

KEY PROGRAM ELEMENTS:

# family support services

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strengthening families

THROUGH EARLY CARE & EDUCATION

The graph below shows the program strategies used by exemplary programs to build the protective factors known to reduce child abuse and neglect.

# how early childhood programs help prevent child abuse and neglect

Excellent early care and education programs use common program strategies to build the protective factors known to reduce child abuse and neglect.

## QUALITY EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION

### Program strategies that:

- Facilitate friendships and mutual support
- Strengthen parenting
- Respond to family crises
- Link families to services and opportunities
- Facilitate children's social and emotional development
- Observe and respond to early warning signs of child abuse or neglect
- Value and support parents

## PROTECTIVE FACTORS

Parental resilience

Social connections

Knowledge of parenting and child development

Concrete support in times of need

Social and emotional competence of children



prevention  
of child  
abuse  
and neglect

# family support services

At exemplary early childhood centers, welcoming and engaging families is an intentional and integral part of the program, supplemental to the work that teachers are doing with the children. These supportive relationships are born of common interest in children's well-being, nurtured by genuine concern on the part of staff, and strengthened by staff members' responsiveness and ability to be helpful to parents when they need it. They are characterized by mutual respect and inclusion of parents in the life—and leadership—of the center.

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Programs organize their support services for families in different ways. Some have family support workers on staff so that when parents come in the door to drop off their children, they are also greeting the family support worker. A few programs have a family resource center co-located with the childcare center. Others organize the family support component more informally, cross-training all staff to interact supportively with families and arranging activities at the center to facilitate relationship building—both between staff and parents and among parents.

Family support can include:

- Family assessments and/or family plans designed to address families' needs and help them reach their goals
- Connecting families to resources and services such as health care, employment training, government subsidies to which they are entitled (such as food stamps), supplemental resources for their children, or transportation
- One-on-one support and informal counseling when families ask for it
- Information about parenting, family life, and child development—both in the form of parent education classes and immediate consultation on issues when parents need it
- A lending library with videos, books, and resources on parenting
- Drop-in times for parents to meet with staff or other parents
- Opportunities for parents to participate as leaders in the work of the center
- Referrals and ongoing support for families who need mental health services, substance abuse treatment, or domestic violence services
- Mobilizing resources in times of family crisis

- Working cooperatively with families and classroom teachers when a child is having difficulty or exhibiting challenging behavior
- Organizing activities for families such as spa nights, dinner nights out, camping trips, field trips for parents and children, or multicultural parties

### HOW DO FAMILY SUPPORT STRATEGIES HELP PREVENT CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT?

- **They reduce stress in the family.** Supporting families increases the number of resources parents have for dealing with challenges, frustrations, and serious problems in their lives. Early childhood programs can reduce families' stress by: 1) connecting families to services they need; 2) strategizing with families, creating a plan, and supporting them in making changes to resolve ongoing issues that create stress (e.g., health problems, unemployment, or relationship issues); and 3) bolstering parents' networks of friendship and mutual support.

- **They enhance parent–child relationships.** Providing family support focuses attention on the relationship between parents and their children and offers many opportunities for developing and improving the parent–child relationship. In early childhood programs, this can be accomplished by providing parent–child activities and child development and parenting information—formally through classes and workshops, and informally, by giving advice, information, and referrals in response to parents' requests. It also includes parents working as a team, with the child's teacher, to deal with challenging behavioral issues or special needs.

- **They reduce social isolation.** A parent's lack of positive, supportive relationships causes isolation, which exacerbates stress in a family and increases the risk of child abuse or neglect. Family support strategies build community within the center, provide opportunities for parents to

connect with and help one another, and proactively engage all parents in trusting relationships with staff.

- **They make child abuse and neglect prevention strategies accessible and unobtrusive.** Many services and interventions designed for families at risk of child abuse or neglect require families to be identified as potentially abusive or neglectful before they can access services, thus attaching a stigma to them. In contrast, early childhood centers develop supportive relationships with all families. These relationships protect children against child abuse and neglect and bolster parents' efforts to nurture their kids in a natural, invisible, and positive way. As parents come to regard staff as trustworthy, helpful, and informative, they are more likely to turn to a staff member when they are under stress or at risk of abusing or neglecting their child.



## PROGRAM EXAMPLES

### Family and Children Educational Services (FACES)

FACES' family support services are delivered by staff that include resource coordinators, disabilities coordinators, and a social worker. A resource or disabilities coordinator is assigned to every classroom, which depends on whether or not the children in the class have special needs. Coordinators greet parents every morning, along with the teachers. Classroom teachers and resource coordinators meet weekly to discuss children who are struggling. Following these brainstorming sessions, the resource coordinators are charged with reaching the families—at pick-up or drop-off times, through a special meeting, or by making a home visit, depending on the situation. In the case of families whose children have developmental disabilities or delays, disabilities coordinators team up with the social worker to provide family support services. The disabilities coordinators also educate parents about

their rights and join with them to advocate for their children when necessary. When problems persist, they are brought to the monthly staff meeting—to which parents are invited when their families will be discussed. In addition to these specific family support strategies, FACES parents are active volunteers at the center, which sponsors monthly discussions, informal breakfast get-togethers (Donuts for Dads, Muffins for Moms), and events such as the Fall Festival, the Spring Fling, a sing-along, and a pizza pajama party for parents and children.

### Parents and Children Together (PACT)

The family services department provides family support programs and services for all families in the PACT program. Its staff includes family support workers, a father facilitator, a youth services coordinator, a family literacy coordinator, and a bilingual specialist. PACT also employs a number of specialists to support teachers and parents in the program, including

education specialists, a disabilities specialist, a health specialist, a nutrition consultant, and a mental health consultant. Family support workers connect families with social services; health, nutrition, and dental care; involvement opportunities, and specialists when needed. They are also the point of contact for families in crisis and assist families with referrals or transportation to shelters, medical appointments, or treatment facilities. In addition to providing services at early childhood programs, PACT runs two family support centers that function as neighborhood gathering places where people build social relationships, find resources to support and strengthen family life, and become invested in their community. PACT parents play an active role in governing the centers through policy councils and parent committees as well as sub-committees of the PACT board that inform specific aspects of program planning.

### **Sauk Rapids-Rice Early Childhood Family Education Programs**

At Sauk Rapids-Rice, which is part of Minnesota's statewide Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE) program attached to every school district, family support is the main mission; childcare and preschool programs are secondary. Rather than caring for children while parents work, Sauk Rapids-Rice cares for children while their parents participate in program activities. Families utilizing either the School Readiness Preschool or Even Start program must also participate in ECFE activities: structured parent-child activities and parenting education. Sauk Rapids-Rice also offers family literacy services (including life skills), mental health and behavioral services (through collaboration with a variety of specialists), and home visits.

### **Sheltering Arms Child Development and Family Support Center**

This center has two full-time family support coordinators on site to provide family support services to children and families. Family support coordinators begin their involvement with each family with an extensive interview upon a child's enrollment. This allows for an initial assessment of each family's particular situation, including current needs and future goals. The initial process lasts at least two hours and allows family support coordinators to get to know families. During the enrollment interview, family members complete a family interest survey and family empowerment plan so they may work with the family support coordinator to develop obtainable goals. Extended family members are included and personal goals are also identified. Family support coordinators work to build strong foundations for families through personal and home visits, parent/teacher conferences, informal contacts, and multiple opportunities for

involvement. Family support coordinators are also available for one-on-one counseling and provide referrals to social services in the community. They develop personal relationships with staff of community organizations, which enables them to connect families with people they know, rather than referring families to unfamiliar agencies. Teachers and family support coordinators work closely together with families and make home visits together at least twice a year.

### **South of Market Child Care, Inc. (SOMA)**

SOMA works with families in a culturally respectful way: all center activities are designed to respond to the cultural orientation of the families who attend, staff are hired from each of the ethnic groups represented among the center's clientele, and all activities are translated into the appropriate languages so that all parents can participate. In addition, families can get information and support at an on-site family resource center open every day and many



evenings. It contains a lending library for parents that includes children's books and games and employs a full-time coordinator available to meet and engage families to talk about parenting and other issues of concern. A Wednesday afternoon Tagalog-speaking parent support group helps Filipino parents, including foster parents, learn how to cope more effectively with U.S. culture, as well as how to nurture their children. Domestic violence and child abuse prevention workshops are offered in three languages to help families understand their options and build a climate of non-violence in their homes. The family resource center has also become the focal point for neighborhood parent organizing around school issues—parents come together to push their own agenda for school reforms.

## CHALLENGES FOR PRACTICE

- **Hiring:** Programs often grapple with how family support services are to be delivered, and by whom. Questions that programs must answer according to their strategy, resources, and community needs include: Should family support workers be professionals trained as social workers or paraprofessionals from the community? What staff gender balance is optimal? What personality characteristics are most important for staff who will be connecting with families?
- **Team building:** While one of the most obvious characteristics of a family support worker is his or her ability to empathize with, relate to, and mobilize resources for parents, what might be less obvious is the importance of staff relationships and program protocols regarding confidentiality and exchange of information. Credibility with parents rests on trust and communication among all staff members. The success of family support strategies depends on the

quality of relationships between the early childhood teachers and the family support staff. Optimally, teachers and family support workers work as a team, carefully observing parents and children and solving problems with families to promote the healthy development of children. Centers must consciously work to develop a team ethos with their staff, providing training and staff development to enhance communication, camaraderie, joint problem-solving skills, and an understanding of protocols and procedures.

- **Training on child abuse and neglect:** The process of identifying and dealing with incidents of child abuse and neglect is a conflicted, traumatic, and stressful one for everyone involved. Family support workers and teachers are on the front lines, usually with the center's director, when a suspected incident needs to be addressed. Programs must establish clear rules and train the whole staff

about their roles in situations where child abuse or neglect is suspected.

- **Supporting family support workers:** Family support work in early childhood education settings can be difficult and stressful. Family support workers are often in the position, many times each day, of troubleshooting problems with families, approaching parents with delicate issues and unwanted information ranging from suspected child abuse to challenging classroom behavior to cleanliness and personal hygiene. They serve as a buffer for both parents and teachers. They need emotional and practical support to avoid burnout—in practice, this support usually comes from collegial relationships with coworkers. Mental health consultants on staff or retainer also provide help for staff individually, and as a group, and can help resolve conflicts between staff members.
- **Funding:** Unfortunately, family support strategies are not uni-

versally recognized as essential elements of early childhood programs, and their role in preventing child abuse and neglect is not widely appreciated. Therefore, these components can be seen by funding sources as supplementary and non-essential. Maintaining funding for family support staff is a challenge that programs consistently face.

- **Boundaries/limits:** Family support services are not a replacement for more intensive therapeutic help when families need it. In order to avoid staff burnout, to get families what they really need, and to ensure that all families in the program benefit from the services, family support workers also need support and sometimes training in setting limits on both the amount and intensity of help they can provide to any one family.
- **Confidentiality:** Both staff and families need to be fully informed and understand the program's policies and protocols on confidentiality: when families

can expect the information they reveal to be kept private, what the norms are for sharing general information about a family among staff, and what type of information will not or cannot be kept confidential. Because building and maintaining trusting relationships between staff and families is a critical part of the work in exemplary programs, and because breaches in confidentiality can be devastating to a relationship, it is important that staff maintain the confidentiality of families and that families are always aware of what information about them is being shared.



## **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

### **Family Support America**

This national membership, consulting, and advocacy organization is the major clearinghouse for how-to publications on implementing family support and parent engagement strategies into child- and family-serving programs. Its website, publications, and conferences advance the practice of family support and build networks of family support practitioners. It also is a resource for information about family support efforts in states and communities across the country.

<http://www.familysupportamerica.org>

### **National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)**

The Professional Development Division of NAEYC is dedicated to sustaining excellence and supporting innovation in early care and education. To do this, the division's work focuses on the improvement of professional preparation and development for individuals who care for and educate children, from birth through age eight. Recently, NAEYC has embarked on a new project—Supporting Teachers, Strengthening Families—to help early childhood educators prevent harm to children while they strengthen children's social and emotional development.

[http://www.naeyc.org/profdev/support\\_teachers/default.asp](http://www.naeyc.org/profdev/support_teachers/default.asp)

### **National Head Start Association**

Head Start has been an innovator and champion of parent involvement and family support in early childhood education settings for many years. The association sponsors leadership institutes, produces publications, and advocates for policies that recognize the importance of families and social and emotional skill development as part of early childhood programs.

<http://www.nhsa.org>

### **Parent Services Project**

Parent Services Project is dedicated to promoting the health and well-being of children, families, and communities by developing and expanding quality family support and parent involvement services in early care and education settings. Its specialty is integrating family support into early education settings through training, technical assistance, and education.

<http://www.parentservices.org>

# strengthening families

THROUGH EARLY CARE & EDUCATION

## ABOUT STRENGTHENING FAMILIES THROUGH EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION

Beginning in 2001, the Center for the Study of Social Policy documented the role that early care and education programs across the country can play in strengthening families and preventing abuse and neglect. A new conceptual framework and approach to preventing child abuse and neglect emerged from this study. The approach is organized around evidence-based protective factors that programs can build around young children by working differently with their families. (See inside front cover for a list of the protective factors.)

The Strengthening Families approach is the first time that research knowledge about child abuse and neglect prevention has been strategically linked to similar knowledge about quality early care and education. Resources and tools have been developed to support early childhood programs, policymakers, and advocates in changing existing early childhood programs in small but significant ways so that they can build protective factors and reduce child abuse and neglect.

This program was initiated with funding from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation in New York and managed by CSSP staff Judy Langford and Nilofer Ahsan. You can contact them at [judy.langford@cssp.org](mailto:judy.langford@cssp.org) and [nilofer.ahsan@cssp.org](mailto:nilofer.ahsan@cssp.org).

## ABOUT THE KEY PROGRAM ELEMENTS SERIES

This paper is part of a series describing key program elements used in exemplary programs. The practices described in the series are based on site visits, interviews, and surveys with 21 exemplary early childhood programs.

The other papers in this series include:

Promoting Children's Healthy Social and Emotional Development

Staff Leadership to Create Relationships that Protect Children

Mental Health Consultation

Including Men

Use of Physical Space

Relationships with Child Welfare Agencies

## ABOUT THE CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF SOCIAL POLICY

The Center for the Study of Social Policy's mission is to promote policies and practices that support and strengthen families and build community capacity for improving the lives of vulnerable populations. CSSP works in partnership with communities and federal, state, and local governments to shape new ideas for public policy, provide technical assistance, and develop and support networks of innovators.



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*These and other publications and resources to help programs implement the Strengthening Families approach are available at [www.cssp.org](http://www.cssp.org). The website also contains information about the exemplary early childhood programs that informed this project.*