

## *From the Expert...* Ounce of Prevention: Augmenting Early Education and Early Care



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We expect the best for our children. We want our children to attend an early care or early education setting that supports healthy child development; adheres to age-appropriate, research-based curricula; and employs nurturing, professional staff. We anticipate that these factors contribute to child well-being. We know instinctively that appropriate care and education will help them become secure and well-adjusted adolescents. But what if I were to tell you that quality early education and early care has been researched as an effective strategy for preventing child abuse and neglect?

In 2004, the Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) unveiled the results of a two-year study outlining a national-level, strategic mechanism for preventing child abuse and neglect before it could occur. *Strengthening Families through Early Care and Education* reports that:

“Early childhood professionals have known for decades that they play an important role in protecting and nurturing young children and promoting their social and emotional development. In addition to the role they can play with all parents and children, there is evidence to suggest that an early childhood program that reaches out to parents also may be the best child abuse and neglect prevention strategy.” (2004)

CSSP has had a lot of heavy-hitting national support for this concept. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), the largest national association for early childhood professionals, clearly outlines its position in *Prevention of Child Abuse in Early Childhood Programs and the Responsibilities of Early Childhood Professionals to Prevent Child Abuse*. (1996) *Zero to Three's Curriculum, Preventing Child Abuse and Neglect: Parent-Provider Partnerships in Child Care (PCAN)* is focused on supporting child care professionals to help reduce risk of abuse and neglect through their natural relationships with families and was constructed in tandem with the CSSP's *Strengthening Families* research. The National Alliance for Children's Trust and Prevention Funds sites the Early Childhood Initiative as one of its top four focus areas in *Safe and Healthy Children, Strong and Stable Families, Thriving and Prosperous Communities* (2006).

### What the Research Tells Us

How can we demonstrate that child abuse or neglect was prevented if it never occurred? Although we can not adequately determine the extent to which abuse is prevented, there are measurable indicators that “protect” a family. These protective factors are variables that reduce the potential for abuse or neglect. According to the Child Welfare Information Gateway, “[protective factors] serve as buffers,

#### Family-Centered Protective Factors

- Parental resilience – parents are able to overcome stress with positive behaviors
- An array of social connections – establishing supportive adult relationships decreases isolation
- Adequate knowledge of parenting and child development – increases the likelihood of age-appropriate expectations
- Concrete support in times of Need – access to material resources, behavioral health and coping strategies when needed

#### Child-Centered Protective Factors

- Healthy Social and Emotional Development – increases likelihood of emotional stability, speech and language development

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helping parents find resources, supports, or coping strategies that allow them to parent effectively, even under stress." By enhancing or increasing protective factors, families are strengthened, they become more resilient, and indicators of child well-being are improved.

The CSSP's *Strengthening Families* research identified five protective factors that strongly demonstrate a correlation to increased family resiliency and a reduction in the risk of child abuse and neglect. These factors include four family-centered protective factors and one child-centered protective factor. The identification of these five factors was not surprising. For years, social service agencies have used protective factors as a research-based method of coordinating prevention activities and promoting strong, resilient families. The ground-breaking premise behind *Strengthening Families* is that it identified early education and early care professionals as a vehicle to significantly enhance these protective factors and to be the catalyst for the prevention of child abuse and neglect.

## Why Early Education and Early Care?

When the Welfare Reform Act was passed in 1996, it created a shift in the number of young children enrolled in the childcare system. Recent statistics indicate that 60% of children under the age of six receive care outside of the home (CSSP, 2004.) Early education and early care professionals have the most frequent opportunity to interact with and support families of young children in a meaningful way.

CSSP's *Strengthening Families* documents seven specific strategies that early education and early care centers can use to enhance the five protective factors. These strategies assist programs that are committed to working with and supporting the parents of the children that they serve. By consistently using strategies to enhance the parent-provider relationship, protective factors can be increased and the risk for child abuse and neglect can be decreased.

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*Strengthening Families* Research  
<http://www.cssp.org/uploadFiles/handbook.pdf>

Online *Strengthening Families* Self-Assessment Tool for Centers  
<http://www.atlassoft.com/cssp/>

Promoting Healthy Families 2007 Community Resource Packet  
[http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/res\\_packet\\_2007/packet.pdf](http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/res_packet_2007/packet.pdf)

Parent Assistant Line (Alabama)  
1-888-962-3030 or <http://pal.ua.edu/>

Alabama Department of Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention  
(Children's Trust Fund/Prevent Child Abuse Alabama)  
<http://www.ctf.alabama.gov>

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### *Seven Strategies for Enhancing Protective Factors*

- **Facilitate Friendships and Mutual Support** – offer parental involvement opportunities (for ALL parents) such as parties; field trips; volunteer opportunities; family activities
- **Strengthen Parenting** – offer learning opportunities through resource libraries; parenting workshops; tip sheets; teacher consultation; charting child development; sharing information
- **Respond to Family Crisis** – get to know the parents; provide space for private consultation; provide contact lists; listen to parents; maintain confidentiality; be empathetic
- **Link Families to Services and Opportunities**— identify services and opportunities; maintain resource and referral information; share opportunities, services, and resources with ALL families.
- **Facilitate Child's Social and Emotional Development** – encourage child development; model behaviors; express feelings; practice communicating; use artwork, words, and expressive play
- **Value and Support Families** – let parents be active in decisions; know parents by name; recognize parent contributions



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