

Building Resilient Families: Issues Around Child Abuse Prevention

by Nilofer Ahsan

Often families with young children do not know where to turn for help and support. Early care and education programs are natural places to reach out to parents and help them strengthen their parenting skills and social interactions. Even brief moments, such as drop off or

pick up times, provide early care and education providers an opportunity to model developmentally appropriate behaviors and skills with children. When warning flags are observed, such as inappropriate discipline, frustration, and anger they are avenues for reaching out and offering parents strength-based, concrete help and support to head off the crisis you know might happen.

Strengthening Families Through

Early Care and Education is an emerging positive approach, developed by the Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP), that gives early care and education professionals training, help, and support they need to deal with families under stress and crisis that may put them at risk of abuse and neglect. Strengthening Families builds off of the strong relationships that early care and education programs create with the children and families they work with. These strong relationships are a key building block for effective work to develop protective factors in families that prevent child abuse and neglect. The initiative has identified five research-based protective factors that early exemplary care and education programs can and do build in families.

The protective factors – and how programs build them

■ Parental resilience

Parents who are emotionally resilient can bounce back during tough times and:

- maintain a positive attitude
- solve problems creatively
- rise to challenges in their lives effectively

- avoid situations that compromise their child's healthy development.

Strengthening Families programs promote parental resilience by providing warm and welcoming environments to parents as well as children. Also, parents benefit from what their children learn in the classroom about the importance of communication, the need to share feelings and respect the feelings of others. Children of "resilient" parents are often more prepared to succeed in school, better skilled at meeting and making new friends, and are more likely to respond appropriately to stressful situations than children of less resilient parents.

■ Social connections

Early childhood programs are an important place where parents of young children get to know other parents and make new friendships. Parents can feel isolated and have a greater need for support from others when their children are young. Friends can be an important source for relief in times of parenting stress, advice and information on parenting issues, and back-up support. Strengthening Families programs create a community space where parents can connect to other parents in a comfort-

Nilofer Ahsan has been involved with policy and practice in children and family issues for over 15 years. As the co-director of the FRIENDS National Resource Center she supported states' implementation of child abuse and neglect prevention legislation and worked with family support initiatives in over 20 states to improve program practice and develop evaluation/assessment strategies. She has authored many handbooks and tools for family support practitioners. Currently an Associate at the Center for the Study of Social Policy, she is working to develop innovative practice models in: early care and education, child abuse and neglect prevention, parent/resident leadership and social networks. She has a Masters in Public Policy from the University of Chicago.

able environment. Staff work hard to make sure that parents in the program get a chance to make new friends and create formal and informal ways for parents to come together. These opportunities might include: time and space for parents to drop in and share a cup of coffee or a meal, activities organized for families in the program, or regular celebrations.

■ Knowledge of parenting and child development

Staff in Strengthening Families programs can answer questions and address concerns about children's development. They help parents understand what's normal behavior and what isn't, provide advice on dealing positively with children's behavior, or point parents to resources, information, or classes where they can learn more about how children develop and how to help with their child's developmental issues. Some programs even offer parent education courses or parent support groups on-site.

■ Concrete support in times of need

Experiencing problems with housing, finances, conflict in relationships, illness, or unemployment can sap parents' energy and take their focus away from their child. Getting help when it's needed helps parents parent well by making sure they can give their child what he or she needs, and minimizes stress and anxiety, which can make them short-tempered and irritable with their child. Strengthening Families programs connect parents to resources in the community for meeting a family's needs. Staff treat issues brought to them with confidentiality and respect and try hard to get parents the help they need. Staff know about a lot of resources and support in the neighborhood and should be able to get you in touch with programs and providers that can help you with many issues.

In December of 2006 Strengthening Families ended a seven state pilot of the initiative. Pilot states have developed many creative strategies to support early care and education programs in implementing the approach:

- Wisconsin, Alaska, and Arkansas are training their child care resource and referral networks to train and support early care and education programs on the Strengthening Families model.
- Illinois has developed trainings for early care and education providers on the protective factors, how to talk with families about difficult issues, and how to support children who have experienced trauma.
- New Hampshire, Alaska, and Arkansas have been working with higher education partners to integrate the Strengthening Families model and the protective factors into pre-service training at university and community college levels.
- Children's Trust Funds in multiple states have embedded Strengthening Families and the protective factors into their grant process — that means early care and education programs can now apply for dollars to support the family strengthening work they do.
- In Missouri the Department of Social Services has incorporated the protective factors into their Start-Up and Expansion grants for early care and education programs.
- Wisconsin and Missouri have offered small mini-grants to early care and education programs to implement programmatic action plans based on completing the self-assessment.
- Missouri and Arkansas have incorporated family strengthening into their quality rating systems for child care programs.
- New Hampshire, Illinois, and Arkansas developed learning networks where programs could provide peer support to each other as they implemented the model.
- Illinois and Alaska are looking at weaving the model into child care licensing.

■ Social and emotional competence of children

Staff in Strengthening Families programs work with children to help them learn about their emotions so that they can describe what they're feeling and to help them learn how to regulate their emotions so that small issues are less likely to make them angry or unhappy. They partner with parents to help them learn how to best

support their child's social and emotional development. How a parent responds to a child's emotions influences how children learn to understand and cope with feelings of anger, happiness, and sad feelings that are a fundamental part of the human experience.

■ Becoming a Strengthening Families program

What started off as a demonstration project has grown into a national movement.

Strengthening Families is now being adopted or adapted in more than 20 states. Children's Trust and Prevention Funds (which fund child abuse and neglect prevention activities in most states) across the country are adapting their funding protocols to include funding for early childhood programs that are using the Strengthening Families approaches. Programs in states across the country are adopting the approach because it builds off of and reinforces strong early care and education practice and allows them to address issues that they see on a day to day basis.

A program's Strengthening Families approach can often be deepened by a series of small and inexpensive changes in program structure or staff practice. CSSP has created a number of tools and materials that can be used by programs, localities, and states that are interested in adopting a protective factors approach. Most are based on an

in-depth study of exemplary early childhood programs that build strong relationships with families. These tools include:

- The Strengthen Families Initiative Self-Assessment tool for early care and education programs helps staff assess their practice and identify concrete practice change. As a result of using the self assessment tool, early care and education programs will acquire a deeper understanding of how to build protective factors with their families.
- A variety of materials and tools to educate staff, parents, and partners on protective factors and the Strengthening Families approach.
- Program write-ups and practice papers that help programs identify new ways of working that are in line with the Strengthening Families approach.

As more states adopt the approach, the materials, resources, and supports that are being developed to help program and state implementors continue to grow. In addition to the materials and tools developed by CSSP a number of national partners including Zero to Three, the National Association for the Education of Young Children, the National Alliance of Children's Trust and Prevention Funds, and others are developing training, leadership, and technical assistance to support Strengthening Families implementation.

The Strengthening Families national initiative was developed and is supported by the Center for the Study of Social Policy with funding from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation. To learn if Strengthening Families is being implemented in your state or access information and tools, visit the CSSP web site at www.cssp.org.