

KEY PROGRAM ELEMENTS:

# promoting children's healthy social and emotional development

2



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

# promoting children's healthy social and emotional development

One of the main goals of early childhood centers is to promote healthy social and emotional development in children. Research has shown, and early childhood educators universally understand, that children's social and emotional skills are vital for school readiness and are key building blocks for cognitive development and knowledge acquisition at very young ages. What is less obvious is that promoting children's social and emotional development contributes to reducing child abuse and neglect.

The insight that a standard curriculum that supports healthy social and emotional development in children could contribute to reducing child abuse and neglect came out of discussions with parents whose children attended the exemplary early childhood centers profiled in this project. Consistently, when asked, "How did participating in this early childhood program impact your parenting?" parents talked about how what happened to their children in the classroom changed the way they interacted with their children. Specifically, several centers used the I Can Problem Solve and Second Step violence prevention programs, which help young children learn to identify their emotions. Children then come home and, in response to parental behavior, say things like, "Mommy, that makes me feel bad." This kind of simple statement can change the way parents see their children—as separate human beings, with feelings that need to be acknowledged and respected.

---

According to the National Association for the Education of Young Children and Head Start, the number of young children displaying serious behavioral issues has markedly increased in recent years, challenging classroom teachers and early childhood programs in unprecedented ways.

---

This understanding is especially important with children who display challenging behaviors. Research indicates that these children are at increased risk of child abuse and neglect. According to the National Association for the Education of Young Children and Head Start, the number of young children displaying serious behavioral issues has markedly increased in recent years, challenging classroom teachers and early childhood programs in unprecedented ways. Parents and early childhood centers are seeing more children who are impacted by trauma and who are afflicted with biochemical imbalances; strategies for helping these children should extend beyond those techniques for dealing with ordinary temper tantrums. Regardless of the causes of children's acting out, quality early childhood centers present an opportunity for parents, teachers, and mental health consultants to work together to resolve children's behavioral issues that cause stress in the household. As a result, parents feel supported and learn constructive ways to address their children's issues, expand their range of parenting skills, and adopt alternative disciplinary techniques to spanking and yelling.

Ways that programs promote children's healthy social and emotional development include:

- Providing many opportunities for children to understand and appreciate differences
- Utilizing violence prevention curricula, such as I Can Problem Solve or Second Step, in the classroom
- Using (and modeling for parents) non-violent ways of disciplining children
- Employing mental health consultants and/or play therapists to team with parents and teachers to help children with challenging behaviors
- Offering opportunities for parents to observe teachers interacting with their children through one-way mirrors or glass panels and time for parents to practice strategies the teachers have modeled

- Maintaining rules and standards for interactions between people (including parents and children) in the context of the early childhood center
- Offering children multiple avenues to express themselves, such as participating in theater, music, and visual arts activities
- Modeling good conflict-resolution processes within the center
- Building communication skills between parents and children across a range of issues, including: emotions, challenging behavior, and resolving differences
- Training teachers in developing good emotional skills (in themselves and in children)
- Sticking with the children in the program and their families and not expelling children with behavioral issues

## **HOW DOES PROMOTING CHILDREN'S HEALTHY SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT HELP PREVENT CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT?**

- **It teaches children how to express themselves and advocate for their feelings and needs.** In many cases, children's ability to make their needs known and express their feelings has a direct impact on how parents treat them. As children's social and emotional skills improve, parents' range of responses is also enhanced.
- **It enhances relationships between parents and their children.** The ways in which programs work with parents and staff to address children's challenging behavior, to maintain non-violent norms for interacting, and to develop parents' ability to nurture their children's social and emotional development often result in improvements in communication between parents and children. Improved communication strengthens both



parents' understanding of and love for their children and their relationships with them.

- **It strengthens parenting.** When parents feel supported by staff and assisted in resolving difficult behavioral issues with their children, they are better able to manage the stress of parenting and simultaneously interact more constructively with their children. Parents learn and practice alternative methods for disciplining their children and broaden their range of possible responses to children's behavior.

## PROGRAM EXAMPLES

### Calvary Bilingual Multicultural Learning Center

Calvary's childcare programs place strong emphasis on the arts, technology, bilingualism, and multiculturalism as tools for children's learning and development. Arts activities provide opportunities to support children's social and emotional development by encouraging creativity and self-expression—and can help staff identify when children may be experiencing difficulty.

Calvary employs two resident artists who rotate through the classrooms to work with all children, emphasizing tactile, multi-sensory, and experiential arts activities. The artists also help teachers build their capacity to develop the sensory part of children's learning. Calvary partners with more than 15 artists and arts organizations to bring visual, performing, literary, and media arts to children, staff, and family members. Not only are arts used in the classroom, but the program makes special efforts to honor the artwork of all children by displaying it prominently and offering children opportunities to perform or display their work. This contributes both to children's self-esteem as well as to parents' appreciation of their children.

### Family and Children Educational Services (FACES)

FACES' focus is on developing young children's communication skills and sense of personal responsibility for their own welfare and the welfare of the community. The program holds a morning meeting for children and staff that promotes

social and emotional growth.

The format is the same for every meeting: greeting, sharing, conducting a group activity, and concluding with news and announcements. These components give children the opportunity to practice greeting each other, listening and responding, solving problems as a group, and learning respect and responsibility.

FACES uses the Second Step curriculum (see page 6) that teaches children how to deal with emotions, resist impulsive behavior, resolve conflicts non-violently, solve problems, and understand the consequences of their actions. By first identifying their own and others' feelings, children learn to understand issues that lead to conflicts, and then use specific problem-solving strategies to resolve and avoid them. Family components in the curriculum strengthen the link between home and school and encourage children to practice their skills at home. Parents report that their children's participation in the program impacts their parenting behavior

by making them more conscious of their children's feelings.

During the first parent meeting of the year, the program teaches parents the disciplinary technique that is used at the center (1-2-3 Magic) and encourages them to use it at home to build continuity between what is taught and enforced at school and at home.

### **Lenox Hill Early Childhood Center**

Lenox Hill takes a therapeutic approach to ensuring children's social and emotional health. The program has a long-term relationship with a mental health consultant who has worked eight to ten hours per week with staff and parents in the program for 25 years and is truly an integral part of the program. Lenox Hill teachers receive training and support in developing an "emotionally responsive classroom," that entails creating outlets for children's emotional expression through arts and dramatic play as well as paying special attention to transitions in children's lives.

Staff members recognize, for example, that entering a new class, or leaving an old one, can be difficult for children and give them structured opportunities to express their emotions regarding these transitions. The same attention is given to the emotional transitions that children face in their lives outside the classroom. Teachers are trained to send clear emotional messages and to be emotionally available to children.

### **Palm Beach County Head Start and Early Head Start**

Palm Beach County Head Start centers takes a formal, curriculum-based approach to promoting children's social and emotional well-being. Teachers are trained in gentle teaching methods. Creative Beginnings, a comprehensive, anti-bias, multi-cultural curriculum that allows children to develop at their own rate and encourages learning through creative play, is the primary center curriculum. Its activities promote children's self-esteem and foster interaction between children. An Individual

Development Plan is developed for every child and children's progress and development is tracked. This information is accessible to parents and teachers. The centers also use the I Can Problem Solve curriculum to manage behavioral concerns and implement the Devereux Early Childhood Assessment in all classrooms to assist staff and parents in understanding children's strengths and weaknesses in self-control, initiative, attachment, and behavior. In addition, the program has an active cadre of volunteers—foster grandparents and godparent volunteers—to give special attention to children who need it.



## CHALLENGES FOR PRACTICE

- **Intentionality and integration:**

Quality early childhood centers encourage children's healthy social and emotional development as a core part of what they do in the classroom. The challenge for centers is to recognize and capitalize on how what they do in the classroom can influence what happens at home. This involves being intentional about integrating how programs work with children and their parents as well as connecting their family support activities with other program components and strategies.

- **Staff training and support:**

Some of the attitudes, behaviors, and skills necessary for encouraging healthy social and emotional development in children do not necessarily come naturally to teachers. Quality early childhood programs should invest in staff training and ongoing staff development to educate and support teachers in dealing with difficult behavioral issues as well as promoting healthy development.

- **Cultural responsiveness to parenting issues:**

Different cultures have different histories, traditions, and mores regarding parenting and discipline. Being respectful of cultural traditions and values, while encouraging involvement of all families in building the norms of the center—particularly around conflict resolution, communication, and disciplinary techniques—often requires a delicate touch. When staff members are both part of the cultures served by the program and committed to the social and emotional philosophy and practices of the center, they can be effective interpreters, bridges, and liaisons to parents. They help build trust between parents and staff and broad ownership of the center's behavioral standards.

- **Fostering parental resilience:**

Parental psychology plays an important role in parenting behavior, and one of the protective factors for preventing child abuse and neglect is parental resilience. Programs have found that in

order for parents to nurture their children's social and emotional development, they must, in many cases, build their own competency in this area. By valuing and supporting parents who may have experienced abuse or neglect themselves, or who have limited social, emotional, or communications skills for other reasons, programs model and reinforce the behavior that helps parents help their children.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

### Committee for Children / Second Step Violence Prevention Curriculum

Committee for Children, a non-profit organization, is a leader in social and emotional learning and violence prevention. It produces curricula, such as Second Step Violence Prevention Curriculum, that teach empathy, impulse control, problem solving, and anger management. Its website also contains research on social and emotional development issues.

<http://www.cfchildren.org>

### *The Emotional Development of Young Children: Building an Emotion-Centered Curriculum*, second edition by Marilou Hyson (New York: Teachers College Press, 2003).

This book was written for early childhood professionals, including educators, students, caregivers, and administrators working in early childhood programs. It combines theory, research, and anecdotal material with many specific applications for practitioners. Part I provides a general introduction to the significance of emotions in early childhood programs. It describes the historical evolution of professional thought on this issue and reviews recent theory and research on early emotional development. Part II applies this theory and research to specific issues in early childhood education. After presenting an overview of the emotion-centered curriculum, it presents specific teaching goals and strategies for an emotion-focused early childhood program.

### I Can Problem Solve Curriculum

This curriculum helps children learn to resolve interpersonal problems by teaching them the problem-solving skills of appreciating the perspective of others, recognizing people's potential motivations for behavior, having sensitivity to interpersonal problems and their causes, and learning listening and awareness. These and other prerequisite skills enrich children's ability to generate alternative solutions to real-life problems, anticipate potential consequences to an act, and plan sequenced steps to a stated interpersonal goal (means-ends thinking). Information about the curriculum as a model program is available on the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration website.

<http://modelprograms.samhsa.gov/promising.cfm?pkProgramID=101>



# 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:

Family Support Services

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.



[www.cssp.org](http://www.cssp.org)  
1575 Eye Street, NW, Suite 500  
Washington, DC 20005  
202-371-1565

---

*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.*