

KEY PROGRAM ELEMENTS:

staff leadership
to create relationships
that protect children

3



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

staff leadership to create relationships that protect children

Creating a shift in culture at early childhood centers toward reaching out to families begins with staff leadership. At exemplary centers, staff members view the center as their own community and work hard to develop, with families, community standards and norms based on inclusiveness, safety, and non-violence. They model the warmth and commitment to cultural competence and cross-cultural understanding that they want to pervade the atmosphere. Staff leaders develop personal relationships with families, teachers, and other staff members, and they model flexibility and commitment—going the extra mile for families who need it.

Besides being warm and welcoming, the atmosphere at exemplary early childhood centers is one of dedication to constant improvement, flexibility, and responsiveness. There is depth in staffing and fluidity in the roles staff members play. For example, the early childhood teacher's role is expanded—she does not operate autonomously and in isolation, interacting with only the children in her class. Rather, she is part of a team that is focused on nurturing the potential of each child. When she runs into a problem, she can call on her colleagues to brainstorm solutions. If she has concerns about a child or a family, she will talk to the person on staff who knows the family best, whether that is another teacher, the center director, the bus driver, cook, receptionist, or janitor. She also knows she can draw on the expertise of mental health consultants, experts on special needs

issues, family support workers, and other specialists attached to the center. Staff members feel that they have back up—they trust and rely on each other.

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POWER SHARING AND RECIPROCITY

Center directors and other administrative leaders at exemplary programs are committed to sharing power with parents and staff. The style of the leaders and the organizational structures may be hierarchical, but they are also inclusive, respectful, and honoring of different perspectives, ideas, and points of view. In both formal and informal ways, parents whose children attend these centers are integral and active decision-makers, serving on advisory councils and holding positions on the boards of directors. Staff respect parents and treat them as important and special; they make it easy for parents to say what they need.

Center leaders empower others by creating opportunities for staff and parents to assume leadership positions, by discovering and supporting leaders and leadership potential in both staff and parents, and by hiring from the community. Parents who have had good experiences at the center and who have developed their leadership skills with the center's support are excellent ambassadors for the program and also can be highly reliable, effective staff members. Hiring staff from the neighborhood enhances centers' knowledge and awareness of issues and events in the community and is a concrete way of "walking the talk." When, for example, a Head Start father who formerly worked as a doorman at a local hotel is hired by the neighborhood center to run a parenting program and to work with fathers, the center reinforces its philosophy with action. Hiring from the community cements trust between neighborhood parents and the center's leadership.

By design, the relationship between parents and staff at exemplary centers is reciprocal and mutually beneficial. Family members play an important role in supporting teachers and other staff. Staff members get satisfaction from working with families who appreciate their efforts. Respectful, reciprocal relationships create a solid foundation for the important work that occurs in these centers and provide incentive, motivation, and positive reinforcement for both parents and staff.

STAFF LEADERSHIP TO CREATE A CULTURE THAT PREVENTS CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT

Specific steps that leaders of early childhood centers can take to build protective factors around children include:

- Involving parents in all decisions that affect the center, including having them serve on the board of directors, advisory councils, and other policy-setting groups

- Creating an environment that is welcoming to and inclusive of all family members
- Hiring staff from the community—especially those who have experience with the center as participants
- Hiring staff—both specialists and paraprofessionals—who support teachers' efforts in the classroom
- Ensuring and supporting diversity on staff—men and women; people of different ages, professional and educational backgrounds, experience, and expertise; and staff members who reflect the community population
- Encouraging, supporting, and promoting professional development of staff members
- Ensuring that all center staff adopt an attitude that is welcoming, inclusive, respectful, and valuing of parents
- Shaping staff positions and expectations so that each staff member is part of a team and has multiple responsibilities and roles



- Setting aside time for regular staff meetings as well as mentoring and supervisory opportunities
- Developing clear, inclusive, and participatory forums for solving problems and resolving conflicts
- Proactively discovering and nurturing leadership potential in both staff and parents
- Investing in training to develop leadership and team-building skills
- Involving staff and parents in intentionally creating and maintaining norms and policies of the center community that are non-violent and supportive
- Prioritizing cultural responsiveness, competence, and sensitivity—including making all communications accessible in all languages spoken by center families
- Developing personal relationships with families and staff of the center

HOW DOES MAKING CHANGES IN STAFF LEADERSHIP AND RELATIONSHIPS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS REDUCE THE LIKELIHOOD OF CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT?

- **It builds a community of care for each child.** The more people who are invested in, take responsibility for, and care about a child, the less likely that child will be abused and neglected. By intentionally adopting a team approach to both staffing and partnership with parents, programs increase the likelihood that parents will reach out if they are under stress or feel themselves at risk of abusing or neglecting their children. They also increase the likelihood that staff will be attentive to and aware of family or child issues that could be early warning signs of abuse or neglect.
- **It models respectful, non-violent relationships and constructive problem solving.** To the extent that programs become communities, they build value systems and norms. The norms in exem-

plary childcare centers are respect for every person and making sure that children have what they need. When problems occur, they are resolved through discussion and negotiation, with patience and respect. Through this kind of approach, children (and in some cases their parents) learn how to interact with each other and others in this way, building and demonstrating good social, emotional, and communications skills.

- **It makes other child abuse prevention strategies possible.** The ambiance of a program affects the setting in which work that strengthens bonds between parents and children and provides social support for families occurs. Creating a culture that is inclusive, respectful, non-violent, supportive, and empowering is the foundation for other programmatic efforts. Staff leaders create this culture through a series of intentional, structural decisions—from hiring choices to program policies. As a result,

leaders are able to implement other strategies that build protective factors around children.

PROGRAM EXAMPLES

Calvary Bilingual Multicultural Learning Center

Staff at Calvary, many of whom have been with the program for more than ten years, view childcare as a way of opening the doors to developing a long-term supportive relationship with families. Calvary provides pre-natal home visiting services, childcare for infants and toddlers, preschool for young children, after-school childcare, and youth development activities for youth up to age 15. On average, children are enrolled in Calvary programs for seven years. Calvary has a strong commitment to community hiring and building childcare capacity within the community. A number of the program's youth staff were once children enrolled in Calvary programs, and a number of childcare staff members first came into contact with the program because their children were enrolled in day

care. Many staff members are community members who were hired and trained through Calvary's in-house Community Development Associate Program. The program is proud that it is difficult to differentiate staff members, parents of children in the program, and community members. Because of the web of personal as well as professional relationships, Calvary's staff operates as a team, ensuring that families who need support do not fall through the cracks. This type of long-term attachment to the program allows the program staff to truly get to know families and build the trusting relationships that encourage families to turn to the program in times of need. Another aspect of the Calvary program that contributes to building strong relationships is its emphasis on bilingualism and multiculturalism, as is reflected in the center's name. This emphasis creates opportunities to involve parents from other cultures or with low English skills. It also provides an opportunity to value and honor the culture and background of immigrant parents and help them cope with the specific

challenges of trying to raise children in the U.S.

Carole Robertson Center for Learning

For 26 years, the Carole Robertson Center has thrived under the leadership of its parent-led board of directors: currently 68 percent of its members are center parents and alumni. The board oversees all agency operations and provides the agency with leadership and direction. All board members—and other center parents—participate on committees such as finance, resource development, program policy, and board development. These committees discuss organizational issues in depth and report to the board of directors at bi-monthly meetings. Many parents also volunteer at the program, providing classroom assistance, administrative support, fundraising, special event planning, and facility improvements. More than 30,000 hours of volunteer time are logged each year. The center is also committed to hiring from within the community and providing professional devel-



opment opportunities for all of its staff members. For example, in 1998, the center launched a welfare-to-work training program that offered three months of job-readiness and occupational skills training and a six-month paid internship in the center's classrooms. At the end of this period, interns were eligible to apply for one of 60 entry-level positions in the two new facilities that the Carole Robertson Center opened in 2000 and 2001. Forty community residents became employed at the center through this program, many of whom have already reached their one-year anniversary, gained their CDA (child development associate) or other college credit, and received promotions and raises. Every center employee has his or her own annual professional development plan, and all staff members are offered: enrollment in a customized CDA credential program, specialized training in music and art, CPR training, tuition reimbursement for four college courses annually, and opportunities to attend national conferences. All teachers receive a

monthly training, and staff members receive stipends to participate in regular weekend training sessions. Staff and parents are also offered seminars in financial literacy, budgeting, savings programs, first-time homebuyer programs, tax preparation, legal issues, and tenants' rights.

Region 19 ESC Head Start—El Paso

This center serves families in the urban and rural El Paso area—more than half of whom use Spanish as their primary language and 75 percent of whom earn less than \$15,000 annually. All staff members are bilingual. All meetings are either bilingual or conducted so that parents receive simultaneous translation. The center is particularly creative when it comes to staff team-building and development activities. It employs bilingual community residents as "CORTs" (Community Outreach and Referral Technicians) in full-time positions. Both the CORTs and the teaching staff receive training in identifying of children and families at risk of child abuse or neglect and both

are trained to refer families to community resources that offer emotional and physical support. CORTs intervene first with families in need. Cross training is a priority, accomplished partially with a policy of "trading places": administrative staff are required to spend time in someone else's job each year—so that they know what that person does and what his or her job issues are. Staff leaders are sensitive to community norms and values. For example, in recognition of the stigma sometimes attached to mental health consultants, they renamed the job position "educational facilitator"—which is a more accurate reflection of the function served by this professional. The new title is easier to understand and does not carry negative connotations for participating families.

Sheltering Arms Child Development and Family Support Center

Sheltering Arms is noted for the way its staff members operate as a team and rely on each other for mutual support. Staff members report that they use each other both to get information and for emotional and professional support. A break room and scheduled break times facilitate this interaction on a day-to-day basis, while monthly staff meetings and weekly team meetings allow for more formal interaction. Teachers can also access a resource room on a daily basis for curriculum needs. Sheltering Arms takes a team approach to issues; no staff member feels he or she has to make a decision in isolation and without back up. Because the staff structure is cohesive, it successfully models community to families. Staff members aim to bond with each family to help identify difficult times before they occur. Through day-to-day contact with families, they are able to detect changes in a family's norm, indicating potential problems.

CHALLENGES FOR PRACTICE

- **Staff retention:** Early childhood programs are notoriously challenged to retain quality staff, primarily because of the generally low level of compensation teachers receive. The annual average turnover rate is 40 percent. The exemplary programs profiled here understand that job satisfaction contributes to employee retention. Many are able to retain quality staff for five to ten years because of staff members' commitment to, enjoyment of, and overall comfort with the program and their jobs. Positive relationships with coworkers and with families are cited by staff as major contributing factors to their job satisfaction.
- **Supervision and team building:** Creating the culture and environment to protect children from child abuse requires that the program be structured to help teachers and other staff build relationships with families. This is not a typical requirement of early childhood centers.

Leadership, coaching, and organizational focus are required in order to make it happen. Staff leaders use supervision, staff meetings, and team-building opportunities both to provide professional development and to create a cohesive, warm, welcoming, and effective staff team.

- **Funding:** Implementing the recommendations in this paper requires staff depth, training, and development. Retaining quality childcare teachers would be helped immeasurably by raising wages, which requires additional funding. Exemplary centers are proactive about raising funds from multiple sources to build and maintain the organizational norms and programmatic components necessary to promote healthy development. Programs should also consider joining advocacy efforts undertaken by the National Association for the Education of Young Children and Children's Defense Fund to raise the wages of early childhood workers nationally.



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Center for Early Childhood Leadership—National Louis University

The Center for Early Childhood Leadership is committed to providing training programs and technical assistance to center directors to improve their management skills and the quality of services to children and families. Its training initiatives support the professional development of new and experienced center-based program directors, college instructors, consultants, and other leaders in the field of early childhood education. The center is infusing family support strategies into its training programs.

<http://www2.nl.edu/twal/>

Free To Grow: Head Start Partnerships to Promote Substance-free Communities

Free to Grow is a national community-based initiative that focuses on strengthening the overall environment of young children, particularly their families and communities. In 15 sites around the country, programs work in collaboration with local funding and program partners, including school systems, law enforcement, and substance abuse and mental health treatment programs, to develop integrated family- and community-focused prevention approaches that fit the local community context. The Free to Grow website contains resources and strategies to develop partnerships among community organizations, involve residents in assessing risk and protective factors in their neighborhoods, develop local leaders, support community action, and utilize formal and informal policy to change local norms and regulations.

<http://www.freetogrow.org>

National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)

The Professional Development Division of NAEYC is dedicated to sustaining excellence and supporting innovation in early care and education. To do this, the division's work focuses on the improvement of professional preparation and development for individuals who care for and educate children, from birth through age eight. The division collaborates with NAEYC's Communications/Policy Development Division and its National Academy for the Accreditation of Early Childhood Programs to influence policies and practices that benefit young children and their teachers. Its services to the field focus on professional preparation and program review, publications, and conferences.

<http://www.naeyc.org/profdev/default.asp>

Wheelock College

This educational institution's mission is "to improve the quality of life for children and their families." Wheelock carries out this mission by providing graduate and undergraduate programs as well as ongoing education for professionals, contributing to the knowledge of professionals in the field, generating and sharing new knowledge, and influencing the development of social policy. The mission of the college is sustained by its academic programs, course offerings, and involvement in the life of the surrounding community, as well as research, curriculum development, and professional activities. Its child and family studies program offers concentrations in birth-to-three development and intervention; family-centered care; child development studies; family, culture, and society; and family support and parenting education.

<http://www.wheelock.edu>

Zero to Three

Since 1977, Zero to Three's multi-disciplinary focus has brought together infant and family professionals, uniting the fields of medicine, mental health, research, science, child development, and education. One of its main emphases is to support early childhood workers and foster professional excellence through training and related activities, such as publications. Among its most important contributions to professional development are its publications on reflective supervision and developing staff relationships and relationships with families.

In addition, Zero to Three and the National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies (NACCRRA), the nation's network for childcare resource and referral, have recently launched a training initiative with materials aimed at helping childcare centers and family childcare providers to work with parents and their young children in ways that are supportive, that strengthen parent-child relationships, and that promote healthy

development in very young children. The goal of this project is to help the childcare community reduce risk factors associated with child abuse and neglect by using natural opportunities to provide parents support, developmental guidance, and needed information. It will pay special attention to helping childcare center directors offer staff the supports and structures they need to build and maintain effective partnerships with parents.

<http://www.zerotothree.org>

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 retooling 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.

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

Promoting Children's Healthy Social and Emotional Development

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.



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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.