



# PROTECTING THE YOUNGEST

## THE ROLE OF EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION IN PREVENTING AND RESPONDING TO CHILD MALTREATMENT



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Children from birth to age 3 are uniquely vulnerable to maltreatment. In federal fiscal year 2004, these children accounted for almost 30 percent of the victims of abuse or neglect. Children in this age group were victimized at a rate of 16.1 per 1,000 children, compared to 13.4 per 1,000 for children ages 4 to 7 and 10.9 per 1,000 for children ages 8 to 11. Nearly 73 percent of maltreated children from birth to age 3 were victims of neglect.<sup>1</sup>

Young children also enter foster care in disproportionately high numbers. In federal fiscal year 2005, 33 percent of children who entered out-of-home care were age 3 or younger. Of this group, almost half (46,954) were under age 1.<sup>2</sup>

Young children who are abused or neglected are at high risk of experiencing serious developmental challenges, including behavioral difficulties and problems with memory and learning. Evidence also indicates that foster care placement itself contributes to these poor outcomes.<sup>3</sup>

Early childhood care and education with significant parent involvement may help prevent child maltreatment and assist children and families who already are involved in the child welfare system. It can do so by offering parents caring relationships, a supportive learning environment, help to establish social support networks, information about parenting and child development, and referrals to other services. For this potential to be realized, however, it will be necessary for state policymakers to recognize early care and education as a promising family strengthening strategy; ensure that a family strengthening approach is integrated into laws and policies that govern early childhood licensing, training, professional development, reimbursement and strategic planning; and seek to strengthen the links between early childhood programs and the child welfare system.

Some policy options that state legislators can consider to support early care and education programs in protecting the nation's youngest children are briefly reviewed in this report.

### POLICY OPTIONS TO CONSIDER

- Promote child abuse prevention in state laws that govern licensing, training, professional development and reimbursement of early childhood providers and teachers.
- Review existing strategic planning processes for opportunities to expand the mission of early childhood education to include more intensive parent support and prevention of maltreatment.
- Include early childhood care and education in child welfare case planning.
- Ensure stability of enrollment in early care and education programs for children in the child welfare system.
- Authorize information sharing between early childhood programs and child welfare agencies.
- Authorize and fund collaborative pilot projects.



## Background

High-quality early childhood education with parent involvement has the potential to be an effective child abuse prevention strategy. According to Sharon Lynn Kagan, a noted expert on early childhood education, “Quality early care and education programs can help to prevent child abuse and neglect by building supportive relationships with families, observing children carefully, responding to early warning signs of abuse and neglect, and promoting children’s social and emotional development.”<sup>4</sup> Early childhood care settings are involved with many families in ways that are nonstigmatizing and nonconfrontational. These settings provide opportunities for trained caregivers to interact daily with families and provide not only support for working parents, but also early learning and developmental opportunities for children.

Approximately 12 million children under age 5 are in early care and education settings,<sup>5</sup> which may include family and center child care, Head Start programs, and prekindergarten programs. According to the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER), close to 1 million 3- and 4-year-olds were enrolled in state prekindergarten programs in 2005-2006.<sup>6</sup> In FY 2005, the federal Head Start program enrolled just over 900,000 low-income children to provide early childhood and comprehensive support services, including parent education.<sup>7</sup>

Strong evidence indicates that quality early childhood care and education programs foster the physical, cognitive, social and emotional development of young children. The evidence base for using early childhood programs to prevent and respond to child maltreatment is less extensive, but nonetheless promising. A recent study by Arthur Reynolds and colleagues at the University of Wisconsin found that children who participated in a Chicago school-based early learning program

with significant parent involvement experienced a 52 percent lower rate of substantiated maltreatment between ages 4 and 17 than did a comparison group of children who attended full-day kindergarten only.<sup>8</sup> Among other elements, the program requires that parents participate one half-day per week, provides a comprehensive array of services, and features experiential training in parent-child interaction.

For early childhood programs to reduce child maltreatment, they must include a strong family support component. The terms “family support” or “family strengthening” refer to interventions that are intended to improve a broad array of

results in children’s health, development and safety; parenting knowledge, attitudes and behaviors; parental resilience and mental health; overall family functioning; and family economic self-sufficiency.

Clearly, these results—also known as protective factors—in regard to parents are key to reducing child maltreatment. A meta-analysis of family support research conducted by Abt Associates Inc. found that, although the average effect of family support programs on parent outcomes was small, programs that focused on developing parents’ skills as effective adults—including self-confidence, self-empowerment, family management and parenting—had more positive effects on parents than did those programs that had no such focus. The programs also tended to feature parent support groups and to use professional staff.<sup>9</sup> Other studies have found that experiential training in parent-child interaction is more effective in improving parenting than are classroom-style programs.

Incorporating services to parents in early childhood programs has been included as part of numerous programs. Head Start and Early Head Start have always had a strong parent support component. The Parent Services Project, founded in 1980, is a national organization dedicated to integrating family support into early childhood programs and schools through training and technical assistance.<sup>10</sup>

More recently, the Strengthening Families through Early Care and Education Initiative of the Center for the Study of Social Policy seeks to reduce child maltreatment by helping early childhood programs promote five key protective factors—parental resilience, an array of social connections, knowledge of parenting and child development, concrete support in times of need, and children’s healthy social and emotional development. These factors were developed from extensive review of research on factors linked to reductions in child abuse and neglect. Field research in exemplary early childhood programs suggests that small but significant changes in mainstream practice can enable early childhood programs to become an early warning system for children who are at risk of maltreatment and a gateway to a broader array of supportive services. These changes include intentionally reaching out to and deepening relationships with parents; training staff about how to talk with parents about sensitive issues and how to model effective parenting; building a sense of community within a program; and strengthening linkages with community-based service providers.

Notwithstanding these examples of how early childhood programs can support families, policymakers' recent interest in school readiness and academic achievement has tended to focus early childhood policy and programming on the needs of the child rather than on those of the parents. Expanding this focus to include parents may require changes in state and local policy. Some of these policy options are described in the following section.



## Enhancing the Capacity of Early Childhood Programs to Support Families

States already have at their disposal a number of tools to enhance the capacity of early childhood programs to support families and prevent child maltreatment. These tools include the following.

- Regulatory standards governing licensing, training, professional development, quality standards and reimbursement;
- Strategic planning processes; and
- Laws and policies to promote greater parent involvement in early childhood programs.

The following sections provide brief background information about these tools and how some states are using them to strengthen families.

### Early Childhood Licensing, Training, Professional Development, Quality Standards and Reimbursement

**Licensing.** Every state provides some form of licensing and some degree of training and professional development for child care providers and, for states that have prekindergarten programs, early education teachers. All states have regulatory requirements and standards for early care and education programs. All states have requirements for child care training and education, although they vary widely from state to state. These standards usually represent a baseline to protect children's health and safety. Some states have policies that encourage and reward early childhood programs that become accredited. *Accreditation* is a process of adhering to standards that exceed licensing requirements, and several national organizations—including the National Association for the Education of Young Children—accredit early care and education programs.

**Training and Development.** Some states support broader professional development activities for early care teachers and providers. Professional development activities can include

specialized training programs, the child development associate credential, teacher recruitment, compensation, and other child care and early childhood education scholarship programs. Over the years, some states have considered or enacted legislation to provide for stronger training requirements and expanded professional development opportunities for early care providers and teachers.

**Quality Standards and Reimbursement.** Some states are helping early care programs and providers meet standards through a quality improvement mechanism called quality rating systems (QRS). In 2006, 13 states and the District of Columbia had statewide quality rating systems, and at least 42 states are developing or implementing such systems.<sup>11</sup> The quality rating system standards are based on child care licensing requirements, but also add multiple steps between licensing and higher quality standards, including accreditation. Programs and providers that meet certain quality rating system standards or exceed minimum licensing standards receive a higher reimbursement.

At least 40 states have state-funded early education programs. These states are developing policies that establish stronger and more uniform quality standards. States with prekindergarten programs increasingly are requiring that these teachers have a bachelor's degree. Because one-third of children nationally were served outside the public schools, many states that use a mixed delivery system (both public schools and private child care providers) require that all providers meet the state prekindergarten standards. States are using a combination of strategies and funding to help community providers meet higher prekindergarten standards.<sup>12</sup> To meet teacher education requirements, states use scholarships to raise the level of education and training of early childhood teachers.<sup>13</sup>

**State Action.** Currently, at least eight states train child care licensing staff to identify child abuse and neglect in children. In 2005, approximately 24 states required child abuse and neglect prevention training for center staff.<sup>14</sup> Recently, some states that are implementing the Strengthening Families Initiative approach have incorporated child abuse and neglect prevention strategies into the professional development offered to early care providers and teachers.

- Wisconsin incorporated child abuse and neglect prevention strategies into its early childhood training registry. Currently, more than 25 states use an active registry system to track the early childhood workforce, including professional development opportunities and use of training. A registry is one key component of state career development systems.<sup>15</sup>

- New Hampshire has integrated Strengthening Family Initiative concepts into its professional development career lattices for early childhood center-based and home providers. The career lattices, a credentialing structure comprised of different levels, serve as incentives for professional growth.<sup>16</sup>
- Arkansas has proposed to establish a quality rating system that will include specific strategies to work with families.
- Alaska is examining incorporating Strengthening Family Initiative concepts into a quality rating system.<sup>17</sup>
- Protective factors are embedded in Missouri's Preschool Project grant and technical assistance program. Missouri's Educare program, which provides training and technical assistance to subsidized child care providers, also includes protective factors.
- Child Care Resource and Referral agencies provide Strengthening Family Initiative training in a handful of states, including Alaska, Georgia, Illinois and Wisconsin.

#### NAEYC Training Early Childhood Educators

For the past few years, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) has focused on training early childhood professionals and providing other activities designed to promote the prevention of child abuse and neglect through family strengthening strategies. NAEYC, an accrediting organization with more than 100,000 members, focuses on improving the quality of early childhood care services. NAEYC has evaluated the training efforts of more than 4,000 early childhood teachers and found an increase in knowledge and skills regarding prevention of child abuse and neglect. NAEYC also aligned its accreditation criteria and standards with the Strengthening Families Initiative to encourage early childhood programs to do the following:

- Provide high-quality care and education through developmentally appropriate practices;
- Develop reciprocal relationships with families;
- Recognize signs of abuse and situations that may place children at risk of abuse, and provide families with appropriate support;
- Understand and help families to understand and handle children's challenging behaviors;
- Build on children and family strengths; and
- Stay informed about professional responsibilities and take charge of professional development.

**Source:** NAEYC, 2004,  
[www.naeyc.org/ece/supporting/strategies.asp](http://www.naeyc.org/ece/supporting/strategies.asp).

#### Strategic Planning and Coordination

Early childhood planning has been another way that some states have focused on child abuse prevention. In 2003, the federal Maternal and Child Health Bureau awarded grants to support states' work on early childhood comprehensive systems (ECCS) planning. The grants helped states to plan, develop and implement collaborations and partnerships to support families and communities to produce children who are healthy and ready to learn at school entry. The statewide ECCS plans addressed the key components of health and the medical home; early care and education, mental health and social-emotional development; family support; and parenting education.<sup>18</sup>

Several states have used ECCS planning to connect early childhood with child abuse and neglect prevention strategies. Alaska, Arkansas, Illinois, Kansas and New Hampshire have developed and integrated a Strengthening Families Initiative approach into their early childhood comprehensive systems initiatives and state plans for preventing child abuse and neglect. Alaska and Rhode Island have expanded statewide planning processes to include the Strengthening Families Initiative approach. Hawaii and Massachusetts have identified child abuse and neglect as part of their planning. Connecticut recently examined improving children's development by integrating its child welfare and early education systems.<sup>19</sup>

#### Parent Involvement

The NICHD Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development showed that parent and family characteristics were more strongly linked to child development than were child care features, and that parent and family characteristics predicted some developmental outcomes that were not predicted by child care.<sup>20</sup>

According to Nobel Prize winner James Heckman, early education and other early interventions such as home visits can mitigate the effects of poor family environments and produce significant long-term returns on investments in these early intervention programs.<sup>21</sup> The nationally implemented Parents as Teachers Program recently showed a positive effect on school readiness and later school achievement of children.<sup>22</sup> Along with increasing parent knowledge of early childhood development, one goal of Parents as Teachers is to reduce child abuse and neglect.

**State Action.** State laws and policies can be structured to require or promote a certain level of family involvement in early

childhood care and education. At least nine states and the District of Columbia provide that parent involvement in school activities qualifies for unpaid leave under the federal Family and Medical Leave Act.<sup>23</sup> Twenty-two states and the District of Columbia have licensing rules that require parent involvement. Ten states require centers to provide opportunities for parents to be involved in activities, and seven states require centers to encourage parent involvement. In 15 states, centers are required to hold regularly scheduled meetings with parents.<sup>24</sup>

States have the potential to tap into existing prekindergarten programs to connect and engage parents. According to NIEER, most states with state-funded prekindergarten programs require parent conferences or annual home visits as part of program standards. Twenty-nine states require that support services for prekindergarten programs include parent support or training, parent involvement activities, education services or job training for parents, and health services for parents and children.<sup>25</sup>



### Improving Collaboration Between Early Childhood Programs and the Child Welfare System

Both the early childhood and child welfare systems are dedicated to the well-being of children, although one focuses on healthy development and the other primarily on safety. There is some evidence of an increase in the number of children who are both involved with the child welfare system and enrolled in early childhood programs. An analysis by the Center for Law and Social Policy found that the number of families both involved with Early Head Start and receiving child welfare-related services increased 16 percent between 2005 and 2006, compared to only a 3 percent increase in total Early Head Start families.<sup>26</sup>

Traditionally, the child welfare system has seen early care as a way to keep children safe and provide respite to birth and foster parents. Child welfare agencies, however, are beginning to see that early childhood programs have the potential to provide more than just “protective day care.” The child welfare system should be encouraged to view early childhood programs as an important part of the service array available to both young children and their parents. The long-term development of young children who are placed in foster care—as with all vulnerable young children—can be significantly improved through enrollment in high-quality early care and education.

### Including Early Care and Education in Child Welfare Case Planning

Early care and education with parent involvement can be included in child welfare case plans to improve parenting, ameliorate the effects of maltreatment, promote school readiness and, in appropriate cases, facilitate reunification of foster children with their birth families. Early care settings also could provide a safe venue for supervised visitation between foster children and their birth parents.

Every child in foster care has a written case plan that specifies the child’s care and the service goals that the child’s parents must meet to regain custody of the child. Federal law requires, at a minimum, that a case plan address the following:

- A description of the type of home or institution in which a child is to be placed;
- A plan to ensure that the child receives safe and proper care and that appropriate services are provided to the child, parents and foster parents:
  - To improve the conditions in the parents’ home,
  - To facilitate the return of the child to his or her own safe home or an alternative permanent placement, and
  - To address the needs of the child while in foster care;
- To the extent available and accessible, the health and education records of the child;
- Where appropriate, for a child age 16 or older, a description of the programs and services that will help the child prepare for independent living; and
- If the permanency goal for the child is adoption, documentation of the steps being taken to find an adoptive family.<sup>27</sup>

Approximately 31 states and the District of Columbia provide detailed case plan requirements in statute.<sup>28</sup> Many of these laws contain requirements that are in addition to those in the federal statute. Over time, as awareness of the needs of children in the child welfare system has grown, these laws have been amended to include new requirements to address specific issues. Although the statutes generally do not describe specific services or activities, more states are requiring agencies to describe in case plans how they intend to meet the well-being needs of children in addition to their safety needs, including, for example, how they

will minimize disruptions to a child's education or maintain a child's connections with his or her siblings, community and important adults.

**Expanding Case Plan Statutes.** State statutes, rules and policies governing case planning could be amended in several ways to encourage greater use of early care and education in the array of services provided to children and families involved with the child welfare system.

- Statutes governing case planning could be amended to require that particular attention be paid to the needs of the youngest children and their families. A requirement, for example, that child welfare agencies describe how they will address the critical developmental needs of young children would be consistent with a growing emphasis on children's well-being in these statutes and increased knowledge of the lifelong importance of brain development in the earliest months of life.
- Although every state requires case plans to address a child's educational needs, that requirement generally is interpreted to apply only to school-age children. State law and policy could be clarified to provide that the learning needs of even the youngest children must be considered. Children in foster care are automatically eligible for Head Start and Early Head Start regardless of family income. In addition, many states have laws or rules that make children in the child welfare system eligible for other forms of child care or preschool. State policy could go beyond merely providing for eligibility and, instead, mandate enrollment of eligible children in the custody of child welfare agencies.
- In addition to requiring early care and education in case plans, state policies could be amended to ensure that early childhood professionals be encouraged to participate in the case planning process. If a child is already enrolled in a program, his or her teacher could provide valuable input to the caseworker and the child's parent regarding service needs. Teachers may provide the only continuity in caregiving that these very vulnerable young children have ever had. Teachers could be included as members of multidisciplinary case planning teams. Some states, such as Utah and Wyoming, have adopted that approach.
- Case plans for foster children commonly provide for a plan of visitation with birth parents. Laws, rules and policies could be amended to authorize or encourage, in appropriate cases, the use of early care settings as sites for supervised visitation between foster children and their birth parents. Studies have

found that frequent and regular visitation results in more secure child/parent attachment and increases the likelihood of successful reunification. In addition to these benefits, supervised visitation in early care sites would provide caseworkers and teachers with an opportunity to consult on children's progress and strengthen their working relationships.

**State Action.** Although these changes may be making their way into child welfare practice, they are only beginning to appear in law and policy. Only Florida has a statutory requirement to include early childhood care and education as a case plan component for certain young children involved in child welfare. In 2003, the Florida Legislature enacted the Rilya Wilson Act in response to the disappearance of the 4-year-old girl from foster care.<sup>29</sup> The law provides that children age 3 to school entry age who are in foster care or under protective supervision and who are enrolled in early education or child care must be enrolled in such a program five days per week. It also requires that case plans developed for these children contain such participation in early education or child care as a required action. Finally, the law specifies certain attendance and reporting requirements that are intended to promote continuous monitoring of the child's safety by early childhood program staff.

Clearly, the chief goal of the Florida legislation is to protect the safety of young children in the child welfare system. The Senate staff analysis of the bill states that, "for a number of children, the increased visibility that participation in early education and child care programs provides can minimize further abuse, neglect, or abandonment."<sup>30</sup> The law, however, also expresses legislative intent "that children who are currently in the care of the state be provided with an age-appropriate education program to help ameliorate the negative consequences of abuse, neglect or abandonment."<sup>31</sup>

The Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) has embarked on a School Readiness Initiative that seeks to enroll all 3- to 5-year-old children in foster care in Head Start, state-funded prekindergarten or, when one of these options is not available, an accredited early care and education program. DCFS has initiated a policy change that would make enrollment in an early education program a required action item in case plans for all children ages 3 to 5 in the child welfare system.<sup>32</sup>

New York recently made sweeping changes to its laws governing the permanency process for children in foster care, including detailed requirements for permanency hearing reports submitted by county child welfare agencies to the court with jurisdic-

tion over a child's case. The new law requires that such reports include a description of the steps the agency has taken to enroll eligible children in a prekindergarten program.<sup>33</sup>

### **Ensuring the Stability of Early Care and Education Placements**

Many states have enacted legislation in recent years to address the educational needs of children in foster care.<sup>34</sup> Much of this legislation seeks to minimize disruptions to a child's education caused by initial foster care placement and by subsequent changes in placement. Not only do these changes impede a student's academic progress, they also interfere with the formation of stable relationships with supportive teachers and peers.

For the most part, these provisions were enacted with school-age children in mind but could be amended to acknowledge the critical importance of young children's secure attachments with caregivers and to ensure that these attachments are not disrupted due to changes in foster care placement. State law could be amended, for example, to give young children the right to maintain their enrollment in an early education program notwithstanding foster placement instability. For children in school-based early care programs, such law would preempt any residency requirements that would otherwise preclude a child's continued participation at a specific school because of a change in address. State law could require child welfare agencies to provide or arrange for transportation if a change in placement status makes it necessary, and also could require the child welfare agency and providers of early care and education to develop protocols for educational continuity if children are required to leave a program because of a change in foster placement.

### **Information Sharing**

Strengthening links between early care programs and child welfare agencies, while potentially beneficial, must be undertaken with great care to avoid undermining trust between teachers and parents. One particularly sensitive issue is information sharing between the two systems. To best serve families involved with the child welfare system, teachers may benefit from knowing how and why the family came to the attention of child welfare authorities and the treatment goals for both the child and the parent. This confidential information could be shared if a parent executes a release and the teacher agrees to applicable restrictions on redisclosure.

There may, however, be cases in which a parent refuses to sign a release, but it is in the child's best interest for certain information to be disclosed to the child's teacher. The federal Child

Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act authorizes disclosure of child abuse and neglect information to certain individuals and entities, including "... entities or classes of individuals statutorily authorized by the State to receive such information pursuant to a legitimate State purpose."<sup>35</sup> A state, therefore, could amend its confidentiality laws to provide for disclosure of child abuse and neglect information to an early care and education program that is serving a child in the child welfare system.

At least three states have included child care providers in their lists of people or entities that are allowed access to confidential child maltreatment information under certain circumstances. Kentucky includes "child care administrators ... that have a legitimate interest in the case."<sup>36</sup> Minnesota allows disclosure to mandated reporters who have ongoing responsibility for the health, education and welfare of a child, including child care providers.<sup>37</sup> Similarly, Mississippi provides for access to a "child caregiver" who has made a report of maltreatment.<sup>38</sup>

### **Pilot Programs to Test Collaboration**

State legislators can statutorily authorize or mandate pilot programs to test new and innovative ways that child welfare agencies and early care and education programs can collaborate to improve outcomes for young children. Small, targeted funding accompanying such pilot programs could, for example, enable early care and education programs to provide more intensive services to multi-problem families that are involved with child welfare. Such collaboration also can include joint training sessions to learn about the mission, structure, legal obligations and staff responsibilities applicable to each system. Early care staff would benefit from knowing more about the service needs of families and discussing with child welfare staff how their programs could fill service gaps and supplement the types of parenting education programs traditionally used by child welfare agencies. Collaboration also might involve joint participation at meetings involving a child, ongoing consultation regarding case plan progress and attendance by early care staff at court hearings.

In October 2002, the federal Head Start Bureau initiated a demonstration project involving grants to 24 Early Head Start programs to promote collaboration with local child welfare agencies. Each program decided upon its own target populations, goals and service strategies. Many sites combined center-based parenting skills training with home visiting. Other activities included provision of infant mental health services; development of protocols for continuity of care for children who are removed from home; provision of transportation; and



joint training and participation in child-specific meetings.<sup>39</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Maltreatment of the nation's youngest children is a tragedy that carries heavy long-term social and economic costs to society. Policymakers, therefore, may be eager to identify evidence-based, cost-effective ways to prevent the abuse and neglect of all children, particularly the most vulnerable. Over the past several years, attention has focused on improving collaboration between child

welfare agencies and courts, substance abuse service providers, K-12 education, cash assistance programs, and the domestic violence community. Given recent breakthroughs in our understanding of early childhood development, it is an opportune time to expand that focus to include early childhood care and education. With leadership from state legislators and other policy leaders, early care and education programs can become a valuable resource for supporting families and preventing maltreatment. Child welfare agencies, for their part, need to recognize the unique developmental needs of their youngest clients, the risks that maltreatment poses to such development, and the importance of early care and education in protecting

against those risks.

## Notes

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