

C E N T E R F O R T H E S T U D Y O F S O C I A L P O L I C Y

strengthening families

THROUGH EARLY CARE & EDUCATION



protective factors literature review:

early care and education programs
and the prevention of child abuse
and neglect

The graph below shows the program strategies used by exemplary programs to build the protective factors known to reduce child abuse and neglect.

how early childhood programs help prevent child abuse and neglect

Excellent early care and education programs use common program strategies to build the protective factors known to reduce child abuse and neglect.

QUALITY EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION

Program strategies that:

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

PROTECTIVE FACTORS

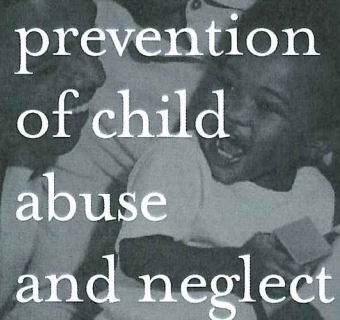
Parental resilience

Social connections

Knowledge of parenting and child development

Concrete support in times of need

Social and emotional competence of children



prevention
of child
abuse
and neglect

introduction

THE PROTECTIVE FACTORS APPROACH

In the fall of 2001, the Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) began a two-year study of early care and education programs throughout the United States to determine if they might be an effective avenue for preventing child abuse and neglect. CSSP chose to focus on early care and education programs because these programs represent a systematic way to reach the largest number of very young children (children younger than kindergarten age). The uniquely close relationship between the caregiver or teacher and parents of very young children, the daily opportunities for observation and learning with parents, the relationship between early childhood programs and other resources for young parents, and the fact that parents come there as “empowered consumers” rather than as clients or recipients of service, made this a promising universal strategy.

Strengths Versus Deficits

A further goal of the work was to develop a credible framework for child abuse and neglect prevention that can lead program developers, policymakers, and advocates toward effective prevention strategies based on building strengths with families rather than focusing exclusively on risks and deficits. The reluctance of families to participate in programs that identify them as “at risk” is well-documented and amounts to a significant barrier in interventions designed to reduce abuse and neglect. An evidence-based model built on promoting resilience would provide a new angle on prevention

and move toward a widespread understanding of what all kinds of programs and providers can do—and in some cases already do—to promote healthy child development and reduce the incidence of child abuse and neglect. The hypothesis is that a more universal approach can be an effective way of reaching many more families long before a risk of child abuse or neglect emerges.

The Logic Model

In keeping with the goal of focusing on strengths instead of deficits, CSSP developed a logic model for reducing child abuse and neglect based on building resiliency as a way of reducing risk factors. An early scan of existing research about conditions related to a lower incidence of child abuse and neglect revealed several “protective factors” that appear to be related to reduced incidence of child maltreatment. The protective factors related to families include: parental resilience, an array of social connections, adequate knowledge of parenting and child development, and support in times of need, including access to necessary services such as mental health. The protective factor related to children is their healthy social and emotional development.

The initial set of protective factors was determined after discussions with a national advisory panel and researchers in the child abuse prevention, early childhood and family support fields. The factors are not unique to this framework; they are addressed by many

ferent strategies interact to produce a protective impact. A comprehensive literature review was commissioned to discover pertinent research evidence of a connection between what early care and education programs do (or could do) and a reduction in child abuse and neglect. The final formulation of protective factors for this framework was determined after studying what actually happens in programs in the field.

The hypothesis for the program research part of this work was that some early childhood education programs actively build protective factors through their programs and thus can be effective agents in preventing child abuse and neglect. Subsequent research in the programs sought information about specific strategies that programs use to build protective factors for the families and children they serve. The program's work around the protective factors was assumed to occur in the context of maintaining a "high quality" early childhood program as defined by national standards.

More than 100 programs were nominated by national experts and state early childhood leaders as potential exemplary programs working to build the protective factors. Twenty-six programs were visited by CSSP staff for extensive data gathering. Twenty-one programs were determined to be excellent examples of how early care and education programs work in their daily programs to build protective factors against child abuse and neglect. The many strategies that were found in common across these programs work together to build the protective factors. Programs

sometimes use a single strategy to build more than one protective factor, and often use several strategies at different times with different families to have impact on a single protective factor.

Preventing Child Abuse and Neglect Versus Other Good Outcomes

While the identified protective factors also may be linked to a variety of positive outcomes for young children, this study is concerned with the link between the factors and a lower incidence of child abuse and neglect. For the Strengthening Families approach to work, it is vital to show that improved child abuse and neglect results can accrue from increasing the identified protective factors. Child abuse and neglect prevention advocates and funding sources need to see what kind of return they might get on an investment in building protective factors. Early childhood programs need to see how their existing efforts link specifically to the prevention of child abuse and neglect and how their work may need to be reinforced or changed to get a better child abuse and neglect prevention result.

Although this approach seeks to highlight how some high quality early care and education programs already provide strategies that will reduce child abuse and neglect, it also shows that high quality early care and education as it is currently defined is not sufficient to prevent child abuse and neglect. High quality care doesn't necessarily reduce the incidence of child abuse and neglect unless it includes specific strategies

designed to build protective factors with families. For example, an effective universal strategy against child abuse and neglect has to include facilitating social connections for families. Many high quality early care and education programs do not make attempts to help families in this way, even though they may employ excellent child development strategies in their classrooms.

Factors Not Addressed

There are other factors linked to a reduction in child abuse and neglect, such as mitigation of poverty and a lower incidence of mental illness, domestic violence and substance abuse by parents. These issues are beyond the reach of early care and education programs and are not included in this framework. The extent to which these factors interact with those in the framework or have an overwhelming impact on the capacity of an early care and education program to prevent child abuse and neglect are addressed in the literature review.

There is some evidence that community norms influence the incidence of violence, including child abuse. Promoting community norms against violence was originally proposed as a protective factor in this framework. The study sought to find research evidence of a link between community norms about violence and a reduction in child maltreatment or evidence that early childhood programs might work effectively in their communities to build non-violence as a norm.

In the end, there was little research evidence to make the explicit link between child abuse and neglect and

community norms. In the exemplary programs that were studied, there were a few programs engaged in working toward community-wide norms against violence. However, most programs engaged in violence prevention programs within the classroom, which created school-level norms against violence. What the children learned at school, in turn, appeared to have an impact on the parent's behavior toward the child and a new perspective about how the parent's verbal or physical interaction with the child affected the child. These came exclusively from parent reports; program staff had not considered the impact of classroom norms on family behavior.

The Protective Factors Literature Review

The following paper presents the knowledge base behind the CSSP Strengthening Families approach. Information about the strategies that exemplary early care and education programs use to build the protective factors is available at www.cssp.org and from written materials available from the Center for the Study of Social Policy, 1575 Eye St., NW, Suite 500 Washington, DC 20005.

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Excerpted from “The Physical Environments for Early Learning (PEEL) Scale: An Introduction”

By Carl Sussman with Lyz Jaeger

November 8, 2012

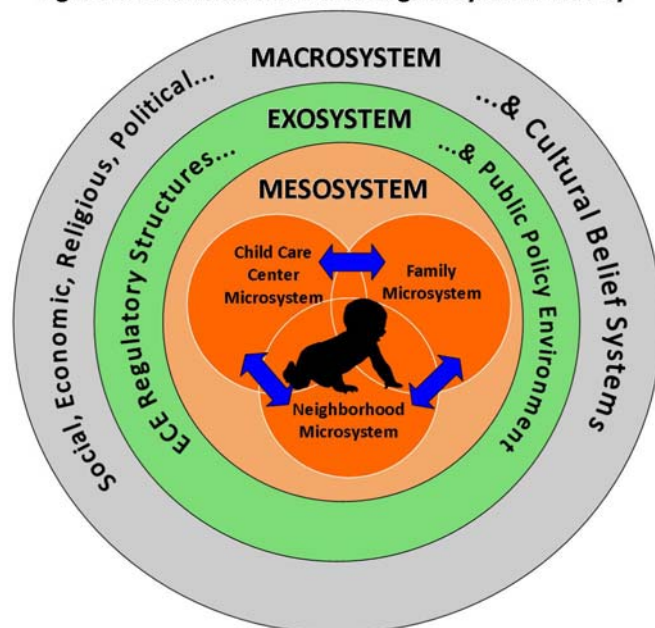
Urie Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) Ecological Systems Theory of child development, depicted in Figure 1, emphasizes the way environment shapes a child’s development. Occupying the center of his model are “microsystems.” These are the various settings in which a child directly participates, such as the family, the neighborhood, and the child care center. The young child’s experiences and relationships in the other microsystems influence the child care center’s ability to achieve positive outcomes.

For example, a child exposed to books and encouraged to speak at home will have a larger vocabulary and stronger pre-reading skills. These advantages will also contribute to the quality of his or her learning experiences in preschool. The home and community environments can also enhance a child’s health and well-being or expose a child to threats to his or her healthy development through abuse or neglect (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child [NSCDC], 2009).

Microsystems can also interact with each other without the child being present, thereby indirectly affecting the child. Bronfenbrenner dubbed this the “mesosystem.” Parent-teacher interactions, for example, do not directly involve the child. Nonetheless, the dynamics of these interactions influence the behaviors and relationship each has with the child.

The exosystem is the next higher stratum in Bronfenbrenner’s model. Compared to the mesosystem, the exosystem is more impersonal and external. As one moves out from the center of this model an individual’s impact on the next higher system diminishes. Thus the exosystem serves as a vehicle through which societal expectations shape the meso- and microsystems and ultimately influence a child’s development. For the child care center microsystem, public policies and regulations governing ECE are the exosystem’s most relevant elements because they dictate staffing patterns; influence supply, demand, and pricing in the child care market; set health and safety standards; mold the center’s cost structure; and much more.

Figure 1. Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory



The macrosystem lies at the farthest reaches of Bronfenbrenner's model, depicted as the outermost ring in the diagram. This layer houses the most broadly accepted sets of social, economic, religious, political, and cultural beliefs and norms, such as capitalism and democracy. In circular fashion, these prevailing and socially constructed imperatives filter back down through the layers of Bronfenbrenner's model, exerting their influence over everything that shapes a child's development.

Thus the exosystem, which occupies the concentric circle between the macro- and mesosystems, houses the vehicles that give institutional expression to the macrosystem's global doctrines. Courts, economic markets, political parties, and religious institutions are among the exosystem's institutional manifestations of macrosystem creeds.

The macrosystem affects a child's development and the ability of early care and education programs to achieve positive child outcomes. For example, in the United States, centers serving non-white, non-Christian, immigrant, and poor children – those outside the economic mainstream and the prevailing culture – face special challenges. In supporting healthy development, centers serving these children need to compensate for the insidious effects of poverty, racism, and cultural stereotypes on a child's self-image. On the other hand, programs like Head Start are exosystem level interventions designed to mitigate the developmental risks extremely poor children face as a result of the inequality caused by larger macrosystem structures.

These meso-, exo- and macrosystems determine whether a preschool has the wind at its back or in its face as it pursues the positive outcomes that children take with them to primary school. How a center performs, the tasks it undertakes, and the means it employs depend on the dynamic interactions of the child care center microsystem with these external forces.

The significance of Bronfenbrenner's theory is this: a child's development reflects the influence of, and the interactions between, many environmental systems, including some that may seem quite remote.