

KEY PROGRAM ELEMENTS:

# use of physical space

6



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

# use of physical space

In exemplary early care and education centers, the physical layout and interior design of the space contributes to the effort to reduce child abuse and neglect. The centers in this study differed greatly in setting and in architecture. One program is housed in portable units, another in a multi-story building on a busy urban street. Two centers were designed and built specifically for early care and education. All use their physical space to communicate to parents and other visitors the importance of keeping children safe and nurturing their development.

---

**In exemplary early care and education centers, the physical layout and interior design of the space contributes to the effort to reduce child abuse and neglect.**

---

At exemplary centers, three main aspects of physical design are important for bolstering protective factors around children:

- 1) The spaces feel welcoming and safe to parents
- 2) There are ways for parents and staff to easily observe children while the children are in class
- 3) Staff have the ability to congregate and communicate with each other separate from parents and children

## WHAT THE SPACE SAYS TO PARENTS

One of the key aspects of the centers profiled in this study is that they actively and intentionally foster relationships between staff of the program and parents of children who attend preschool there. The ambiance of the centers contributes to the relationship-building process in concrete ways. The centers typically include space for parents to:

- Attend classes or workshops
- Sit and talk with one another and /or with staff
- Share food
- Attend social events
- Drop in and visit with staff or with their children
- Observe their children playing with other children or learning in a classroom

It is particularly important that parents immediately feel welcomed and safe when they enter a center. Many of the centers profiled in this study were described by parents as being “like an oasis.” This happens most successfully when the receptionist is a friendly, warm person and when the décor of the center reflects the neighborhood culture. The center’s design must also communicate that staff understand the norms and the challenges of the neighborhood as well, particularly with regard to safety. In neighborhoods where there is gang activity, for example,

parents feel more comfortable leaving their children at a center that has bulletproof fencing around the playground area than they would if the playground were open and unprotected.

Lucy Martinez was horrified that her three-and-a-half-year-old son, Guillermo, wanted to dress up in her clothes at home. She came to the center furious because her son told her that's what they did in school. Staff explained that many costumes were available in the dramatic play area of the classroom and that it was normal for children to dress up in clothes of the opposite gender.

Mrs. Martinez watched her child's classroom through the one-way glass window and saw many different children dressing up in many different costumes. Staff spoke to her about her concerns and about gender roles, and Mrs. Martinez was able to gain insight into not only her son's behavior, but also her own.

## OBSERVATION SPACES

All of the exemplary programs profiled in this study configured their space so that staff and parents could observe children in class. All centers had glass windows into classrooms from hallways. A number had video cameras in the classrooms. Observation spaces are an explicit child abuse prevention strategy—having many eyes on teachers and kids contributes to certainty that children will not be abused while in the program. The spaces, however, have several other benefits as well:

- **They contribute to a feeling of “transparency” and inclusion.** Nothing that the center does with children is private or secret. Parents are included in all of the early care and education activities, and they can check on their children at any time without interrupting what's happening in the classroom.
- **They facilitate communication and learning between parents and staff.** Staff and parents use

the spaces to observe children's behavior together. Staff may demonstrate alternative approaches to handling challenging behavioral problems or show parents what otherwise might be difficult to communicate. Observation spaces afford the opportunity for parents to see and compare their child with other children of that age, which can be helpful for getting parents to understand that their child has a developmental delay—or that his or her behavior is age-appropriate.

## SPACE FOR STAFF TEAM BUILDING AND DEVELOPMENT

Observation areas are also important for staff development and team building around the important programmatic work of nurturing the social and emotional development of children. For example, when a teacher is concerned about the challenging behavior of a child, she and the program's mental health consultant may watch the child and



Educare Center, Chicago

discuss strategies for addressing the child's issues. Or, for example, in a different situation, the mental health consultant may use the observation areas to teach staff how to set up imaginative, therapeutic play situations to help elicit from a child "what happened" when the child can't tell.

In addition to observation areas, the physical space of an early care and education center should contain space for staff to communicate with each other—a break room, kitchen, or lounge can serve this purpose.

### KEY ASPECTS OF PHYSICAL SPACE IN EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION PROGRAMS

Exemplary early childhood centers:

- Are safe for children and parents—and accomplish the goal of safety in ways that are appropriate to the neighborhood context
- Create an ambiance that is welcoming and inclusive of all family members

- Ensure that children and their teachers are visible to many adults at all times
- Contain spaces for parents to gather and build relationships among themselves and with staff (e.g., communal kitchen)
- Have ways—electronic or physical—for parents and staff to observe children in classrooms, without disturbing the class
- Include spaces for staff to communicate with each other (e.g., break room)

### HOW DOES THE DESIGN OF PHYSICAL SPACE CONTRIBUTE TO REDUCING CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT?

- **It keeps children safe within the program.** The premise that early childhood centers can help to prevent child abuse and neglect by building protective factors around children assumes that children will be safe from abuse within the program itself. Children's safety is a key concern for parents when choosing a

childcare program. Ensuring that many different pairs of eyes can watch children contributes to their safety while they are in the program itself.

- **It builds relationships between parents and staff.** 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 creating a welcoming, safe, and friendly atmosphere in programs, and by dedicating space for parent and staff use, programs encourage relationships between staff members and parents. This increases the likelihood that parents will reach out if they are under stress or feel themselves at risk of abusing or neglecting their children.
- **It helps strengthen the relationship between parents and their children.** By developing relationships between parents and staff and using observation areas effectively, staff can help parents increase their depth of knowledge about their children

and also their range of potential responses to challenging behaviors. Deepening a parent's understanding of his or her child's behavior, personality, and development often results in a stronger relationship between the parent and the child.

- **It provides opportunities for connections among parents.** When a family is under stress, social isolation contributes to stress, thereby increasing the risk of child abuse and neglect. Friendships and mutual support among families can provide tangible assistance and emotional support in times of stress as well as contribute to a family's sense of well-being.

## PROGRAM EXAMPLES

### Educare Center

Community violence was one of the motivating factors for creating Educare, located on Chicago's South Side. The goal was to create a space in the community where children could be truly safe and their parents would know that they were safe. The center is designed to look like a tiny village, with each

classroom its own pastel-colored house. Classrooms are clustered around a "village square"—an enclosed courtyard with a rubber "floor"—and bounded by an attractive (and bullet-proof) fence that provides a safe and protected place for children to play. Great care has been taken to create a space that feels safe, that is stimulating for children, and that feels warm and welcoming to both children and adults. One-third of the space is designated as "parent space"—including a huge kitchen with multiple islands for food preparation. There are patio spaces outside of each classroom where parents can sit (with or without staff) to observe their children through glass doors. The building is easily navigable with corridors color-coded by the age of the children in the classrooms.

Educare was designed by architect Stanley Tigerman to be a state-of-the-art childcare center. Elements of the design have been replicated around the country by programs that have the resources to build a facility as well as by those that don't (e.g., arranging portable buildings around a courtyard).

### Ft. Belvoir Child and Youth Services

All Department of Defense childcare programs have explicit policies and practices designed to prevent child abuse and neglect within the program. These include:

- Video cameras to monitor and record all classroom activity
- Vision panels in doorways and hallways to allow easy supervision of classrooms
- Limited and monitored entrances
- Alarmed exits to unfenced areas
- Easily monitored bathrooms within the classroom areas
- Hourly monitoring of adult-to-child ratios
- Extensive background checks completed for all employees
- Annual staff training on child abuse and neglect recognition, reporting, and prevention

An explicit continuum for guidance and discipline is spelled out for employees as part of annual training.



### Sheltering Arms Child Development and Family Support Center

Sheltering Arms is a colorful glass-and-steel facility in a convenient location for the population it serves, designed intentionally as a childcare center. The design of the center is welcoming to children and parents alike. The entry area near the front desk is designed to facilitate conversation and communication. It includes sofas and chairs, a large parent/community room, storage places for car seats and strollers that parents may want to leave at the center during the day, and a large video monitor that enables parents to look in on their children. There are often snacks and drinks available for parents when they arrive to pick up their children. The receptionist makes a point of greeting every child by name as he or she passes by. Each classroom features large windows into a hallway and doors with glass panels that allow very small children to see out into the main hall. All classrooms open onto a large outdoor play area. Comfortable staff offices, a parent library, a staff

room, and a lending library for home childcare providers are included in the facility.

### South of Market Childcare, Inc.

The slick modern design of this new center belies the history of the director and staff as long-time childcare providers in the neighborhood. The center is located on top of San Francisco's Moscone Center, which provides families with easy access to several downtown children's attractions, including a skating rink, a large carousel, and a plot of land for a vegetable garden. While the center is located in an urban, downtown neighborhood, its access to the rooftop allows the children's play space to be open to the sky. There are glass windows onto classrooms, so that parents can observe their children. A family resource center is located in the middle of the childcare center—demonstrating in a concrete way that parents are at the heart of the project, that they are welcome, and that there are resources available to connect them with each other and with needed supports and services.

## CHALLENGES FOR PRACTICE

- **Space limitations:** Many childcare centers were not built with glass panels on doors, specially designed observation spaces, or one-way windows onto classrooms, and many centers may not have the financial wherewithal to renovate their building. Existing space limitations, however, do not need to preclude observation opportunities. Observation can be accomplished in such settings electronically, with video cameras.
- **Infrastructure improvements:** It is possible and desirable for centers to assess their space according to the criteria expressed here with the goal of fully understanding whether and how the space is welcoming to parents, it has rooms for staff interaction, and children are able to be observed throughout the day by both parents and staff. Once the space has been assessed, the center can prioritize changes and plan how to gradually make infrastructure improvements that bring the

center closer to conforming to these standards (such as by opening up classrooms and other areas to observation).

- **Staff training:** Spatial attributes and décor alone do not render a center family friendly or promote the social and emotional development of children. For observation to work, staff must be trained so that they are comfortable with being observed, and feel protected, and so that they understand the benefits of collaborating with parents around the protection and development of children. For a center to be a warm and welcoming place, staff must be friendly and accessible.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

### National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)

NAEYC is the nation's largest and most influential organization of early childhood educators and others dedicated to improving the quality of programs for children from birth through third grade. Founded in 1926, NAEYC celebrated its 75th anniversary with more than 100,000 members and a national network of nearly 450 local, state, and regional affiliates. NAEYC affiliate groups work to improve professional practice and working conditions in early childhood education and to build public support for high quality early childhood programs. NAEYC publishes a journal called *Young Children*, which contains articles on topics of interest to early childhood professionals. The website contains a searchable index. The link listed below is to the article index.

"Creating a Family-Like Atmosphere in Child Care Settings: All the More Difficult in Large Child Care Centers" by Linda Whitehead and Stacy Ginsberg, in *Young Children* (March 1999)

"Use the Environment to Prevent Problems and Support Learning" by Nancy Ratcliff, in *Young Children* (Sept. 2001)

[http://www.naeyc.org/resources/journal/search\\_journal.asp](http://www.naeyc.org/resources/journal/search_journal.asp)

### National Child Care Information Center (NCCIC)

NCCIC's website contains information about starting a childcare center, including basics of design considerations and licensing requirements.

<http://www.nccic.org/faqs/starting.html>





### **Ounce of Prevention Fund**

The Ounce of Prevention Fund was responsible for the development of the Educare Center (which started in 1986 in an apartment in the Robert Taylor Homes housing project and moved in early 2000 to its own site, designed by architect Stanley Tigerman). Its website contains information on Educare replication, and the organization can be contacted for more information about designing a state-of-the-art early care and education center.

<http://www.ounceofprevention.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 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

Promoting Children's Healthy Social and Emotional Development

Staff Leadership to Create Relationships that Protect Children

Mental Health Consultation

Including Men

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.*