

Title: Strengthening Vulnerable Families Through Early Care and Education

Moderator: Diane Schilder, Researcher and CCPRC Member, Education Development Center

Cathy Overbagh, CCB

Nilofer Ahsan, Center for the Study of Social Policy

Ellen Wheatley, State Child Care Administrator, New Hampshire

Martha Reeder, Project Director, AECCS, Arkansas

Jamala Wade, Program Development Coordinator, Division of Childcare and Early Childhood Education, Arkansas

SUMMARY OF PRESENTATION

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Specifically, the session focused on actions states are taking through participation in the “Strengthening Families Initiative” funded in part by the Children’s Bureau’s Child Abuse Prevention program and the Doris Duke Foundation.• Panelists presented overviews of the key federal and state objectives in supporting this cross-system work and presented evaluation results. Panelists described how the initiative is enhancing child care providers’ ability to work productively with families and community agencies to prevent child abuse and neglect and to enhance child and family outcomes.• The session also addressed the policy implications for sustaining and scaling up the initiative. |
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SUMMARY OF DISCUSSION

<p>Diane Schilder, of the Education Development Center</p>
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Key indicators of success were the alignment of goals and activities. The particular emphasis of this session is focused on child abuse and neglect and protective factors for vulnerable children and families. |
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<p>Cathy Overbagh, Child Care Bureau</p>
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Highlighted the significance of collaboration and partnerships for serving families comprehensively. Strengthening protective factors is critical to the work of the Children’s Bureau and staff recognized the important role of quality child care for this issue. Among the shared goals of the Children’s Bureau and the Child Care Bureau is increased access to a range of high quality early care and education settings to support families. This can be achieved through coordination and systems integration as exemplified in the Strengthening Families (SF) Initiative. |
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<p>Nilofer Ahsan, from the Center for the Study of Social Policy</p>
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Shared information on the SF Initiative. Understanding that families look to child care for resources and support, the development of the SF Initiative model |
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focused on child care as a delivery mechanism for prevention of child abuse and neglect. Knowledge of parenting and child development is critical to successful child rearing and yet knowledge transfer is difficult. Parenting courses often miss the optimal time of child guidance. However, child care providers have regular communication opportunities with parents and early childhood teachers have the basic knowledge needed to educate parents on guidance techniques.

- Research was conducted in four basic steps: 1) search the evidence to find out what factors influence the child abuse and neglect, 2) explore the connection between factors that prevent child abuse and neglect and what quality early childhood programs do to build them, 3) identify programs that build the factors and learn how they do it, and 4) learn about policy and practice changes needed to infuse the model statewide through a partnership with 7 pilot states. Currently, many partners and funders are exploring potentially extending this model and contributions to the SF Initiative.
- What does it mean for a state to implement the SF Initiative? More early childhood education programs using the protective factors framework. Parent leadership demonstrated at all levels. Integration of SF Initiative into all early learning initiatives. Early learning and child welfare services build stronger mutually beneficial relationships. Documentation of key decision points.
- Currently working on developing a SF Network for peer sharing opportunities across states. Also funding child care/child welfare linkage work. Exploration of tools that will support parent-to-parent partnerships.

Ellen Wheatley, State Child Care Administrator for New Hampshire

- Highlighted the implementation of a statewide agenda for the SF Initiative.
- NH has over 90,000 children younger than 6 and over 60,000 need non-maternal care. Based on assessments of child abuse or neglect in the state, NH applied for and was selected as one of the original 7 Center for the Study of Social Policy Pilot States. A survey of child care providers was conducted to determine potential sites for the SF Initiative. Ten Exemplar Child Care Programs were selected because they provide: high quality care and education for children, social connections for families, parenting education opportunities, and resources and referrals in the community. These ten sites completed an intensive self-assessment, developed a program goal, focused on enhancing protective factors in families, became mentors to other child care programs in their community, and forged closer relationships with local child welfare offices. NH also made strategic decisions for professional development. The State Leadership Team identified professional development as a means to transforming child care practice regarding supporting families. Strengthening Families is embedded in child care practice throughout NH's professional development model.

Martha Reeder, Project Director for the Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems grant in Arkansas

- To increase the health and well-being of children. Resources used to guide the work of Arkansas relative to strengthening families and effective early childhood system development were shared. Working from Sharon Lynn Kagan’s work in this area, Arkansas assessed the current early childhood system against her guidelines and recommendations to determine key priority areas needed for programming and policy decisions.
- The result was a framework in which high quality early care and education programs build the five protective factors: 1) parent resilience, 2) social connections, 3) knowledge of parenting and child development, 4) concrete supports in time of need, and 5) social and emotional competence of children.
- This is done by intentionally implementing seven program strategies: 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, and 7) observe and responds to early warning signs of child abuse or neglect. This initiative was developed in order to help prevent child abuse and neglect.

The major goals for the SF Initiative were: increased awareness among early childhood professionals about SF concepts and strategies; increased parent involvement in early learning programs; increased utilization by early childhood professionals of three key concepts (self-awareness, careful observation, and flexible response) to strengthen parent provider partnerships. The major activities that supported these goals included: train-the-trainer events for 8 multi-disciplinary teams, creation of a steering committee providing support and guidance to the project, and continuous evaluation. Currently, an online training course is being developed to educate professionals on this framework that can be utilized in their programs.

KEY POINTS

Collaboration between child care and child welfare systems is critical to efforts for the prevention of child abuse and neglect.

Comprehensive system development for child care must include basic elements of child protective factors and parent education delivered in natural environments (child care programs) to effectively strengthen vulnerable families.

Leveraging existing efforts, resources and activities is key to developing initiatives that support vulnerable children and families.

There are many available resources to guide state efforts for developing policies and programs that strengthen vulnerable families and prevent child abuse and neglect.