

strengthening families

THROUGH EARLY CARE & EDUCATION

THE PROBLEM

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

THE CURRENT STRATEGY

For 30 years, the approach to reducing child maltreatment has been based on government action at the federal, state and local levels. The dominant strategy has focused on protecting children by removing young victims from their abusers, supported by public campaigns focused on making the public aware of the incidence of child abuse. Child abuse prevention strategies have focused on identifying parents at risk of maltreating their children and providing intervention such as home visits or parent education. These efforts have been poorly funded and reach a very small number of families.

AN INNOVATIVE NEW STRATEGY

The new approach uses early childhood programs to build evidence-based protective factors for children and their families. It differs from the current strategy and tactics in these significant ways:

- It is based in the early childhood education system.
- It focuses on building protection for children within their homes and communities, not only on identifying risks in their homes and communities.
- It seeks to overcome or mitigate manageable individual causes of child neglect and abuse—parental isolation, lack of knowledge about child development, and mental, physical or financial crisis in the family—rather than removing children from their homes.

ASSETS OF THE NEW STRATEGY

The breakthrough strategy for dealing with child neglect and abuse shows great promise for several reasons, among them:

- **It is doable.** Most early childhood programs can rather easily add or enhance program components that build protective factors into their current curricula.
- **It is affordable.** Most public and private child care programs could add relevant components rather inexpensively. No additional government funding is being sought to implement the strategy; some state welfare officials are exploring whether their child abuse and neglect funds may be more effectively used by applying the new strategy.
- **It has widespread support.** Experts across the policy development continuum have been involved in the development of the new approach. Social science researchers, state welfare officials, and early childhood practitioners and policy experts have participated in developing the strategic framework led by the Center for the Study of Social Policy.
- **The new frontline is willing to go to work.** Early childhood educators from every regional and ethnic group have said that they want to be more involved in working to reduce child neglect and abuse. A nationwide survey by the National Association for the Education of Young Children, the professional association for early childhood practitioners, has shown that 97 percent of teachers and administrators want to do more to prevent maltreatment and want training so that they can.

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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

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Protective Factors Framework and Early Care and Education Programs

FACTOR THAT PROTECTS AGAINST CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT	EXPLANATION	HOW PROGRAMS BUILD IT
<p>Parental Resilience</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parental psychology plays an important role in both the causes and prevention of child abuse and neglect. Parents who are emotionally resilient are able to maintain a positive attitude, creatively solve problems, and effectively rise to challenges in their lives—and they are less likely to abuse or neglect their children. • Parents who have experienced violence or abuse and neglect themselves or who have other risk factors for becoming abusers need caring relationships to help them develop and maintain positive relationships with their children. • Parents who know and trust staff are more likely to reveal problems such as domestic violence or feelings of frustration and ask for assistance. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Space set aside for parents, welcoming atmosphere throughout the program, coffee and snacks at the program. • Staff trained and expected to create trusting relationships with families; the program provides time and opportunity for these relationships to flourish. • Programs hire dedicated family support workers whose job it is to build trusting relationships with parents and employ mental health consultants who are available to parents when they need them. • Staff watch for early signs of child or family distress and respond with encouragement, support, and help in solving problems.

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FACTOR THAT PROTECTS AGAINST CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT	EXPLANATION	HOW PROGRAMS BUILD IT
<p>Social Connections</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Helping parents build constructive friendships and other positive connections can reduce their isolation, which is a consistent risk factor in child abuse and neglect. Isolation is a particular problem for families in crisis or who need intensive help, such as victims of domestic violence. • Social connections build parents' "social capital", which is their network of others in the community—e.g., family, friends, neighbors, churches—who they can call on to help them solve problems. • Social connections also enable parents to develop and reinforce community norms about behavior that affects everyone. Norms against violence help reduce child abuse and neglect. • Friendships lead to mutual assistance in gaining resources all families need from time to time: transportation, respite child care and other tangible assistance as well as emotional support. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Potluck dinners with parents and children. • Sports activities for parents. • Parent education classes and workshops. • Helping parents connect with organizations and resources outside the program (e.g., helping find a church). • Special outreach and activities for fathers, grandparents, and other extended family members.

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FACTOR THAT PROTECTS AGAINST CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT	EXPLANATION	HOW PROGRAMS BUILD IT
<p>Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents who understand normal child development are less likely to be abusive and more likely to nurture their children’s healthy development. Observing other children helps parents understand their own child in context. • Parents often need timely help from someone they trust in resolving specific problems such as biting or hitting without resorting to harsh discipline techniques. • Multiple models of positive parenting, including alternative discipline techniques, males in nurturing roles, and a program norm of non-violence demonstrate alternatives for parents. • Parents of children with developmental or behavior problems or special needs need coaching and support in their parenting roles to reduce their frustration and provide the help their children need. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Informal daily interactions with program staff—coaching on specific issues (e.g., biting, sharing toys, bullying). • Parent education classes—organized in various ways such as teaching developmental stages, organizing groups of parents with children of the same age (e.g., 2-year-olds), etc. • Observation space where parents can observe their child interacting with others (glass, video monitors in rooms) and learn new techniques from watching staff.

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FACTOR THAT PROTECTS AGAINST CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT	EXPLANATION	HOW PROGRAMS BUILD IT
<p>Concrete Support in Times of Need</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child neglect can be a consequence of family crisis, a parental condition, such as substance abuse, or stresses associated with the lack of resources. <p>Programs help by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Connecting parents to resources such as job training, social services, or access to health care. • Providing for tangible needs such as food, clothing, etc. Not providing for a child's basic needs—such as being homeless—constitutes child neglect in some states. • Providing access to services such as a battered women's shelter, mental health services, substance abuse counseling, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Programs have closets with clothing that children can be given (e.g., winter coats) and/or pantries where parents can get food for home. • Linking parents with specific people in service agencies (“We refer people to people, not services.”), providing transportation, if necessary. • Responding to family crises such as evictions with immediate assistance and support from staff and other parents in the program. • Ongoing support for the family from program staff through the crisis. • Providing links to jobs, job training, transportation, and other means of economic security for families. • Serving as an access point for health care, child care subsidies, and other services available to families. • Initiating contact or inviting conversation if staff suspect there may be a problem or emergency with the family.

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FACTOR THAT PROTECTS AGAINST CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT	EXPLANATION	HOW PROGRAMS BUILD IT
<p>Social and Emotional Competence of Children</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children with challenging behaviors are at greater risk for abuse. Identifying and working with children early to keep their development on track helps keep them safe. • The bread-and-butter of early childhood programs—helping children develop socially and emotionally—also has impact on the way parents and children interact. For instance, as children learn to verbalize their emotions rather than act them out, they are more able to tell parents how they feel, what they need, and how parental actions make them feel. Parents can then be more responsive to their children’s needs—and less likely to yell or hit. • Children who have experienced or witnessed violence in particular need a safe environment, trained staff and opportunities to develop normally. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Direct teaching of social skills—e.g., how to share and be respectful of others—and emotional skills—e.g., expressing feelings. • Timely action when there is a concern: asking another teacher or staff member to observe, talking with the parent, bringing in a consultant. Staff may pick up issues parents do not, because they are more trained (e.g., a child being sexually abused by a neighbor). • Art programs that allow children to express themselves in ways other than words, many of which involve a take-home component that bring parents into the activity, too.

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ABOUT STRENGTHENING FAMILIES THROUGH EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION

Beginning in 2001, the Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) 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.

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 and nilofer.ahsan@cssp.org.



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