

Mission: “Pennsylvania, through the Strengthening Families Leadership Team, works to sustain and weave the Five Protective Factors, which are social and emotional competence of children, knowledge of parenting and child development, social connections, concrete supports in times of need and parental resilience, into policies, program and practice across child and family service systems.”

Relationships * Strong Families * Respect

Vision: “Pennsylvania families will use a seamless network of committed partners who provide strength-based family supports.”

The PA Strengthening Families Leadership Team’s committed members represent the following child and family service systems:

Office of Child Development and Early Learning (OCDEL)

Pennsylvania Children’s Trust Fund (CTF)

Office of Children, Youth and Families (OCYF)

PA Child Welfare Training Program

Office of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services (OMHSAS)

Pennsylvania KEY

Early Childhood Mental Health Program

Community Engagement Groups (CEGs)

Head Start (State and local programs)

Project ELECT Education Leading to Employment & Career Training (PDE)

PA Parent Information and Resource Center (PA PIRC)

Local School Districts and Intermediate Units

Pennsylvania Family Support Alliance (PFSA)

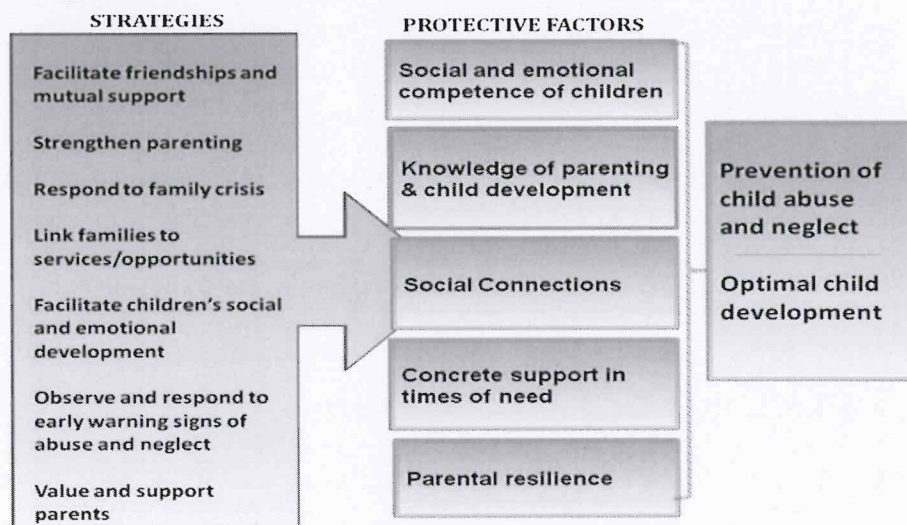
Effectiveness of the “Strengthening Families” Approach

Strengthening Families is an approach to working with families to prevent child abuse and neglect (CAN) that builds upon strengths, rather than focusing on deficits. It is not a curriculum or a program; instead, it offers a framework of five research-based Protective Factors that give parents what they need to parent effectively, even under stress:

- ◆ **For children:**
 - Healthy social and emotional development
- ◆ **For adults:**
 - Knowledge of parenting and child development
 - Social connections for families
 - Concrete supports in time of need
 - Parental resilience (ability to meet challenges and stresses)

Pennsylvania is one of several states using Strengthening Families in its core safety net and as the first response to families under stress. This prevention approach reduces the chance that families will require more costly government services and is a cost-effective way to reduce abuse and neglect, lighten social service caseloads and improve school success.

The Logic Model



Strengthening Families Research in Brief

Social and Emotional Competence in Children

The social and emotional development of young children plays a critical role in their cognitive skill building, social competence, mental health, and overall wellbeing. The nature of this development is deeply affected by the quality of a child’s relationships with his or her primary caretakers, usually parents. Healthy development is threatened when families of young children face multiple problems and stressors.

A variety of family disturbances, including maternal depression, marital discord, domestic violence, hostile and inconsistent parenting, and child maltreatment are strong predictors of early behavioral problems. National studies indicate that 5–10 percent of school-age children experience serious conduct problems; rates among preschoolers are believed to be even higher. Research also indicates that while difficult child behaviors (e.g., noncompliance, defiance) do not in and of themselves cause maltreatment, they are commonly implicated in an escalating cycle of negative parent-child interactions that may include physical abuse (Shonkoff and Phillips 2000; Ammerman 1991). Consequently, supporting children’s social and emotional development can be considered a preventive factor against child maltreatment, particularly physical abuse.



Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development

Parent education programs designed to prevent child maltreatment are based on the belief that improving parents’ understanding of child development and effective child management techniques will reduce the incidence of CAN among vulnerable families. Mental health professionals who work with maltreating parents have observed that CAN is often correlated to a lack of understanding of basic child development. In particular, adults who physically abuse children commonly have inappropriate expectations of children’s abilities, and assess children’s behaviors in excessively negative ways. Common stresses of child rearing, such as colic, night waking, separation anxiety, exploratory behavior, negativism, poor appetite or resistance to toilet-training may trigger harsh punishments or episodes of abuse (Reppucci et al, 1997, Chap. 3). The most effective parenting education programs are tailored to the specific needs of the family.

Overall, the research literature suggests that while parenting education programs are an important component of CAN prevention efforts, they must be supported by other interventions in order to have a significant impact, particularly among highly dysfunctional families (Daro 2002).

Social Connections

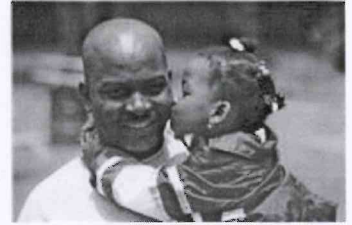
According to published research, there are multiple reasons for families being socially isolated, embedded in negative relationships, or unable to benefit from the social resources available to them. When parents need support in developing positive social connections, that support must be tailored to their particular psychological, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral needs, as well as to the current circumstances of their lives. For example, early childhood programs are a part of families’ everyday lives; they have the potential to develop a relatively deep, personalized knowledge of each family. When combined with the full repertoire of services in the Strengthening Families approach, programs have the ability to respond to parents’ particular needs in developing protective, pro-social connections.

Concrete Supports in Times of Need

Research demonstrates that family poverty is the strongest factor known to be correlated with CAN. Providing concrete support to help families cope with the stresses associated with poverty—particularly in times of crisis or intensified need—represents an important strategy to prevent child maltreatment. Helping families access critical material resources and/or behavioral health services is a particularly promising intervention strategy. ECE programs are in an especially good position to provide these interventions, as they work with parents and children on a daily basis. This connection with the everyday lives of low-income families should enable them to detect the existence or development of high-stress or crisis situations, and connect parents with resources when they are most needed.

Parental Resilience

Research shows that programs that effectively help parents develop pro-social connections and/or link them to other needed services increase parental resilience. The literature on CAN prevention and adult resiliency provides detailed explanation of why these connections are vitally important in preventing child maltreatment. Caring, supportive relationships—with friends, intimate partners, and/or professional therapists—are the key means by which parents develop the capacity to form functional relationship with their children. In particular, parents who experienced maltreatment or other severe stressors in their own childhood become resilient by developing the capacity to “love well,” or empathize with themselves and others.



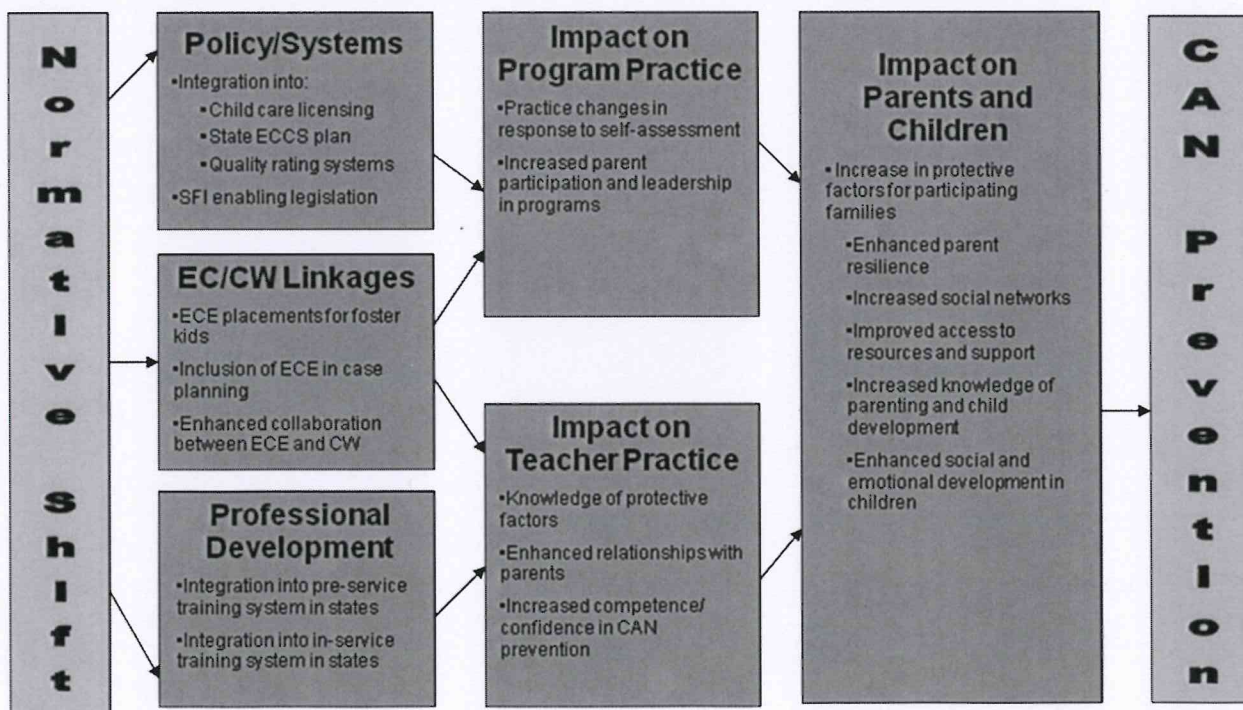
Source: *Protective Factors Literature Review: early care and education programs and the prevention of child abuse and neglect*, Center for the Study of Social Policy, 1575 Eye St., NW, Suite 500 Washington, DC 20005, 2003.

What is being evaluated?

There are several interim indicators that can show how progress is being made toward reductions in child abuse and neglect. Mapping backwards from the result of reduced child abuse and neglect, child abuse prevention depends on building the five protective factors with families. These can be measured by a variety of indicators, as the underlying research studies show. Improved early childhood program practices and improved practices by individual teachers will determine the extent to which children and families build the necessary protective factors. There are several ways to measure these two levels of practice changes.

Changing practice in programs depends on the extent to which policy and systems changes. Better linkages between child welfare workers and early childhood staff and professional development opportunities provide support to local programs so that their practices can change and be supported in an ongoing way.

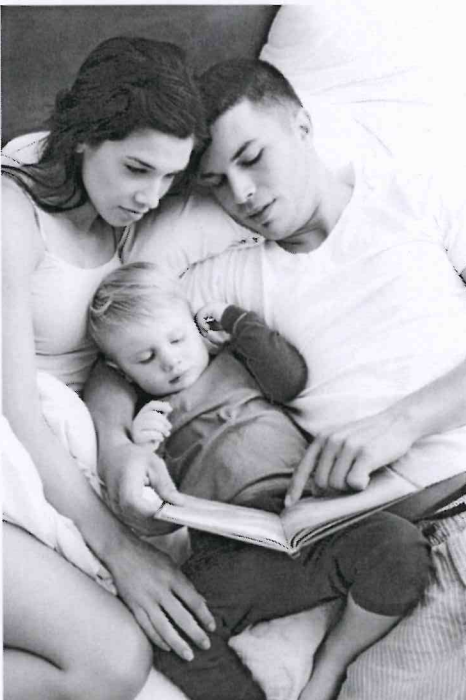
The three supports for program practice, of course, start with a shift in thinking about child abuse prevention, away from a risk-oriented, deficit approach to one that builds on family strengths, using universally available partnerships with early childhood programs.



Putting Research into Practice in Pennsylvania

Pennsylvania's Strengthening Families initiative is beginning to translate research into practice. For example:

- ◆ Thirty-eight professional development instructors from the early childhood field completed a 6.5 hour Building Protective Factors with Families "Professional Development Instructors' Institute" (PDII) in January 2010. 13 regional trainings (71 early childhood programs) have occurred in PA, involving 221 early childhood professionals. Evaluations of the training indicate that, following the training:
 - 94% of the participants feel they have a greater understanding of the protective factors
 - 93% of the participants can describe specific things they can do to strengthen families
 - 90% of the participants are comfortable talking to parents about difficult topics
 - 88% of the participants believe they have a role to play in child abuse prevention
 - 77% of the participants intend to share more resources with families
 - 70% of the participants are committed to learning more about community resources
 - 63% of the participants plan to interact differently with families
 - 62% of the participants will reach out to isolated families
- ◆ The PA Quality Rating and Improvement System (Keystone STARS) was updated to incorporate Strengthening Families language in the worksheets and Best Practice Guides used by early learning programs and can be found at www.pakeys.org under the tab Early Childhood Programs, forms & tools, optional tools.
- ◆ Over 50 affiliates of PA Family Support Alliance (PFSA) have completed a self-assessment of their use of the protective factors in existing CAN prevention programming and have devised strategies to improve their programs with research-based principles.



For more information

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Visit the Strengthening Families website at
www.strengtheningfamilies.net.