

strengthening families

THROUGH EARLY CARE & EDUCATION

What is Strengthening Families through Early Care & Education

Strengthening Families is a new, proven, cost-effective strategy to prevent child abuse and neglect. The strategy involves early childhood centers working with families to build protective factors around children (see right). The Strengthening Families approach is based on:

- A review of existing research in the field of child abuse and neglect
- A national study that led to the identification of 21 exemplary programs across the country
- Conversations with hundreds of experts in the field, researchers, practitioners and parents

Implementation in Seven States

Strengthening Families through Early Care & Education initiatives are now being implemented in seven states: Alaska, Arkansas, Illinois, New Hampshire, Missouri, Rhode Island, and Wisconsin. In each state a leadership team that includes representatives from child welfare, early care and education, and a number of state partners is implementing the initiative. Each state is being supported through technical assistance from CSSP staff and a national network of technical assistance providers. Over two years (Jan. 1, 2005 - Dec. 31, 2006), partners will lay the foundation for work that is self-sustaining and institutionalized across systems.

What are the goals of the initiative?

- To increase awareness that strengthening families is central to quality child care
- To increase the number of early childhood programs that are working to prevent child abuse and neglect by building protective factors around children and families
- To improve working relationships among early childhood systems, child welfare systems, and child abuse prevention programs and initiatives
- To integrate prevention planning among state agencies with a family-centered approach that includes early childhood

How can I implement Strengthening Families in my state/program?

The CSSP website contains a host of materials from self-assessment and implementation guides for programs to updates on strategies being pursued by pilot states. For more information visit www.cssp.org

Protective Factors

With support from the **Doris Duke Charitable Foundation**, the **Center for the Study of Social Policy** spent two years researching and identifying five protective factors that prevent child abuse and neglect. These are:

For adults:

- Parental resilience
- Social connections
- Knowledge of parenting and child development
- Concrete support in times of need

For children:

- Healthy social and emotional development

A number of tools are available for those who want to learn more about the protective factors approach.

- A literature review
- A self-assessment tool for early childhood programs organized around protective factors
- Handouts and descriptive tools on the protective factors

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Illinois

Partners

Illinois' State Leadership team includes:

- IL Dept. of Children and Family Services (convener)
- Parent leaders (5)
- Action for Children
- Carole Robertson Center for Learning
- Chicago Public Schools/Erikson Institute
- Children's Home and Aid Society of IL
- El Valor
- IL Center for Violence Prevention
- IL Dept. of Human Services
- IL Family Partnership Network
- IL Head Start Association
- IL Network of Child Care Resource & Referral Agencies
- IL State Board of Education
- IL Violence Prevention Authority
- McCormick Tribune Foundation
- Midwest Learning Center for Family Support
- Ounce of Prevention Fund
- Partnership for Quality Child Care
- Prevent Child Abuse America
- Prevent Child Abuse IL
- Voices for IL Children

Illinois' Strengthening Families Initiative is convened by the Department of Children and Family Services. The Leadership team for the initiative builds on a long history of collaborative work in early childhood—but brings DCFS to the table as a new partner. Key aspects of the state approach include:

- Developing five regional learning networks of early childhood centers implementing the Strengthening Families approach. One early childhood center in each region will serve as a technical assistance and support hub on SFI implementation issues. Overall, more than 50 statewide will participate.
- An awareness campaign aimed at:
 - Ensuring that 80 percent of licensed early childhood centers are aware of the connection between protective factors and preventing child abuse and neglect
 - DCFS caseworkers and foster parents are aware of the important role that early care and education programs can play in supporting children and families who have experienced abuse and neglect
- Making family strengthening training available to early childhood programs
- Collaborating with the Illinois Children's Mental Health Partnership to build resiliency, knowledge about children's mental health, and advocate for mental health resources in the pilot sites and statewide.
- Ensuring that all foster children have access to quality early care and education placements
- Infusing the Strengthening Families approach in state-level decision-making and prevention activities across state agencies.

Exciting things happening right now:

- Illinois has created a one-year plan to ensure that every child 3 – 5 years of age in foster care is in a quality early care and education setting. Each region has gone

through their case loads to identify the current status of children 3 to 5 and is in the process of developing an action plan to connect them to ECE programs.

- The five regional partner programs that will serve as hubs for piloting Strengthening Families Initiative have been selected and will be beginning the process in September. Each site will be trained using the Parent's Services Project *Stronger Together* curriculum.
- 1½ day training is being developed by the Midwest Learning Center for Family Support on the protective factors. In collaboration with DCFS they are also developing a one-day training on identifying the early warning signs of abuse and neglect.
- The DCFS training department is revising its foundation and enhanced training for caseworkers and has agreed to include the protective factors and Strengthening Families practices into this training – as well as in training for licensing staff and foster parents.
- A communications workgroup has been established and has developed draft outreach materials explaining the protective factors and the Strengthening Families project.
- An evaluation framework for the initiative is being developed.