social Connections

Parents need friends. When they have an informal network of trusted friends in their community, they have a support system for meeting both practical and emotional needs. They can brainstorm about problems together, give and receive back-up child care, and help meet unexpected needs such as transportation. As a social group, parents provide each other with norms for how family and community issues should be handled.

Early childhood professionals can partner with parents in building a community within the program. Together, they can plan simple activities like potluck dinners or group sports. Some programs find that setting out coffee and donuts one morning a month provides an invaluable forum for parents to get to know each other. Staff can find out what parents' interests and needs are and then offer workshops or self-help groups on those topics or simply introduce parents to others who have the same interests or concerns.

3. Build Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development

Being a great parent is part natural and part learned. Parents who understand normal child development have reasonable expectations for their children, and by having alternative strategies for dealing with children's challenging behavior, they can avoid harsh punishments.

At early childhood centers, parents can observe other children's behavior and how teachers deal with that behavior. They can watch their own children interact with others and strategize with teachers and program staff to resolve problems. Providers can also offer parenting education workshops on topics that parents request to build their knowledge of parenting and child development.

4. Offer Concrete Support in Times of Need

We all need help sometimes, and families that can get help when they need it are able to stay strong and healthy. Whether the need is caused by a sudden crisis—like a death in the family or loss of employment—or an ongoing issue such as substance abuse or depression, being able to ask for and receive help is important to keeping families strong.

Sometimes a parent's first step in getting help is seeing that the child's well-being depends on it. When early childhood program staff are available, supportive, and knowledgeable about services for families within the community, they can help connect families to what they need, whether it is job training, transportation, food assistance, or mental health services. If there is a strong community within the program, both parents and staff will band together to help families going through difficult times and provide all kinds of concrete support, including food and clothing.

5. Foster Social and Emotional Competence of Children

Parents need to help their children communicate. Parenting can be especially difficult when children act out or exhibit challenging behaviors. When they can communicate their feelings appropriately and interact positively with their families and with other adults and children, parenting becomes less stressful.

Teaching social and emotional skills is the foundation of quality early childhood education. Early childhood staff can also work with parents to understand children's feelings and actions. They can offer strategies and make plans with parents to address challenging behaviors. Providers who understand what is normal and what is not for children in this age group can be helpful in detecting signs of trouble that parents are not trained to see, such as indications of special needs, developmental disabilities, trauma, or sexual abuse. They can work with parents to intervene effectively and get specialized help.

6. Promote Healthy Parent-Child Relationships

It is important that parents give their children the love and respect they need. When parents have healthy relationships with their children, they are "in tune" with them: they can listen to their children, understand them, and perceive their needs. A parent who fully comprehends and accepts his or her role as the child's chief provider, protector, and teacher shows love for the child and strives to meet the child's needs and provide a solid foundation for life. Through this relationship, children can trust, learn, grow, and explore the world.

First and foremost, early childhood staff promote healthy parent-child relationships by respecting parents, their role and value in their children's lives, and how hard they are trying to meet their children's needs. From this basis of respect, staff can help enhance parents' understanding of their children and help children communicate with their parents. Programs can also provide parent-child activities and help during challenging times that put stress on parent-child relationships.

Building early
childhood programs
that reach out to
parents may be the
best child abuse
prevention strategy.

strengthening families

THROUGH EARLY CARE & EDUCATION

I L L I N O I S

Questions?

Want to learn how to implement Strengthening Families in your early care and education program? Interested in what other states are doing? Curious about the research behind the initiative? Just want to know more?

Visit us on the web at:

www.strengtheningfamiliesillinois.org

Contact:

info@strengtheningfamiliesillinois.org

Or call:

312.421.5200 ext. 25

For press inquiries or to schedule a legislative briefing, contact:

Division of Communications

Illinois Dept. of Children and Family Services

312.814.6847

Partners

Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (Convener)

Action for Children

Association for Infant Mental Health

Caregiver Connections

Carole Robertson Center for Learning

Chapin Hall Center for Children,
University of Chicago

Chicago Children's Museum

Chicago Department of Children and
Youth Services

Chicago Safe Start/Department of
Public Health

Chicago Metro Association for the
Education of Young Children

Chicago Metropolis 2020

Chicago Public Schools

Childcare Network of Evanston

Child Care Resource and Referral Agency
at John A. Logan Community College

Children's Home + Aid

Crittenton Centers

El Valor

Erikson Institute

Illinois Association for Family Child Care

Illinois Center for Violence Prevention

Illinois Childhood Trauma Coalition

Illinois Children's Mental Health Partnership

Illinois Department of Human Services

Illinois Family Partnership Network

Illinois Federation of Families

Illinois Head Start Association

Illinois Network of Child Care Resource &
Referral Agencies

Illinois State Board of Education

Illinois Violence Prevention Authority

McCormick Tribune Foundation

McHenry County Youth Service Bureau

Metropolitan Chicago Information Center

Midwest Learning Center for Family
Support, Family Focus, Inc.

Ounce of Prevention Fund

Partnership for Quality Child Care

Prevent Child Abuse Illinois

Rockford Public Schools

South Cook Educational Consortium

Tom Thumb Community Child Care Center

University of Illinois Extension

Voices for Illinois Children