

strengthening families

THROUGH EARLY CARE & EDUCATION

executive summary

advancing child abuse and neglect
protective factors:

the role of the early care and education
infrastructure

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Early childhood education is at a critical juncture. Historically, early childhood programs have had multiple purposes, including: care while parents work, inculcation of values (immigration movement), socialization, (child study movement) and advancing children's learning (school readiness movement). The field has also been perennially challenged in terms of infrastructure, funding, and the absence of a national overarching strategy for ensuring quality. Today, early care and education programs are being pressed for accountability to specific learning goals and by others to expand their reach and range of services to, for example, support adult literacy, employment training, mental health consultation and child abuse and neglect prevention. Early education settings hold much promise for serving multiple agendas to benefit children and families, but only to the extent that programs are high quality and are supported by an early childhood infrastructure.

Beyond these purposes, high quality early care and education can serve as an effective vehicle for child abuse and neglect (CAN) prevention. Because they offer the only consistent, daily contact that societal institutions have with increasing numbers of families with young children, early care and education programs are in an especially good position to intervene early to defuse situations in which the risk of child abuse and neglect is present. With proactive intention and slight modifications, early care and education

programs can become routine accelerators of CAN prevention strategies.

BUILDING PROTECTIVE FACTORS: HOW EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION (ECE) PROGRAMS PREVENT CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT

Quality early care and education programs help to prevent child abuse and neglect by building supportive relationships with families, observing children carefully, responding to early warning signs of abuse and neglect, and promoting children's social and emotional development. Routine program strategies, characteristic of any high quality program, build protective factors that keep children safe from abuse and neglect.

The Center for the Study of Social Policy has identified five factors which, if strongly present in a child's or family's life, reduce the likelihood of child abuse and neglect. These protective factors emerge from the research literature on the causes of child abuse and neglect as well as the experience of child abuse prevention programs:

- 1. Parental Resilience**—Research suggests that what distinguishes highly functional from dysfunctional adults is the ability to develop and sustain caring relationships and to have faith in their own potential and in the world around them. Resilient families try

to make meaning out of adversity, maintain positive outlooks on life, and are grounded in a set of transcendent or spiritual beliefs. ECE programs can provide positive relationships with staff and a consistently safe environment that encourages parents to develop positive relationships with their children; programs can also help parents to develop their leadership and problem-solving skills.

2. Social Connections—Reducing social isolation among young families can be a key element of preventing child maltreatment. Communities conducive to child well being have stronger social capital that in turn promotes broad community agreement about childrearing norms. ECE programs combat isolation and build social capital by helping families develop stronger connections with each other, linking families to community-based organizations, and creating opportunities for parents to connect with each other within the program.

3. Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development—Research and practice demonstrate that understanding of normative child development and the parent-child relationship can reduce the incidence of CAN among vulnerable families. Parenting education gives parents insight into their own behaviors as well as the dyadic nature of parent-child interactions. For decades, early childhood programs have recognized the importance

or parenting and child development education and many have offered such education through formal classes, or informal advice and coaching.

4. Concrete Support in Times of Need—Poverty has been shown to be the factor most strongly correlated with CAN. Children living in families with annual incomes below \$15,000 are more than 15 times as likely to be abused and over 44 times more likely to be neglected than those with annual incomes of \$30,000 or more. Other risk factors for CAN include unemployment, inadequate housing, parental mental illness and parental substance abuse. Through the relationships that early childhood program staff develop with families and their daily contact, programs can help families in times of crisis by arranging for or providing emergency services through other community-based programs.

5. Social and Emotional Competence of Children—Research and practice demonstrate that children's early social development can lead them toward alternative and durable paths of social competency or deviancy in middle childhood and adolescence. Emotional development is fundamental to psychosocial well-being and mental health. Social and emotional development are highly contingent upon the quality of the youngsters' primary relationships with family and caregivers, and is a key element of the curriculum in any quality early

childhood program. Moreover, when early childhood programs help parents understand how to facilitate their children's social and emotional development and also to deal with challenging behavioral issues, they lower the risk of child abuse and neglect.

SYSTEM AND INFRASTRUCTURE CHANGES NECESSARY TO ENSURE THAT EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION PROGRAMS CONTRIBUTE TO CAN PREVENTION

In order to contribute effectively to child abuse and neglect prevention, early childhood *programs* must be supported by an early childhood *system*. The early childhood system consists of both direct services provided to children through early childhood programs and the infrastructure composed of the elements discussed below that support these programs. Barely functioning today, the early childhood education system faces severe challenges. States are decreasing expenditures so that investments in infrastructure elements (e.g., regulation) are being diminished. There are grave concerns about the quality of early childhood education, particularly given alarmingly high staff turnover rates. Concern for quality relates to the amount of money being spent on early childhood education, *and* how that money is spent. As a society, we must recognize the importance of, and be willing to invest in, building and maintaining the essential early care and education infrastructure that must undergird high quality programs.

There are eight components of an early care and education infrastructure:

1. Quality programs
2. Child-based, results-driven system
3. Parent and family engagement
4. Individual licensing
5. Professional preparation
6. Program licensing
7. Funding and financing
8. Governance, planning and accountability

Sustaining a durable ECE system through these components can be explained through the following unconventional formula: **8 – 1 = 0**. If even one component of the system is taken away, the system cannot function as a system; the net result would be “zero,” or a non-system. Only when the system is functioning, can early care and education fully embrace CAN prevention. The elements of a functioning system are detailed below, with specific CAN strategies discussed for each:

(1) Quality Programs

Quality programs are deliberate in creating learning environments and opportunities for young children and they use curricula to guide instruction. They are flexible and responsive and they employ various pedagogies and staff deployment strategies to match the

changing needs of individual children. Quality programs honor children’s home culture and provide an appropriate balance of academic and play activities. They advance children’s healthy physical and emotional development by providing access to requisite health services and/or providing such services directly. Quality programs maintain rich links with the community and work to improve their own services, often through the process of formal accreditation.

Recommendations for infusing CAN prevention into quality ECE programs:

- Curricula should be reviewed for their attentiveness to CAN prevention.
- Children’s social and emotional development is at the core of any quality ECE program, and must be advanced in programs seeking to advance a CAN prevention orientation.
- Precise criteria should be developed and incorporated into early childhood accreditation systems.
- Programs should assemble advisory committees comprised of community representatives with a CAN prevention orientation.
- To achieve ECE/CAN linkages, programs should be encouraged to conduct their own “CAN audits.” (A CAN prevention audit would include all elements that have been identified as protective factors, with clearly specified indicators of their achievement.)

(2) Child-based, Results-driven System

A child-based, results-driven system requires the development and implementation of state- or community-wide indicators that reflect children’s progress over time. This type of system uses an inclusive process that actively engages parents, professionals, and community members. It has indicators that address all domains of development and contains safeguards to assure that the data collected from the indicators will not be used to label, stigmatize, or classify young children.

Recommendations for infusing CAN prevention into a child-based, results-driven system:

- Include a special focus on children’s social and emotional development and competence in all indicators.
- Use indicators as a base for parenting education and child development.
- Create and deploy special supports and ongoing professional development for teachers so that they are able to use indicators effectively.
- Include observation and documentation of children’s behavior, creating relationships with families, and working with the child protective system as part of professional development.

(3) Parent, Family, Community, and Public Engagement

In all ECE programs, parents must be made aware of

the options they have in selecting services that match the needs of their children. Parents must become engaged in the life of the program, to the degree that they can. Where such engagement is challenging, outreach efforts must be procured. Concomitant with this commitment by individual programs, communities must increase public awareness about the importance of high-quality ECE, and must work to increase business and workplace commitment to family well-being. Perhaps more than any other element of the infrastructure, this component is most closely aligned with the CAN prevention intentions.

Recommendations for infusing CAN prevention into parent, family, community, and public engagement:

- Engage parents daily and offer individualized information to parents about the growth and development of their children.
- Ensure that program staff is knowledgeable about, and sufficiently linked to, an array of community services that can provide resources to families in need.
- Link with businesses to provide school-related benefits (personal days for the care of children).
- Help develop and promote community norms against violence.

(4) Individual Licensing

To assure high-quality ECE, it is necessary to develop a

set of licenses or credentials so that all individuals who work in ECE settings may have the opportunity for professional recognition. Credentials, and a system for ongoing review, should be developed for directors, lead teachers, teachers, teacher assistants, and family and health workers. It is anticipated that the existence of such credentials will, over time, reduce turnover and create a more qualified and committed workforce.

Recommendations for infusing CAN prevention into individual licensing efforts:

- Incorporate knowledge of adult development, as well as of the signs of social isolation and depression, into criteria for individual licensing.
- Award credentials only if candidate demonstrates knowledge of adults **AND** children.

(5) Improve the Content of, and Resources for, Professional Development

It is possible to become credentialed as an ECE worker with limited child development knowledge, limited knowledge of appropriate pedagogical strategies, and/or limited overall competence. Combining program expansion and staff turnover, the need for staff remains high, so the employment of ill-qualified individuals is likely to persist. Given this, it is necessary for ECE to provide enriched opportunities for in-service development.

Recommendations for infusing CAN prevention into professional development:

- Develop in-service CAN prevention training modules that are portable, easy to use, and adaptable to center-based and family childcare settings.
- Provide advanced seminars to those who deliver in-service training to ECE providers; all should be “CAN-sensitive.”
- Provide incentives for front-line staff who participate in CAN prevention training and implement CAN prevention approaches in their classrooms and programs.
- Review existing training registries and career ladders for sensitivity to CAN and modify accordingly.

(6) Program Licensing

Presently, state program licensing is the most universal regulatory mechanism that exists in ECE and regulation has been shown to correlate directly with higher program quality. Yet, large numbers of programs (some estimate 50 percent) are legally exempt from regulations. This suggests that all programs serving young children should be subject to state regulation, that funds should be sufficient to assure that regulation and enforcement take place, and that there should be a set of national guidelines that can be adopted by states.

Recommendations for infusing CAN prevention into program licensing:

- Incorporate the protective factors into national voluntary guidelines as a part of the recommended strategies for achieving high-quality ECE programs.
- Inform state regulators and the National Association for Regulatory Administration (NARA) of CAN prevention and strategies, with a view towards inclusion in future regulatory reviews.

(7) Funding and Financing

In order for ECE programs to be viable for the long term, attention must be accorded to their funding and financing. Specifically, the overall costs of high-quality early care and education need to be determined. Revenue sources to support these needs must be developed, and long-term financing plans should be created so that the funding of the programs and the infrastructure can be anticipated.

Recommendations for infusing CAN prevention into funding and financing:

- Determine the roles of the public and private sectors in funding CAN prevention/ECE efforts and incorporate these into a comprehensive ECE financing plan.
- Determine the cost-savings accrued as a result of CAN prevention/ECE efforts, including the

amounts of expenditures saved as a result of reduced reliance upon allied social services (e.g., mental health services, rehabilitative services).

- Consider incorporating the costs of CAN prevention/ECE efforts into per-child costs of ECE, thereby making such expenditures an ongoing component of the ECE infrastructure.

(8) Governance, Planning, and Program Accountability

In order for an early childhood system to coalesce, governance mechanisms should exist at both the state and local levels. Such mechanisms should engage in system-wide planning, assessment of needs, and resource planning. In some communities, planning councils or boards co-sponsor services, engage in bulk buying, and share resources to make their utilization far more efficient. In addition, such entities may engage in planning accountability efforts that transcend individual programs.

Recommendations for infusing CAN prevention into governance, planning, and program accountability:

- Undertake community audits to discern the nature and level of commitment to CAN prevention within the community
 - Bring programs together to plan community-wide events and campaigns that focus on CAN prevention/ECE linkages
 - Plan and produce public information materials
- and community-wide media campaigns around CAN prevention
- Launch accountability systems that include criteria designed to advance community ECE providers' commitment to the CAN prevention agenda.

RE-VISIONING THE ECE SYSTEM

These dramatic changes will not come about unless there is some significant revisioning of the early care and education system. To move from thinking about individual programs to more systemic thinking and action, the mindset and the trajectory of contemporary early care and education must change in three essential ways:

1. Making a commitment to meaningfully engaging parents by
 - Moving parents into more clearly-stated partnership roles
 - Upgrading the conventional focus from "children first and parents second" to "children and parents first"
 - Instituting supportive rules/regulations that facilitate the renewed commitment to parents.
2. Broadening the aims of ECE to include both school readiness and social prevention missions (much as public schools do) by
 - Creating ECE environments where both school readiness and prevention missions are possible

- Teaching “core” subjects as well as “mainstream” values and ways
 - Considering social and academic goals as linked.
2. Consistently and intentionally expanding ECE programs into learning environments for children, families, and staff by
- Valuing and praising teachers’ ongoing collaborative learning
 - Recognizing all staff for their domains of expertise
 - Reversing the high rate of teacher attrition in ECE.

The CAN Prevention / ECE agenda is a powerful one, both for the early childhood education field and for child abuse and neglect prevention efforts. In order to advance this agenda, its advocates should herald successful efforts to date, parade appropriate research, and move forward with zest on an agenda that will make a huge difference for children, their families, and the culture of early childhood education and communities across the nation.