

a new, effective, and affordable
strategy for child abuse and
neglect prevention



strengthening families

THROUGH EARLY CARE & EDUCATION

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Contrary to the worry of some parents, quality early childhood programs may strengthen the bond between parents and children rather than weaken it – and when a child is at risk of abuse or neglect, an early childhood program that reaches out to parents may be the best prevention strategy. In 2003, staff from the Center for the Study of Social Policy (the Center) conducted intensive research on early care and education programs across the country whose exemplary work strengthens five protective factors known to be correlated with reductions in child abuse and neglect:

- Parental resilience
- Social connections
- Knowledge of parenting and child development
- Concrete support in times of need
- Social and emotional competence of children

The Center's work is the first time that research knowledge about child abuse prevention has been strategically linked to similar knowledge about good quality early care and education to explore the role that early childhood programs can play in strengthening families and preventing abuse and neglect. The Center's research, reinforced by counsel from a national advisory panel of experts in child abuse prevention, early childhood education, and family support, has led to the development of a new framework for preventing abuse and neglect that recognizes a central role for early childhood professionals.

"Our work found that small but significant changes in programming and staffing of early childhood programs offer an effective new strategy for supporting parents under stress and preventing harm to children," said Judy Langford, project director. "These changes enable programs to respond quickly and effectively to help families that are struggling or children who are at risk of harm or who exhibit challenging behaviors," she added. "And the good news is that any program can make changes with a small investment in resources and planning."

The findings are supported by a recently released longitudinal study, conducted by Arthur Reynolds at the University of Wisconsin, of children and families served by a federally-funded early childhood program in the Chicago public schools. The

Chicago program used resource coordinators to help parents receive the support and services they needed to care for their children at home and to foster social support among parents. The 18 years of research show that children who attended the preschool intervention program, compared to those who did not, had a 52 percent lower rate of maltreatment by age 17.

SPECIFIC STRATEGIES FROM EXEMPLARY EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION PROGRAMS THAT BUILD PROTECTIVE FACTORS:

Many existing early childhood programs already operate in ways that strengthen one or more of the five protective factors. It is the intent of the new strategy to help practitioners understand the greater impact of what they are already doing and to encourage them to supplement their programs in affordable ways so that they will be more powerful forces against child abuse and neglect.

The five protective factors that are at the heart of the new prevention approach are interrelated, and strategies aimed primarily at achieving one factor often contribute to achieving another as well. These are some of the strategies that the Center discovered in their research that contribute to child abuse and neglect prevention:

- Facilitate friendships and mutual support. Programs offered many opportunities for parents to get to know each other, develop mutual support systems and take leadership roles. Strategies included: sports teams, potlucks, classes, camping trips and field trips, advisory groups, board leadership and volunteer opportunities. Special outreach to fathers and extended family members was common.
- Strengthen parenting. Programs offered many ways for parents to get support on parenting issues when they needed it—a class or a support group, opportunities to meet with teachers, family support workers or other staff, home visits, or resources from a lending library. Most programs had classroom designs or technology that allowed parents to observe their children easily. Both parents and staff described the importance of the everyday opportunities at the centers for parents to understand their children's behavior and respond to it more effectively.

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- Respond to family crises. In addition to day-to-day contact between teachers and parents that helped develop good relationships and support parents every day, good programs offered extra support to families when they needed it through designated family support workers or other staff who had the time, training, and expertise to connect families to the support they needed. All programs responded when families faced illnesses, job loss, housing problems, and other issues.
- Link families to services and opportunities. Programs offered parents links to job training, education, health providers and other essential services through their networks in the community. Most programs had family support workers on staff who helped to assess family needs and goals and connect them to services and supports. Mental health consultants were part of almost every program, helping parents and staff work effectively with children who had been excluded from previous programs for challenging behavior, and helping to destigmatize mental health services for children, parents, and staff.
- Value and support parents. Because the relationship between parents and teachers is essential to the programs' ability to connect with parents, support, training, and supervision of teachers to help them do this effectively was very important. Program leaders were involved in many day-to-day activities and were very accessible

to staff and parents. Teaching staff were encouraged to take initiative in their relationships with families and address concerns when they arose, knowing that they had back-up from supervisors and other staff within the program. Male staff members were especially recruited.

- Facilitate children's social and emotional development. Many programs used "I Can Problem Solve", "Second Step" or some other curriculum focused on helping children to articulate their feelings and get along with others. Parents in many of the programs described how the curriculum influenced their perspectives on their children and their behavior toward the child when children brought home what they learned in the classroom.
- Observe and respond to early warning signs of child abuse or neglect. All programs trained and supported staff to observe children carefully and respond at the first sign of any difficulty. Programs used indicators such as frequent absences, missing payments, late pick-ups, or signs of parental stress as opportunities to proactively reach out to families and connect them with family support or other services. Special protocols for child abuse or neglect reporting allowed programs to provide continuity and support for families that were the subject of reports. Parents at several programs backed up the effectiveness of this strategy with personal stories of how the programs had helped them

alter situations that were dangerous for children and how they continue to be involved with the program. Most programs also developed ongoing relationships with staff at child protective services to ensure that children were safe and parents got the services they needed.

RESOURCES AVAILABLE FROM THE CENTER

To support early childhood programs in effectively addressing all five protective factors, the Center makes available the following resources, which will help strengthen existing program elements and identify affordable and workable additional elements:

- Descriptions of the exemplary programs studied and the ways in which they build protective factors against child abuse and neglect.
- A program handbook and self-assessment tool for programs that are interested in enhancing their ability to support and strengthen families.
- A website with information on the exemplary programs and other tools.
- Recommendations for early childhood infrastructure improvements that would allow early childhood programs to more effectively implement these strategies.
- Research review on protective factors and their links to reducing child abuse and neglect

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ABOUT STRENGTHENING FAMILIES THROUGH EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION

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

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. The Center 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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