

Strengthening Families through Early Care and Education

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We know that ECE programs can have a significant effect on children's social, emotional, cognitive, and physical development. But everyone who works in a child care program understands, and mountains of research confirm, the primary role played by the young child's family. Or, as the T shirt says, "If Momma ain't happy, ain't nobody happy."

The child care program is in a unique and powerful position to support family functioning and family wellbeing. I remember how I felt, as a young mother, about the excellent infant/toddler program my children attended. (The rest of their education was somewhat downhill from there.) The staff seemed so stable, knowledgeable, and wise compared to my confused and frazzled self. I automatically looked to them for guidance and got a lot of emotional support just from the casual interactions at drop-off and pick-up.

When parents are having problems—or just need information or support—they are often reluctant to seek help. Where to go? How to get the time when you're working? And besides, it's embarrassing to label yourself as someone who "needs help." If parents can find what they need at or through the child care program, it's all so much easier and more natural. And all families need support—that's our basic "it takes a village" premise.

At the same time, child care program managers and staff often feel that they are already peddling as hard as they can just to provide their basic service in the face of inadequate funding, staff turnover, and other challenges.

Strengthening Families

Now a growing national program has developed extensive resources including tools, training, and networks of practitioners, to help ECE programs develop the capacity to support families.

"Strengthening Families through Early Care and Education," an eight-year-old project of the [Center for the Study of Social Policy](#), began by pulling together research about ECE and research about child abuse prevention. Child abuse prevention is critically important, of course, but I wish the framework was more ambitious, such as "supporting families to help their children thrive." You and I both know many families where kids aren't being abused but could be doing significantly better.

Five Protective Factors

They came up with a list of "Five Protective Factors" that help prevent child abuse and promote positive family functioning. In their words:

1. **Parental Resilience:** The ability to cope with and bounce back from all types of challenges
2. **Social Connections:** Friends, family members, neighbors, and other members of a community who provide emotional support and concrete assistance to parents

3. **Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development:** Accurate information about raising young children, appropriate expectations for their behavior, and knowledge of alternative discipline techniques
4. **Concrete Supports in Times of Need:** Financial security to cover day-to-day expenses and unexpected costs; formal supports like TANF, Medicaid, and job training; and informal support from social networks
5. **Children's Social and Emotional Competence:** A child's ability to interact positively with others and communicate his or her emotions effectively.

ECE practices

What makes all this information actually useful is that they have translated their research into specific practices that ECE programs can adopt by making "small but significant changes." And although they suggest that these changes can be "built into existing programs at little cost," you might want to take that last claim with a small grain of salt. Some of the exemplary programs they describe have dedicated staff to work with parents, which is a wonderful thing that all ECE programs should have but not all can afford. On the other hand, many of the practices can be implemented without that element. The practices they identify:

1. Facilitate [families'] friendships and mutual support
2. Strengthen parenting (basically, parent education)
3. Respond to family crises
4. Link families to services and opportunities
5. Facilitate children's social and emotional development
6. Observe and respond to early warning signs of child abuse or neglect
7. Value and support parents

Resources to help

By itself, that's just one more list adding to the already daunting expectations put on early educators. But the project's website, www.strengtheningfamilies.net, provides rich resources to help programs move toward those goals, including:

- A guidebook on the ideas and implementation strategies, which includes a detailed checklist of specific practices that ECE programs can adopt in each of these areas (such as: creating a space for parents to gather, developing personal relationships between staff and parents, introducing families with something in common, hosting formal parent education meetings, organizing family field trips, adopting a social development curriculum like [Second Step](#), inviting local family resource center staff to speak or even provide services at the child care site, and many, many more)
- An online self-assessment tool for ECE programs
- Description of seven pilot statewide implementation efforts, with many specific examples, stories about their experiences, tools they have developed, etc.
- A "training marketplace" where people list and rate training resources

- Information on the national Strengthening Families network, now including 23 state programs plus national partner organizations including [NAEYC](#) and [Zero to Three](#).

In California

The Strengthening Families program has projects at various stages of development in 23 states. They continue to work with partners on implementing the program and developing supportive state policies. The California project is considered an “affiliate,” not a “partner,” probably because it’s relatively recent.

The tricky thing, from an ECE point of view, is that Strengthening Families gave the California franchise to the California Family Resource Association (CFRA) (www.californiafamilyresource.org), an organization of family resource centers and related organizations. Its initial program and list of upcoming activities seem very weighted toward child welfare and family resource center networks and do not appear strongly rooted in the ECE community.

Because I am excited about the potential of this approach and feel strongly about the importance of basing family support in ECE programs, I am fantasizing that CAEYC or some other statewide ECE organization will approach CFRA with an offer to partner in the implementation of the Strengthening Families program in California. Without stronger ties to the ECE community, I fear that this project will not have the impact it’s capable of having and that I hope it will have.

In the meantime, I think you will find it interesting and exciting to explore the [Strengthening Families](#) website and hopefully incorporate some of its resources into your education, training, and child development programs.