

Strengthening Families for Practitioners

Every parent has high hopes for their children. But even great parents need help to make those hopes a reality. And sometimes, the stress of being a parent can overwhelm even the best intentions. Fortunately, most parents have a ready resource to help them: the child care and early education programs that their children are already a part of. These programs are where families already feel comfortable with the staff that care for and work with their children every day.

Strengthening Families was developed to help these local programs understand how they can be an excel-

lent resource for the children and families they serve. It is a research-based, cost-effective approach that focuses on building five Protective Factors that promote healthy development for children, better outcomes for families and reduce the likelihood of child abuse and neglect. The Protective Factors are:

- Parental Resilience
- Social Connections
- Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development
- Concrete Support in Times of Need
- Social and Emotional Competence of Children

What are the advantages of Strengthening Families?

- It is affordable. Most public and private child care programs can adopt this approach by making small but significant changes in their everyday practice without additional cost. In many states, child abuse prevention funds, professional development opportunities and other resources may be available to help programs implement Strengthening Families.
- It has widespread support. More than 30 states and many counties and cities are using the Protective Factors Framework supported by federal, state and local

funds. It helps everyone who works with children and families understand the same research and use the same language for the common work they are doing.

- Local programs are ready to go to work. A nationwide survey by the National Association for the Education of Young Children, the professional association for early childhood practitioners, showed that 97 percent of teachers and administrators wanted to do more to promote healthy families and prevent child maltreatment; and, asked for help to do it effectively.

Program Strategies that Build Protective Factors

Most people who work with children and families are already doing things to help build Protective Factors. Field research behind Strengthening Families identified seven key strategies that exemplary programs use in their work to build protective factors with families. The same strategies often help build more than one protective factor. While the strategies themselves are consistent across many different kinds of programs, the way programs implement them are adapted to the culture, concerns, values and traditions of the particular families they serve. People working in community programs, early care and education, child welfare, family support and the many other places can adapt these strategies to support the families and children they encounter.

The Seven Program Strategies are:

1. Facilitate Friendships and Mutual Support
2. Strengthen Parenting
3. Respond to Family Crises
4. Link Families to Services and Opportunities
5. Value and Support Parents
6. Facilitate Children's Social and Emotional Development
7. Observe and Respond to Early Warning Signs of Abuse and Neglect

How programs help strengthen families, promote optimal child development and prevent child abuse and neglect

Program strategies that:

Facilitate friendships and mutual support

Strengthen parenting

Respond to family crises

Link families to services and opportunities

Facilitate children's social and emotional development

Observe and respond to early warning signs of child abuse or neglect

Value and support parents

Protective Factors

Parental resilience

Social connections

Knowledge of parenting and child development

Concrete support in times of need

Social and emotional competence of children

Strengthened Families

Optimal Child Development

Reduced Child Abuse & Neglect

The Protective Families Framework and Early Care and Education Programs

Protective Factor that Helps Promote Optimal Child Development and Reduce Abuse and Neglect:

Parental Resilience

What It Means

A parent's psychological health plays an important role in their child's development. Parents who are emotionally healthy are able to maintain a positive attitude, creatively solve problems and effectively rise to the challenges that emerge in every family's life. Resilient parents form strong attachments to their children, foster the child's healthy development and are less likely to abuse or neglect their children.

Knowing when and how to seek help, and how to use it effectively, is a vital part of bouncing back from problems. Relationships with people they trust can help parents seek help for problems such as depression, feelings of frustration or assistance with a crisis.

Parents who have experienced violence, abuse and neglect or have had other adverse experiences may need extra caring relationships as adults to help them feel confident as parents and to develop and maintain positive relationships with their children.

How Programs Can Help

Train staff to develop trusting relationships with families during program time, and provide an opportunity for these relationships to flourish.

Hire or develop family support workers who build relationships with parents.

Understand that mental health consultants are an integral part of the staff team, available to staff and to parents when additional support is needed.

Train staff to observe children for early signs of child or family distress and respond to both children and their families with encouragement, support and help in solving problems.

The Protective Families Framework and Early Care and Education Programs

Protective Factor that Promotes Optimal Child Development and Reduces Child Abuse and Neglect:

Social Connections

What It Means

Everyone benefits from a strong network of extended family, friends, neighbors and others who provide healthy relationships, support and problem solving. Being new to a community, recently divorced or a first-time parent makes a support network even more important; it may require extra effort from programs to help families build the new relationships they need.

Belonging to a network builds parents' "social capital" and encourages opportunities to "give back." It helps develop a community that helps each other out, solves problems together and provides fun and companionship.

Friendships lead to mutual assistance in getting tangible resources all families need from time to time, such as transportation or occasional child care. Friendships also help lend emotional support.

Social connections help parents to develop and reinforce community norms about behavior that affects everyone. Norms against harsh discipline help reduce child abuse and neglect; norms about high expectations for children foster more achievement; norms about healthy eating and activity create a greater chance for long-term health.

Helping parents build friendships and other positive connections can reduce isolation, which is a consistent risk factor for negative outcomes like child abuse and neglect, domestic violence and depression.

How Programs Can Help

Set aside space for parents, with coffee or snacks, or other ways to offer parents a welcoming space atmosphere to mingle and talk.

Use regular potluck dinners with parents and children to make a special effort to reach out to new parents and foster new friendships.

Sponsor sports and outdoor activities for parents, including men.

Provide classes and workshops on parenting, cooking, health and other topics of interest.

Connect parents with organizations and resources outside the program such as churches or other classes that fit their interest.

Create special outreach and activities for fathers, grandparents and other extended family members.

The Protective Families Framework and Early Care and Education Programs

Protective Factors that Promotes Optimal Development for Children and Reduces Abuse and Neglect:

Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development

What It Means

Parents who understand the usual course of child development are more likely to be able to nurture their children's healthy development and less likely to be abusive or harmful to their children.

Basic information about child development and parenting comes from multiple sources, including extended families, cultural practices, books, television and other media, formal parent education classes and a parent's own experiences.

Observing other children of similar age helps parents understand their own child in relationship to other children.

All parents need just-in-time help from someone they trust in to help them manage new chapters in their children's development as well as specific behavior problems such as biting or hitting, without resorting to harsh discipline techniques.

Observing caregivers who use positive techniques for managing children's behavior, seeing men as well as women in nurturing roles, and learning from a program's efforts to teach children non-violent ways to resolve conflicts are key ways that parents may learn alternatives to their own negative experiences.

Parents of children with developmental or behavior problems or special needs need knowledgeable coaching and support in their parenting roles to reduce their frustration and help them become the parents their children need.

How Programs Can Help

Offer informal daily interactions between parents and program staff, plus coaching from staff on specific issues (for example: biting, sharing toys, bullying) when they arise.

Provide multiple parent education opportunities through classes or workshops that address topics parents initiate or that respond to current issues.

Provide observation opportunities such as video monitors or windows into classrooms and outdoor space where parents can watch their child interacting with other children and learn new techniques by observing staff.

Give parents opportunities to participate in conversations with other parents about their own experiences as children and how they want to change their parenting for their children.

The Protective Families Framework and Early Care and Education Programs

Protective Factor that Promotes Optimal Child Development and Reduces Child Abuse and Neglect:

Concrete Support in Times of Need

What It Means

Families need to have basic needs (shelter, food, clothing, health care) met to ensure a child's healthy development. Programs of all kinds need to be able to direct families to services and supports for meeting basic needs when necessary.

A family crisis such as unemployment, illness or death can create extreme stress within the family and make less attention available to support a child's developmental needs. Informal networks of support as well as tangible assistance can lessen the impact of a crisis.

Another kind of family crisis occurs when families experience domestic violence, substance abuse or mental illness. In these situations, professional services are required, along with support for family members to achieve safety and stability.

How Programs Can Help

Connect parents to economic resources such as job training and social services or serve as an access point for health care, child care subsidies and other benefits.

Provide for immediate needs through a closet with extra winter coats and a direct connection to a food pantry; facilitating help from other parents when appropriate.

Know how to help families' access crisis services such as a battered women's shelter, mental health services or substance abuse counseling by providing transportation and the name of a person instead of a phone number.

Train staff to listen for family stress and initiate positive conversations about family needs.

The Protective Families Framework and Early Care and Education Programs

Protective Factor that Promotes Optimal Development and Reduces Abuse and Neglect:

Social and Emotional Competence of Children

What It Means

A child's emerging ability to interact positively with others, self-regulate their behavior and effectively communicate their feelings has a positive impact on their relationships with their family, other adults and peers. A baby's early attachment to its parents is the first step in this process.

Parents and caregivers grow more responsive to children's needs – and less likely to feel stressed or frustrated – as children learn to tell parents what they need and how parental actions make them feel rather than act them out.

Children with challenging behaviors or delays in social emotional development are at greater risk for abuse. Identifying and working with children early to keep their development on track helps keep them safe and helps their parents facilitate their child's development.

Children who have experienced or witnessed violence need special care from a program – an environment where they feel safe with trained staff experienced in dealing with experienced traumatic events.

How Programs Can Help

Use both structured curriculum and informal interaction to teach children to share, be respectful of others and express themselves through language.

Provide art programs that allow children to express themselves in ways other than words.

Have ongoing engagement and communication with parents about their child's social emotional development and the actions the program is taking to facilitate it. Children often take home what they are learning at school.

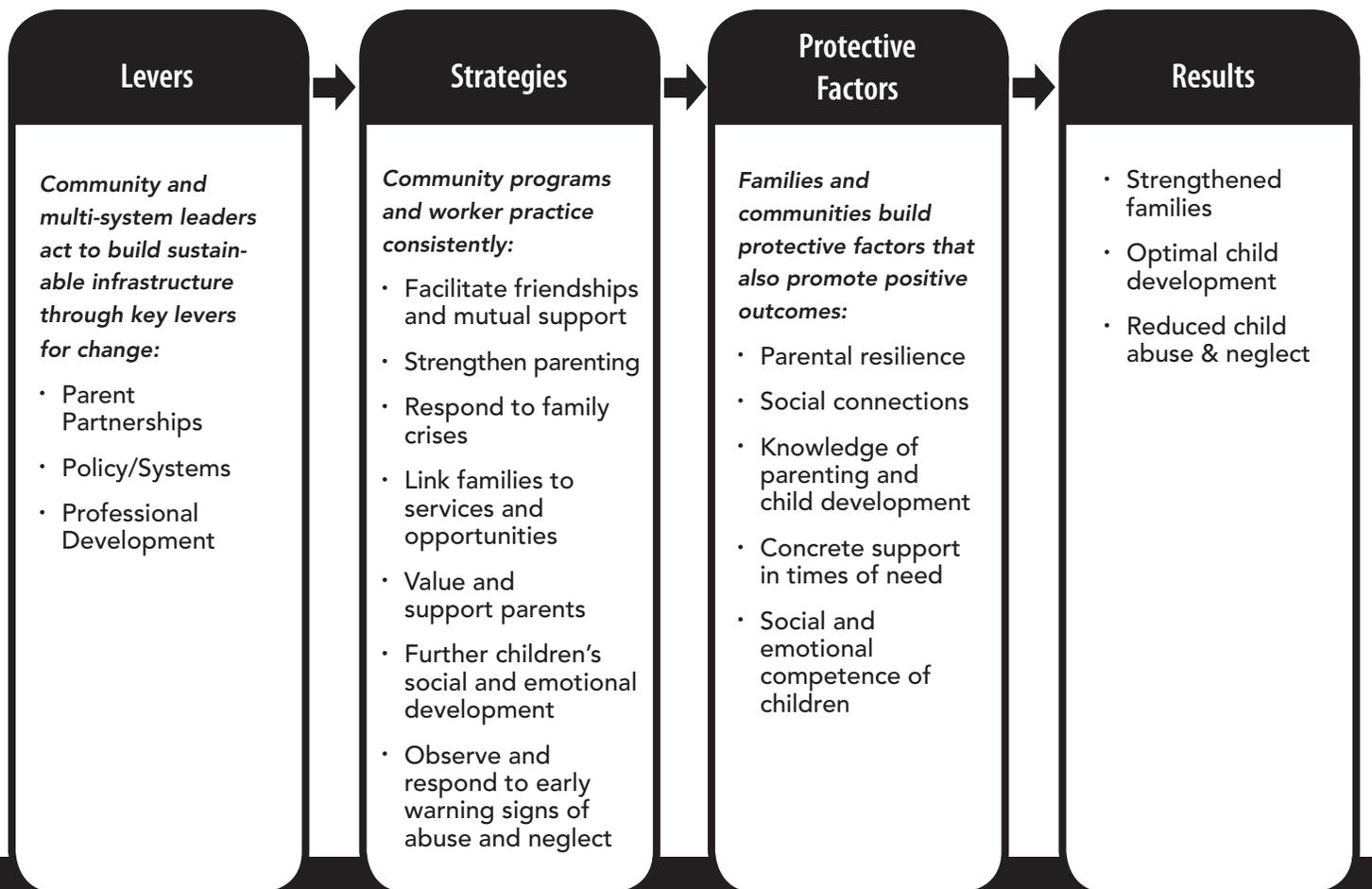
Take timely action when there is a concern – this might include asking another experienced teacher or staff member to help observe a child, talking with the parent or bringing in a consultant.

This handout and other publications and resources to help programs implement the Strengthening Families approach are available at www.strengtheningfamilies.net. The website also contains a self-assessment for programs, the research behind the Protective Factors Framework, in-depth information about the strategies that build protective factors and information about exemplary early childhood programs that informed the development of Strengthening Families.

Mobilizing partners, communities and families
to build family strengths, promote optimal
development and reduce child abuse and neglect

The Strengthening Families Approach

- Benefits ALL families
- Builds on family strengths, buffers risk, and promotes better outcomes
- Can be implemented through small but significant changes in everyday actions
- Builds on and can become a part of existing programs, strategies, systems and community opportunities
- Is grounded in research, practice and implementation knowledge



A New Vision

Families and communities, service systems and organizations:

- Focus on building protective and promotive factors to reduce risk and create optimal outcomes for all children, youth and families
- Recognize and support parents as decision-makers and leaders
- Value the culture and unique assets of each family
- Are mutually responsible for better outcomes for children, youth and families