
The Role of
Relationships in
Early Childhood
Education



Strengthening Families in Illinois

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Increasing Family Engagement in Early Childhood Programs

Strengthening Families is a relationship-based child abuse and neglect prevention initiative started nationally in 2001 through a partnership between the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation and the Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) in Washington, DC. Thirty-five states and several thousand early childhood programs nationwide implement

Strengthening Families in early care and education settings. The states and programs build research-based protective factors into early childhood systems and programs to prevent child abuse and neglect.

Protective factors are positive attributes that strengthen all families, not just those at risk for child abuse and neglect (see “Strengthening Families—Protective Factors”).

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Strengthening Families—Protective Factors

1. Parental Resilience: Parents need to be strong and flexible.

What it is: Having problem-solving skills; being able to rebound; being flexible; experiencing emotional well-being.

How early childhood programs build it: Being welcoming and supportive; building relationships with families; meeting one-on-one with families; working with families to develop family goals and identify resources; involving families in decisions about their children and the program.

2. Social Connections: Parents need friends.

What it is: Having a positive peer network, mutual support systems, and community connections.

How early childhood programs build it: Making space available for families to meet informally; supporting parents in planning events for parents and children; arranging family field trips and family activities outside the center; providing volunteer opportunities; working closely with parent advisory groups.

3. Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development: Being a great parent is part natural and part learned.

What it is: Understanding what children are learning—and what they are capable of learning—at different ages and stages; having appropriate approaches to teaching and guiding children.

How early childhood programs build it: Making parenting information available in families' home languages; sharing classroom observations with parents; telling parents something positive about what their children did during the day; conducting home visits; offering parenting classes; sending home newsletters; setting up lending libraries for parents; holding parent–teacher conferences.

4. Concrete Support in Times of Need: We all need help sometimes.

What it is: Being able to meet basic needs; having access to program services, informal support, and resources to deal with a crisis.

How early childhood programs build it: Building relationships with families so they feel comfortable sharing the challenges they face; making space available for staff to meet privately with families; responding to signs of parent and family distress; being connected to and familiar with community services and organizations (e.g., food programs, clothing closets).

5. Social and Emotional Competence of Children: Parents need to help their children communicate.

What it is: Helping children identify and express feelings in positive ways and helping them understand that other people have feelings and needs; teaching ways to resolve conflicts; encouraging friendships.

How early childhood programs build it: Using social and emotional curricula (e.g., Second Step, Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (CSEFEL), I Can Problem Solve); offering parenting education opportunities; providing individualized support to parents; helping families understand age-appropriate social and emotional skills and behaviors; encouraging children to express their feelings through words, artwork, and expressive play.

6. Healthy Parent–Child Relationships: Give your children the love and respect they need.

What it is: Bonding with the child; nurturing the child; fostering secure attachment; having a loving, reciprocal parent–child relationship; setting healthy boundaries.

How early childhood programs build it: Offering parent–child activities and parenting education opportunities.

Protective factors are adapted, with the authors' permission, from the Center for the Study of Social Policy's second edition of *Strengthening Families—A Guidebook for Early Childhood Programs* (Washington, DC: CCSP, 2008) and from K.G. Wolf's *Living the Protective Factors—How Parents Keep Their Children Safe and Families Strong* (Chicago: Strengthening Families Illinois, Be Strong Families, 2012). The factors are available at www.strengtheningfamilies.org.

The factors incorporate principles and practices regarding relationships, families, and community engagement from the NAEYC Early Childhood Program Standards, Head Start Program Performance Standards, and other measures of quality in early childhood education.

In the Strengthening Families approach, early childhood teachers and child welfare professionals work intentionally through relationships with families to build protective factors. The approach is based on what early childhood professionals have known for years:

- Early childhood programs are places to foster supportive relationships that help build stronger families.
- There is a close relationship between teachers and families of very young children.
- Early childhood programs offer daily opportunities for observation and learning with families.
- Families interact with early childhood programs as empowered consumers rather than as clients or recipients of a service.

The key to implementing Strengthening Families is increasing meaningful family engagement in programs and communities. Emotional and behavioral characteristics related to healthy relationships include empathy, warmth, genuineness, respect, self-disclosure, and energized feelings (feeling liked and welcome). These characteristics need to be part of the relationships between families and program staff in order for families to feel cared about by, part of, and engaged in an early care and education program (Hanna 1991).

Strengthening Families Illinois

Illinois became a pilot state for implementing Strengthening Families in early 2005. The Strengthening Families Illinois (SFI) leadership team includes early childhood professionals and parent leaders representing more than 40 partners—early childhood programs, agencies, community organizations—committed to embedding protective factors in their services for children and families. SFI engages families, bridges the gap between early childhood programs and the child welfare system, and develops early childhood learning networks. Hub programs—organizations such as the Carole Robertson Center for Learning and the Child Care Resource and Referral Agency at John A. Logan College—recruit local early childhood programs to join the network. Together they learn how to implement the Strengthening Families approach. Learning networks formed the core of the initiative from 2006 to 2012 (a structural change is currently under way).

In 2011 there were 12 early childhood learning networks in Illinois, with about 170 early childhood programs, including Head Start, prekindergarten programs, private early childhood programs, multisite agencies, family child care networks, and faith-based programs. Programs participate voluntarily and complete the online CSSP program self-assessment, which requires input from families, staff, board members, and community members. Participating programs

- Develop an action plan, based on the self-assessment, to improve an aspect of programming related to building the protective factors



- Participate in training and staff development on protective factors, communicating with families, and more (see the section “Professional Development Makes the Implicit Explicit,” page 22, for a full list of topics)
- Participate in monthly network meetings to reinforce what staff learn in the trainings
- Participate in evaluation efforts that include annual parent and staff surveys

Making a difference

In spring 2011 Strengthening Families Illinois evaluated early childhood programs that had been participating in the Illinois initiative for more than two years (Douglass 2011). The evaluation included review of parent and staff surveys, programs’ completion of a survey instrument, interviews, and site visits. The evaluation asked what difference participation in SFI made. Respondents stated overwhelmingly that participation in Strengthening Families resulted in more and better-quality family involvement. Ninety-two percent found that being part of SFI helped



them define and articulate their family engagement and family support efforts.

Program staff described the following ways SFI helped them to be more effective in their family engagement efforts: increased parent involvement and attendance at family events and meetings; increased parent-to-parent interactions and relationships; increased parent leadership; and improved parent-staff formal and informal communication.

Elements of success

What is it about Strengthening Families Illinois that is responsible for these successes? Evaluation results suggest explanations in five main areas.

1. Protective factors and Parent Cafés. First and foremost are the protective factors. Initially, Strengthening Families based its national efforts on early childhood providers and child welfare professionals working intentionally with families to build protective factors. In 2005 an Illinois parent challenged the SFI leadership team: “You’ve got important information [the protective factors] that families

need, and you’re planning to give it to us by going through early childhood programs. Why not give it to families directly?”

With assistance from parent leaders, SFI rewrote the protective factors in more accessible language in order to deliver them directly to parents through parent-to-parent learning rather than program-to-parent learning. Strengthening Families Illinois developed Parent Cafés, based on the World Café model (Brown & Isaacs 2005) (see “What Is the World Café?”). SFI adapted the process for peer-to-peer parent learning about the six protective factors and self-reflection, with parent leaders leading parents in small group discussions.

What Is the World Café?

The World Café is a small group conversation process that facilitates consensus building and strategic planning. A “host” welcomes participants to a café-like environment. Participants and a “table host” sit four or five to a table and discuss a question, with the table host facilitating. After 15 or 20 minutes, the table host stays at the table and the participants move to other tables and discuss a different question.

SFI Parent Cafés take place in early childhood settings. Parents, grandparents, and others who are responsible for children’s care are participants, and parent leaders are hosts. The secret of the cafés’ effectiveness is that parents lead, learn from, and assist parents. They discuss questions related to the protective factors, such as “What do you do to help your child control her strong emotions?,” and issues that matter to participants as individuals, families, and community members, such as resourcefulness during tough economic times or violence in the community. After three rounds of discussion, there is a large group debriefing, or “harvest,” that assists participants in bringing together what they have learned.

More than 8,000 parents have participated in Parent Cafés in Illinois since they began in 2007, and the results are overwhelmingly positive. Parent Cafés support diversity because SFI organizes them in different languages and around different groups (teen moms, fathers, foster parents, and others). Early childhood programs involved in SFI hold the cafés. They reach out to their families and the community through invitations, newsletters, parent boards, and social media. They are led by parents, for parents, which is what makes them meaningful.

2. A welcoming community and culture in the program. Ninety parents took part in a focus group café to discuss what makes them want to participate in their

child's program (see "Inviting Parent Participation"). The consensus was that parents participate when they feel welcome. To make parents feel welcome, program staff need to build relationships with them before expecting them to come to events or serve on committees.

Inviting Parent Participation

Parents say, I will come if . . .

- I helped plan the activity.
- Someone I know or care about asks me to attend (more than once).
- I feel positive about the content.
- I feel it's important that I be there.
- I have transportation.
- I promised to go with someone.
- My contributions are valued.
- My children can come with me.
- There's dinner!

Reprinted, with permission, from Strengthening Families Illinois's *You're Welcome: Parent Leaders Speak Out on What It Takes to Promote Real Parent Engagement* (Chicago: Author, 2011), at www.strengtheningfamiliesillinois.org/mirror/downloads/Youre_Welcome_web1.pdf.

Developing relationships with families is an intentional commitment of all program staff. Discussion of parent involvement should be part of the hiring, supervision, and performance evaluation process. In addition, parent-staff relationships need to be supported through team building, professional development opportunities, and discussions at program staff meetings. Research conducted on behalf of Strengthening Families Illinois (Douglass 2009; Douglass & Klerman 2012) raised the point that an early childhood program is unlikely to be successful in engaging parents effectively and positively if the program climate is not supportive of staff. What happens between staff is reflected in the relationships between staff and parents.

3. Professional development makes the implicit explicit. In Illinois, a group from the state's Strengthening Families leadership team identified seven training topics for programs adopting the approach: (1) protective factors, (2) communicating with families, (3) recognizing and responding to signs of family stress, (4) building strong relationships with families, (5) collaborating with child welfare, (6) social and emotional foundations for learning, and (7) helping children heal from trauma. SFI partners developed the curriculum, and child care resource and referral agencies



One teacher described “being able to provide parents with a different way of learning and parenting, where they are comfortable expressing how they feel about themselves.”

and Illinois hub coordinators provided training for participants in their local learning networks.

4. Commitment to the Strengthening Families program strategies. Including family members in the CSSP program self-assessment process, completed every three years, strengthens early childhood program-family relationships. Based on the results of the self-assessment, program representatives, family members, coaches, accreditation facilitation staff, and others develop an action plan to identify areas that can be strengthened. The plan is their commitment to strengthening components of their programming by embedding the protective factors and a family-strengthening approach in their work with children and families.

5. Tools to assist with implementation. SFI supports participating programs with tools and resources. Programs create and share resources with each other as well. The resources vary from sample lesson plans and staff meeting agendas to posters (e.g., “Protective Factors,” “101 Ways to Nurture Your Spirit”), perennial calendars (365 ways

to engage parents), and Café Talk (25 questions on each protective factor). These resources keep front and center the protective factors, programs' Strengthening Families commitment, and the messages staff receive during professional development.

Conclusion

What makes the difference when Illinois early childhood programs build successful, collaborative relationships with families? The difference is staff's desire to shift and deepen their practice and to change practices that may be subtle barriers to closer staff-family connections. The shift from being child centered to family centered is difficult. It requires professional development, new practices, reinforcement, tools, and new ways of interacting with families and colleagues. But the benefits are profound. Describing how Strengthening Families Illinois had made a difference, one program director said, "When a parent was chronically late, we used to look at our watches at pick-up time and complain to each other about how inconsiderate she was. Now, we say to each other, 'I wonder what's going on with her and how we could help.'" Changes like this are at the heart of Strengthening Families Illinois's success in strengthening relationships with families.

For more information about Strengthening Families nationally and Strengthening Families Illinois, visit www.strengtheningfamilies.net and www.strengtheningfamiliesillinois.org, respectively.

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Go instead where there is no path...and leave a trail.

- Ralph Waldo Emerson

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