

when a **NEED** meets an **OPPORTUNITY** strengthening families and mental health consultation in Illinois

Research confirms what our own experience tells us: the stresses facing the families of young children truly have, over the past several decades, changed in both quantity and nature.

But there is something we can do.

We may not be able to fully remove the challenges these families face, but we **can** arm them with tools that can help them overcome those challenges. We can build the Protective Factors that keep families strong. And one powerful way of doing this is to provide mental health consultants who work with childcare providers to help parents with the difficult and crucial work of raising children.

Protective Factors

Families have always faced stress. Why is it, though, that some families thrive while others struggle, even when facing similar life challenges? Why do abuse and neglect occur in one household and not the next, side by side on the same street?

One line of thought points to risk factors, those life circumstances a family may face that identify it as "at risk." Lack of financial resources, isolation and lack of social support, parental substance abuse, depression or other mental illness, community violence, poverty, and unemployment all have been shown to impact family functioning. Lessen the risk factors and you will probably see improved outcomes in the families that have faced those risks.

But not always. Why?

In order to complete the picture, another set of factors must be looked at: the strengths and resources a family can bring to bear on the risks they face.

The following six Protective Factors are at the heart of Strengthening Families Illinois:

- Be Strong and Flexible
- Parents Need Friends

strengthening families THROUGH EARLY CARE & EDUCATION ILLINOIS

This paper is a project of the Building Resiliency Workgroup of Strengthening Families Through Early Care and Education Illinois (see page 10 for contact information and list of members). It was written by John Roope, M.Ed., Project Manager of Caregiver Connections' Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation Project.

EARLY
CHILDHOOD
SUBCOMMITTEE



- Being a Great Parent is Part Natural and Part Learned
 - We All Need Help Sometimes
 - Parents Need to Help their Children Communicate
 - Give Your Children the Love and Respect They Need
- More and more, research is showing that the presence or absence of these Protective Factors can make all the difference.

Childcare and Strengthening Families

Concurrent with changes in family circumstances, more and more parents are by necessity turning to non-family members to help care for their children while they are employed. Early care and education (ECE) programs now serve approximately 60 percent of children younger than kindergarten age. So great is this need that in Illinois, early care and education has become our third-largest industry. Herein lies opportunity!

Engaged with parents and children on a nearly daily basis, childcare centers and family childcare home providers have a unique ability to impact the Protective Factors in the families they serve. Often, the childcare provider is viewed as a partner in the parenting process and a trusted honorary family member who has shared a child's developmental milestones, hurts, and triumphs with the family over time. Relationships such as these are powerful, providing an ideal means of nurturing families through the Protective Factors and connecting them with supports they need.

Mental Health Consultation

One such meaningful support is to provide those who care for our children a new kind of partner: the children's mental health consultant (MHC). Just as children thrive best in the context of loving, safe, and reciprocal relationships with their care givers, and just as families can grow stronger within secure and trusting relationships with their childcare providers, so too can providers grow

in their practice and feel reassured when they have trusted resources to help them with this most difficult and crucial work, the care of children.

The MHC, bringing a strong background in both mental health and child development, provides a new set of eyes, ears, and experiences for parents and childcare providers alike. The MHC, the provider, and the family become a team in assessment, problem solving, and planning. Each brings his or her own unique expertise to the effort. Together, new strategies can be developed to help each child (and family) be successful.

Finally, the MHC can help link families to those services in the community that can best support the family's needs and the child's social-emotional development. Navigating the web of mental health and social services can be a daunting task for even the most capable family. The skilled MHC can help.

Whether we call it attachment, best practice, or building Protective Factors, people thrive best within relationships. The child is nurtured and protected by the parent, who is sheltered within the family, which is supported by the caring provider, who is supported in turn by the consultant.

Relationships like these protect children and strengthen families. Through Strengthening Families Illinois and mental health consultation, we have the vehicle, the relationships, and the plan to make them happen.

Public policy actions are needed if we are to take full advantage of this opportunity; these are described below. Making the required shifts in public policy will mean finding dollars. It will mean blending dollars (or, if you prefer, braiding them). It will mean dissolving barriers and changing old mindsets. It will mean encouraging the "silos" to talk with each other and share. The Illinois Department of Children and Family Services and Department of Human Services, for example, are both stakeholders in the development of children and

strengthening of families, and both are partners in Strengthening Families Illinois.

Most of all, it will require your leadership and courage in supporting Strengthening Families Illinois and early childhood mental health consultation in our state.

Policy Recommendations

1 First, support those programs that support family well-being in basic, concrete ways. Health care, childcare, housing, employment, and transportation may be givens to some portions of our population, but they are critical survival points to many struggling families.

2 Support early care and education, including childcare, Early Head Start / Head Start, and pre-school for all. These programs can help level the playing field for thousands of children. Please make sure the teachers and families involved have the tools and resources needed to achieve this huge accomplishment.

3 Support the statewide expansion of Strengthening Families Illinois. No reinvention of wheels here. The strategies and principles of SFI are effective and have been proven so.

4 Support early childhood mental health consultation wherever our children are. In childcare, in Early Head Start / Head Start and pre-school, in Early Intervention, in home visiting programs, and yes, in our treatment system as well. The hardworking professionals and families who care for our youngest children need and deserve all the help they can get. There are initiatives serving all of these settings. All are needed, and many are currently pilots that need to be brought to statewide scale.

5 Expand and solidify these much-needed efforts by:

- Expanding Caregiver Connections (the Illinois Department of Human Services consultation initiative serving childcare) to fully cover the state
- Continuing the development of mental health consultation within the Illinois State Board of Education system
- Supporting the efforts of the Illinois Children's Mental Health Partnership to build treatment capacity as it provides consultation to mental health agencies seeking to serve young children
- Encouraging coordination among these varying initiatives (including Early Intervention). Each serves a unique purpose and populations. Each will generate unique lessons learned that can benefit all.
- Supporting continued quality enhancement within childcare with a tiered quality-incentive system that can recognize and encourage programs that provide more than just "a place" for our children
- Continuing and expanding support for programs that keep teachers and caregivers strong and growing. Programs like Great Start, TEACH, and Gateways to Opportunity live and die on your watch.

6 When children and families do need treatment, they often come up against the cruelest of financial and bureaucratic barriers in a system that insists on treating children and families as separate entities. After all, the system can only get paid for treating the "identified patient." Fix this, and let our mental health system treat and support what is really in front of them: a family.

Fulfill the promise of the Illinois Children's Mental Health Act. Truly create the integrated and comprehensive system called for. Prevent every pitfall that can be prevented. Intervene early and aggressively when prevention isn't enough. Ensure access to the best treatment we can give when our children and families need it.