

# Key Program Elements: Family Support Services

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## ▼ Abstract

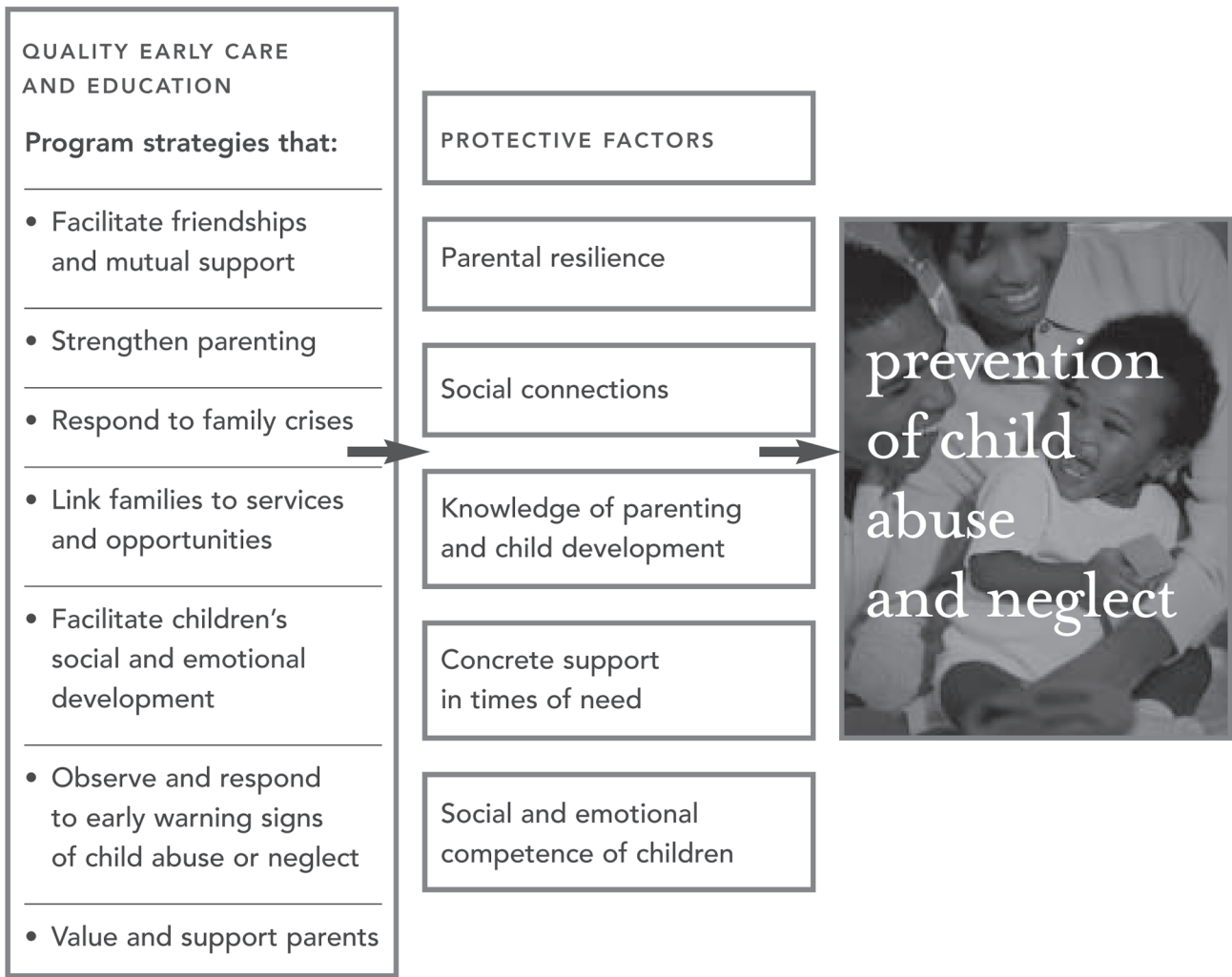
The Center for the Study of Social Policy has documented the role that early care and education programs can play in strengthening families and preventing abuse and neglect. The conceptual framework which emerges from this work is organized around the protective factors that programs can build around young children by working differently with their families. (See page 38 for a list of these protective factors.) The following article is excerpted from one of a series of papers describing key program elements in exemplary early learning and child care programs. This article describes examples of key family support components, based on researchers' site visits, interviews and surveys with 21 early childhood programs in the U.S. It goes on to show how these strategies can help reduce child abuse and neglect. Finally, it points to some of the challenges of integrating family support into early childhood learning and care settings. The full document is available online at [www.cssp.org/uploadFiles/01\\_Family\\_Support\\_REV4.pdf](http://www.cssp.org/uploadFiles/01_Family_Support_REV4.pdf).

**A**t exemplary early childhood centres, welcoming and engaging families is an intentional and integral part of the program, supplemental to the work that teachers are doing with the children. These supportive relationships are born of common interest in children's well-being, nurtured by genuine concern on the part of staff, and strengthened by staff members' responsiveness and ability to be helpful to parents when they need it. They are characterized by mutual respect and inclusion of parents in the life—and leadership—of the centre.

Programs organize their support services for families in different ways. Some have family support workers on staff so that when parents come in the door to drop off their children, they are also greeting the family support worker. A few programs have a family resource centre co-located with the childcare centre. Others organize the family support component more informally, crosstraining all staff to interact supportively with families and arranging activities at the center to facilitate relationship building—both between staff and parents and among parents.

# 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.



Family support can include:

- Family assessments and /or family plans designed to address families' needs and help them reach their goals
- Connecting families to resources and services such as health care, employment training, government subsidies to which they are entitled (such as food stamps), supplemental resources for their children, or transportation
- One-on-one support and informal counselling when families ask for it
- Information about parenting, family life, and child development—both in the form of parent education classes and immediate consultation on issues when parents need it
- A lending library with videos, books, and resources on parenting
- Drop-in times for parents to meet with staff or other parents
- Opportunities for parents to participate as leaders in the work of the centre
- Referrals and ongoing support for families who need mental health services, substance abuse treatment, or domestic violence services
- Mobilizing resources in times of family crisis
- Working cooperatively with families and classroom teachers when a child is having difficulty or exhibiting challenging behaviour
- Organizing activities for families such as spa nights, dinner nights out, camping trips, field trips for parents and children, or multicultural parties

### **How do family support strategies help prevent child abuse and neglect?**

**They reduce stress in the family.** Supporting families increases the number of resources parents have for dealing with challenges, frustrations, and serious problems in their lives. Early childhood programs can reduce families' stress by: 1) connecting families to services they need; 2) strategizing with families, creating a plan, and supporting them in making changes to resolve ongoing issues that create stress (e.g., health problems, unemployment, or relationship issues); and 3) bolstering parents' networks of friendship and mutual support.

**They enhance parent–child relationships.** Providing family support focuses attention on the relationship between parents and their children and offers many opportunities for developing and improving the parent–child relationship. In early

childhood programs, this can be accomplished by providing parent–child activities and child development and parenting information—formally through classes and workshops, and informally, by giving advice, information, and referrals in response to parents' requests. It also includes parents working as a team, with the child's teacher, to deal with challenging behavioural issues or special needs.

**They reduce social isolation.** A parent's lack of positive, supportive relationships causes isolation, which exacerbates stress in a family and increases the risk of child abuse or neglect. Family support strategies build community within the centre, provide opportunities for parents to connect with and help one another, and proactively engage all parents in trusting relationships with staff.

**They make child abuse and neglect prevention strategies accessible and unobtrusive.** Many services and interventions designed for families at risk of child abuse or neglect require families to be identified as potentially abusive or neglectful before they can access services, thus attaching a stigma to them. In contrast, early childhood centres develop supportive relationships with all families. These relationships protect children against child abuse and neglect and bolster parents' efforts to nurture their kids in a natural, invisible, and positive way. As parents come to regard staff as trustworthy, helpful, and informative, they are more likely to turn to a staff member when they are under stress or at risk of abusing or neglecting their child.

### **Challenges for practice**

**Hiring:** Programs often grapple with how family support services are to be delivered, and by whom. Questions that programs must answer according to their strategy, resources, and community needs include: Should family support workers be professionals trained as social workers or paraprofessionals from the community? What staff gender balance is optimal? What personality characteristics are most important for staff who will be connecting with families?

**Team building:** While one of the most obvious characteristics of a family support worker is his or her ability to empathize with, relate to, and mobilize resources for parents, what might be less obvious is the importance of staff relationships and program protocols regarding confidentiality and exchange of information. Credibility with parents rests on trust and communication among all staff members. The success of

family support strategies depends on the quality of relationships between the early childhood teachers and the family support staff. Optimally, teachers and family support workers work as a team, carefully observing parents and children and solving problems with families to promote the healthy development of children. Centres must consciously work to develop a team ethos with their staff, providing training and staff development to enhance communication, camaraderie, joint problemsolving skills, and an understanding of protocols and procedures.

**Training on child abuse and neglect:** The process of identifying and dealing with incidents of child abuse and neglect is a conflicted, traumatic, and stressful one for everyone involved. Family support workers and teachers are on the front lines, usually with the centre's director, when a suspected incident needs to be addressed. Programs must establish clear rules and train the whole staff about their roles in situations where child abuse or neglect is suspected.

**Supporting family support workers:** Family support work in early childhood education settings can be difficult and stressful. Family support workers are often in the position, many times each day, of troubleshooting problems with families, approaching parents with delicate issues and unwanted information ranging from suspected child abuse to challenging classroom behavior to cleanliness and personal hygiene. They serve as a buffer for both parents and teachers. They need emotional and practical support to avoid burnout—in practice, this support usually comes from collegial relationships with coworkers. Mental health consultants on staff or retainer also provide help for staff individually, and as a group, and can help resolve conflicts between staff members.

**Funding:** Unfortunately, family support strategies are not universally recognized as essential elements of early childhood programs, and their role in preventing child abuse and neglect is not widely appreciated. Therefore, these components can be seen by funding sources as supplementary and non-essential. Maintaining funding for family support staff is a challenge that programs consistently face.

**Boundaries /limits:** Family support services are not a replacement for more intensive therapeutic help when families need it. In order to avoid staff burnout, to get families what they really need, and to ensure that all families in the program benefit from the services, family support workers also need support and sometimes training in setting limits on both the

amount and intensity of help they can provide to any one family.

**Confidentiality:** Both staff and families need to be fully informed and understand the program's policies and protocols on confidentiality: when families can expect the information they reveal to be kept private, what the norms are for sharing general information about a family among staff, and what type of information will not or cannot be kept confidential. Because building and maintaining trusting relationships between staff and families is a critical part of the work in exemplary programs, and because breaches in confidentiality can be devastating to a relationship, it is important that staff maintain the confidentiality of families and that families are always aware of what information about them is being shared.

This article is reprinted with the permission of the **Center for the Study of Social Policy**, based in Washington, D.C. Its mission is to promote policies and practices that support and strengthen families and build community capacity for improving the lives of vulnerable populations. The Strengthening Families approach strategically links research knowledge about the prevention of child abuse and neglect 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).