

# strengthening families

THROUGH EARLY CARE & EDUCATION

## Voices From the Field

### Building a Local Collaboration Around Strengthening Families Principles

Deborah Campbell— Sauk Rapids - Rice (MN) Early Childhood Programs

Enhancing relationships and connections between county, school, and other agencies that work to prevent child abuse and neglect is becoming a reality in Sauk Rapids, MN. As a recipient of the Doris Duke Exemplary Programs award, we have been fortunate to recently receive a Children's Trust Fund grant through the Minnesota Department of Health for "Kids First," a program that links our Early Childhood programs more closely with county social workers, public health nurses, women's shelter staff, Head Start teachers and Crisis Nursery programs. One goal is to make a systemic change that connects a variety of helping professionals to work in tandem to prevent child abuse and neglect. Another is to link families who either have been, or are at risk of being, neglectful or abusive to their children with learning opportunities to enhance the parent child relationship. Building on an already successful system of family support and education, CAN prevention continues to expand in our community.

The Children's Trust Fund grant has allowed our universal access school-based program to create specialized services for at-risk families. One of the challenges of connecting helping professionals in our area has been limited time and staff. The CTF grant has enabled us to hire a coordinator whose role is not only to develop and provide services, but also to act as a liaison and referral contact for agencies. This position has been critical to the success of the "Kids First" program. Attending joint trainings, presenting information to common boards and councils, and utilizing the expertise of many helping professionals has not only strengthened family services, but also strengthened professional relationships in the area. We've seen incredible growth in our professional connections between agencies.

Planning for the grant included input from staff representing Benton County Human Services, Lutheran Social Services, Crisis Nursery, Head Start, and a local women's shelter. There was agreement that agencies didn't always connect clients as efficiently to other services as possible, and that additional specialized options were needed for some families. Parents who

had participated in other components of the school-based Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE) programs also shared their ideas and suggestions. These included offering support and education groups for parents and children who had many stresses in their lives, providing learning opportunities for dads to be more actively involved with their children, offering one-to-one home visits, and providing easier access to services like our local crisis nursery when needed.

A variety of options are now available to families who have either been reported for child abuse or neglect or who have identified risk factors. Home visits have been particularly well-received by families. Parents with birth to 5 year old children receive a minimum of 10 visits by a licensed parent educator. Those with infants and toddlers participate in a series of "First Steps" visits, a curriculum developed by our staff that focuses on strengthening the parent-child relationship. Daddy pages are left for those fathers unable to participate and each visit has a short video-time that provides the parent an opportunity to observe behaviors and development. The video becomes a keepsake.

Our experience has shown that parents benefit most if they continue to receive ongoing support and participate in multiple options. Therefore, a number of other options have been developed. "Enlightened Parenting" classes provide a growing experience for families who recognize the need for parenting their own children in more positive ways than their own childhood experience. These classes focus on parents and children play time, a shared meal, and a parent education / support group. The topics build on changing family patterns and understanding the impact of family of origin. Another series entitled "Co-Parenting" helps parents learn to work together for the benefit of their children. Some sections are designed for co-habiting parents and some for those sharing custody.

Evening family fun events have been very popular and well attended. Family meals, special events, and activities draw families in to the school. One such event focused on fathers. A specially designed support group for dads separated to talk about their parenting role. This event also included a time to complete a large woodworking project in with their child. Each dyad took home a completed sensory table, book shelf, or tent that dad and child made together.

Grant funds are also available to ensure spots for Kids First families in the crisis nursery and to inform families about this option. Additionally, ongoing professional support is offered by a licensed parent educator and marriage / family therapist with an expertise in infant mental health. Training, consultation, and support for professionals in all of the partnering agencies and has enhanced their understanding of attachment and development.

The CTF grant has enabled our program to expand the important work of the Strengthening Families Project to prevent child abuse and neglect.

The Kids First Program is accomplishing several major goals: to strengthen and enhance the parent-child relationship, to support parents in their role with children, and to make a systemic change in our community where helping professionals collaborate and support each other to prevent child abuse and neglect.