

What is Strengthening Families Alaska?

Strengthening Families is a new, proven, cost-effective strategy to prevent child abuse and neglect. The strategy involves early childhood centers working to build protective factors around children by supporting family strengths and resiliency. In 2005, Alaska was one of seven states to be selected by the Center for the Study of Social Policy to pilot this approach. The Alaska Strengthening Families Leadership Team is now working to expand the use of this model across the state.

What is special about this approach?

With funding from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, the Center for the Study for Social Policy (CSSP) set out to develop a strategic, feasible approach to child abuse prevention that would be systematic and national, reach large numbers of very young children, and have impact long before abuse or neglect occurred. Their research revealed that proven, positive results take place when early childhood centers work to strengthen five protective factors known to be correlated with child abuse and neglect.

The Center for the Study of Social Policy also identified key strategies used by exemplary early care and education programs to build protective factors.

Protective Factors

The Center for the Study of Social Policy spent two years researching and identifying five protective factors that prevent child abuse and neglect.

These are:

For adults:

- Parental resilience
- Social connections
- Knowledge of parenting and child development
- Concrete support in times of need

For children:

- Healthy social and emotional development

Early Childhood Program Strategies:

EXEMPLARY ECE PROGRAMS USED STRATEGIES TO:

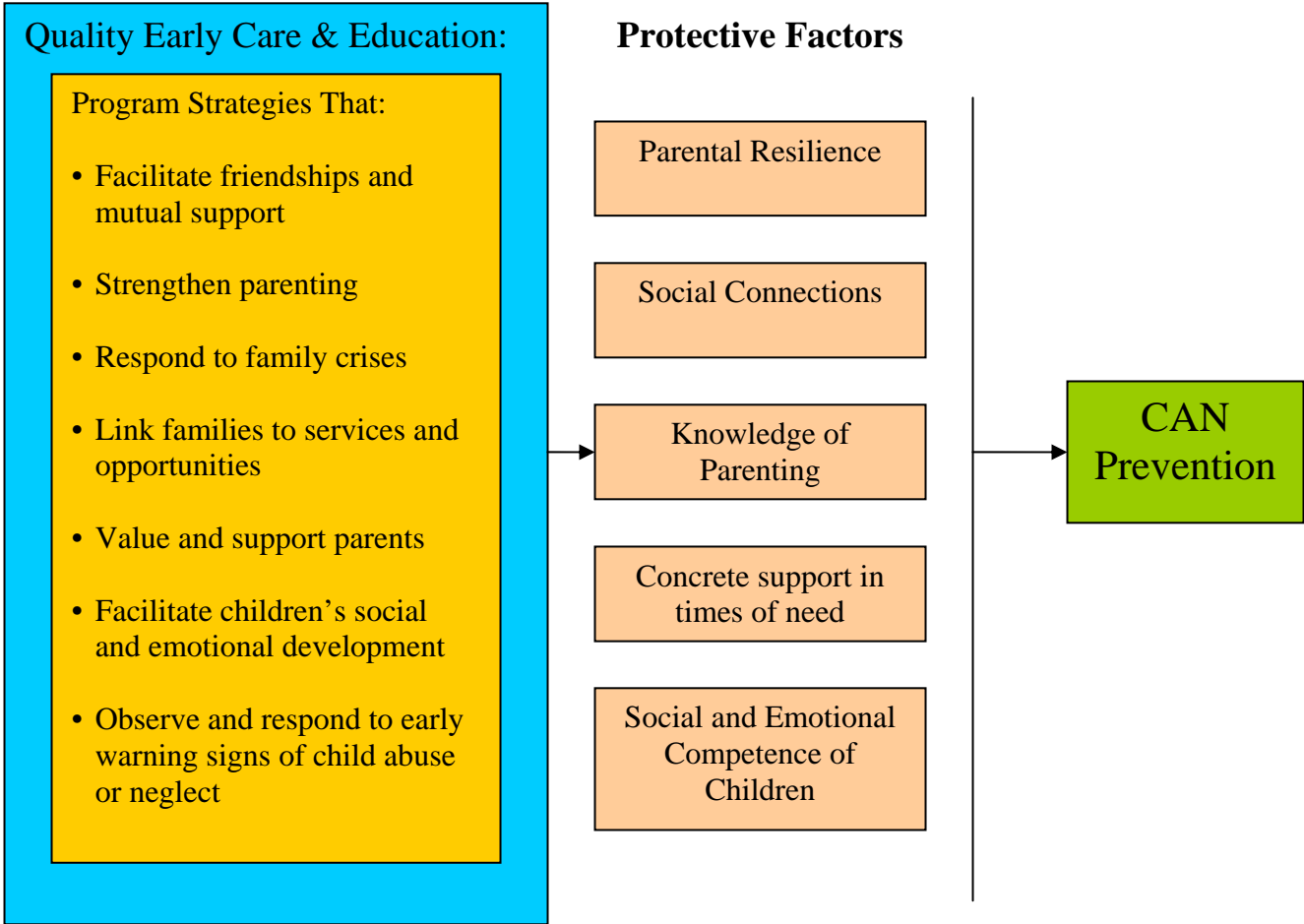
- Facilitate parental friendships and mutual support
- Strengthen parenting
- Respond to family crises
- Link families to services and opportunities
- Facilitate children's social/emotional development
- Observe and respond to early warning signs of child abuse or neglect

ADDITIONALLY STRATEGIES WERE USED TO:

- Build a respectful staff culture
- Support parents as leaders
- Customize the physical space
- Form relationships with child welfare personnel
- Engage men

In keeping with the goal of focusing on strengths instead of deficits, the Strengthening Families approach uses a logic model for reducing child abuse and neglect based on building resiliency rather than reducing risk.

How Early Childhood programs contribute to prevention of child abuse and neglect



Parent Resiliency: Parents who are emotionally resilient are able to maintain a positive attitude, creatively solve problems, and effectively rise to challenges in their lives -- and are less likely to abuse or neglect their children. Early childhood programs can promote parental resilience in a variety of ways - providing a warm and welcoming environment to parents as well as children, providing family support services on site, and offering social and emotional activities for children that may impact the way parents think about their own behavior.

Social Connections: Extensive evidence links social isolation and child maltreatment. It is not the simple fact of social connectedness that protects against child abuse and neglect however, but rather relationships that are positive, trusting, reciprocal, and flexible, and that embody pro-social, child-friendly values. Programs can strengthen social connections by creating a community space and opportunities

for parents to connect with other parents in a comfortable environment. Additionally, many programs serve as a conduit for a variety of social activities, from holiday celebrations to bowling leagues.

Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development: Early care and learning programs are a natural place for parents to turn for parenting information and support. There are countless “teachable moments” that can be used to apply and reinforce positive parenting principles in an everyday context. Providing formal and informal opportunities for parents to gain parenting knowledge and skills can help them develop appropriate expectations of their children’s abilities and behaviors.

Support in Times of Need: Many programs serve families facing multiple stressors and multiple risks. Research suggests that helping families access material resources and/or behavioral health services represent two promising intervention strategies to reduce child abuse and neglect.

Children’s Healthy Social and Emotional Development: For parents with particularly challenging children, the social and emotional work program staff do with children can provide welcome added support and reduce the stress in their family home. Early childhood programs’ impact on children’s social and emotional development happens in two ways; through social and emotional development activities with children in the classroom and by working with parents to help them build positive relationships with their children.

ALASKA STRENGTHENING FAMILIES GOALS:

- To highlight and expand the valuable role that early care and education programs play in their efforts to prevent child abuse and neglect
- To actively engage the early care and education community in becoming key stakeholders in carrying out child abuse and neglect prevention strategies
- To enhance collaboration between the Office of Children’s Services, Child Protection Program staff and the early care and education community statewide
- To link early care and education and child protection programs systems change efforts into a cohesive statewide plan

Targeted Outcomes:

- ❖ ECE programs will recognize their role in preventing child abuse and neglect and implement effective strategies for supporting parents and building protective factors around children.
- ❖ Parents will access the support and services they need to care for their children and report feeling supported in increasing their capacity to parent.
- ❖ Child Protection Service workers will see themselves as members of the prevention team, refer screened out families to community ECE resources, include protective factors in the early assessment of families, and routinely include placement in quality early childhood education programs in service plans for children 0-5.
- ❖ Professional training and education programs will use consistent vocabulary and goals regarding protective factors in their curriculum.
- ❖ Key policy and practice changes will be initiated for statewide implementation of the Strengthen Families principles.
- ❖ A plan will be developed to promote the Strengthening Families principles statewide.

ALASKA'S STRENGTHENING FAMILIES LEADERSHIP TEAM INCLUDES:

- Office of Children's Services, Department of Health and Social Services
- Child Care Program, Division of Public Assistance, Department of Health and Social Services
- Teaching and Learning Support, Department of Education and Early Development
- Women, Children and Family Health, Division of Public Health, Department of Health and Social Services
- Alaska Children's Trust
- Resource Center for Parents and Children, Prevention of Child Abuse America Affiliate
- Child Care Resource and Referral Network
- System for Early Education and Development (SEED), University of Alaska Southeast
- Alaska Association for the Education of Young Children
- United Way of Anchorage
- Best Beginnings, Early Learning Council
- Parent Representatives

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

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