

The Role of Family Support in an Integrated Early Childhood System



Helping Families Get What They Need to Support Their Children's Development

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A history of family support, its current use across service strategies that support families with young children, and implications for future implementation in **integrated** service initiatives

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The Role of Family Support in an Integrated Early Childhood System

Research has demonstrated consistently that the most effective child development programs work with children AND THEIR FAMILIES. – Valora Washington, 2006

Families are perhaps the most critical component of an early childhood system dedicated to promoting optimal development for young children. Even before the first day of life, families set the stage for a baby’s development, beginning with accessing prenatal care and promoting a healthy pregnancy. Families are primarily responsible for ensuring that their young children receive adequate food, shelter and medical attention, nurturing relationships at home and the full measure of opportunities for social, emotional and cognitive development that shapes the child’s eventual success in school and in life. It is a daunting responsibility, especially when families are challenged by economic stress, neighborhoods or communities without adequate services and resources, or a lack of education and experience. Everyone from policymakers and service providers to families themselves agree that helping families fulfill their potential to be good parents is an essential part of efforts to improve outcomes for young children. All the preschool programs that have shown excellent longitudinal results for children had extensive, powerful family components in their original programs. Family support, in its diverse forms, has offered an array of supports to families through a strengths-based, community focused approach for the past 30 years. In the new era of expanded attention and funding for early childhood, attention is also turning again to family support. This paper examines the history, accomplishments and current status of family support to point the way toward new, effective applications of family support in emerging early childhood initiatives and systems.

What is Family Support?

Family support has taken on a variety of definitions since the term first emerged in the late 1970’s to describe friendly local programs designed to support parents with young children with “whatever it takes”. (S. L. Kagan 1994) (Kagan, Powell, et al. 1987) (Goetz and and Peck 1994) Community-based programs that began by calling themselves *family resource programs*,

indicating that the programs were voluntary resources available for all families, most of them on a “drop-in” basis where parents did not need to sign up or pay for the opportunity to participate. *Parent education and support* was another iteration that described what families received in the course of participating in a family resource program.

As programs proliferated and ideas spread across diverse venues, *family support* began to be widely used to describe programs that existed in a center as well as services such as home visiting that helped families take on their parenting roles successfully. It also became an underlying theme for efforts to integrate service systems at the state and national level, strategies to reform systems like child welfare that had strayed from a focus on families, and mechanisms to create more participatory governance for all services for children and families. It remains difficult for any definition to fully capture the dynamic, strengths based approach developed by the early programs to create a sense of community and belonging among its participants and to inspire policymakers to support more comprehensive, responsive services for families.

Today, every community in the United States has some program or service that is described as “family support”, but what a family would find there is likely to differ dramatically from one community to the next. Some versions of family support focus on providing for basic needs such as food or clothing or crisis services. Others may refer to services mandated for families who have been reported for child maltreatment. The definition used in state and federal legislation and in most local programs throughout the nation (and in this paper) refers to services and programs that are focused on helping parents in their parenting role. At a minimum, family support programs provide services and opportunities that help parents, services and activities for children, and opportunities for parents and children to interact and play together. These programs often also provide parent education, links to jobs and education and other services, leadership training for parents, community engagement opportunities, and occasionally home visiting services for more isolated parents. They may be directly linked or co-located with early childhood programs, schools, libraries and other community resources.

In addition to family resource programs, family support describes a component of other services provided by several different disciplines. In medical clinics, schools and other places where families seek services, family support services may include follow up calls and home visits, case management, legal assistance and referrals to additional services such as substance abuse treatment or job training that may be needed in addition to the original need that brought the family into the service in the first place. These services have grown up independently through efforts of service providers who recognized that effective treatment or goals set for children could not be completed unless other barriers faced by the family were addressed. This type of family support is usually provided by a staff member designated as the family support worker or coordinator, whose training varies from program to program.

History of Family Support

The best way to understand family support in the current context is to start with its unique history which demonstrates its complex, hybrid services and ideas which make it so difficult to define. Family resource programs emerged in local communities across the country during the late 1970's, in response, the founders said, to increasing interest and concern about child development and parenting at a time when more families were feeling isolated and unsupported as they began their parenting roles. The advent of Head Start, which focused national attention on early child development, brought about new attention to the early years and the role of parents in helping their children develop appropriately. Emerging research at the time showed the importance of understanding child development in an ecological framework, of early intervention when development is not on track, and the first studies of the cost benefits of prevention. Programs developed independently at the local level to provide a combination of parent education, social support, links to other services, and opportunities for collective action on behalf of children and families. Early childhood and mental health professionals, social workers and educators often joined with local community activists to develop a comprehensive approach. The original programs were open to all families, underscoring the idea that all families need support as they begin their roles as parents and that seeking help in this primary role is a sign of strength.

The diversity of the early programs is indicative of family support efforts. (Goetz and Peck 1994, Allen, Brown and Findlay 1994, FRC Celebrates Ten Years of Leadership 1991) Avance in San Antonio was developed by former school teacher Gloria Rodriguez to prepare Latino children for school success by working with their parents long before they were ready for school. The Carole Robertson Center in Chicago was a cooperative child care program in a disinvested neighborhood, governed by parents, that offered support groups, weekly dinners, links to other services and support for families. Family Focus, with multiple drop in centers around Chicago, developed individual programming responsive to the culture of each neighborhood along with innovative training for staff hired from the surrounding neighborhoods. The Parenting Center in New Orleans, located at Children's Hospital, provided a warmline and baby sitter training in addition to parenting classes and counseling. Parents Place in San Francisco sponsored groups for single mothers, divorced parents, adoptive parents and parents of twins, in addition to services of all kinds for families with children 0-6.

Antecedents to a Spontaneous Beginning

From the beginning, family support was an amalgam of services and supports with roots in several different kinds of programs. As a welcoming, strengths-based approach, family support was built on the idea that participation in a program was not a sign of problems or deficits but a sign of strength to reach out for support when parenting was beginning. Early family support programs drew their practices from several sources (Kagan, Powell, et al. 1987):

- *Parent education* that was built on new scientific research about child development and the eagerness of many parents to learn how to be the best parents they could be.
- *Social work* practice that focused on families in an ecological context and provided links to community resources for families as well as children.
- *Settlement houses* in urban centers that welcomed new immigrants by providing basic needs and services, avenues to jobs and language skills, and a place where the family's original culture was valued and supported.

- *The Self Help movement* that spawned support groups around a multitude of issues and problems during the 1960's and 70's and promoted the idea that peers could be more effective than professionals in helping individuals overcome problems. Alcoholics Anonymous was the best known of the self help groups to show effectiveness in helping its members stop drinking and stay sober.
- *Advocacy and neighborhood action* that grew out of the 1960's, where leadership development and community action produced community "empowerment" programs across a wide spectrum of communities.

In addition to these antecedents of family support, the long standing research and practice behind several disciplines influenced the early development of family support practice. In succeeding years as family support developed, leaders from these mainstream institutions contributed to the family support ideas of a non-deficit, prevention approach to all families, comprehensive services built on empowering families, and a strong connection to the communities and cultures of the families they serve. These same leaders learned from family resource programs and the practices they developed, and adapted what they learned from family support into their own work.

- *Maternal and child health, including obstetrics and pediatrics*, adapted family support ideas to create more accessible, community based, culturally relevant services and to link to support for families beyond medical care to ensure that children's development is on track. Patient centered care learned from and contributed to family support as its practice emerged.
- *Child welfare agencies* gleaned important information about the use of community wide prevention strategies, early response to families at risk of being referred to child welfare and follow up support for families in non-stigmatizing settings. Family team meetings, kinship arrangements in lieu of foster care, more comprehensive community linkages and family centered practice in child welfare bear the imprint of family support practice.

- *Education, particularly early childhood education*, used family support strategies to reach out more effectively as partners with parents and to link families to services necessary to remove barriers to a child's success in school. School based family resource centers have become essential partners with schools in many locations.
- *Parents of children with special needs* have long demonstrated the vital participation of the family in their children's developmental trajectory. Family support benefitted from these families' efforts to fund advocacy training and networking so that parents could advocate effectively for the services their children needed.
- *Mental health professionals* such as social workers and infant mental health specialists expanded their understanding of their roles into consultation with programs and non-professional practitioners. This helped staff in early family resource centers facilitate self help groups effectively, screen for issues that required professional assistance, and provide support for families with mental health needs to get the more intensive services they needed.

A Movement Expands and Adapts

Family resource programs had wide appeal, and thousands of programs sprang up across the country during the 1980's, expanding in purpose, auspice and populations served. The widely known and used Parents As Teachers and Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters (HIPPY) home visiting programs were pioneers in the family support movement, developing strong training and consistent program components based on building trusting relationships with families. Minnesota's Early Childhood and Family Education program, today based in school districts across the state, originated as a way to reach out to all families in areas where there were many teen parents and few resources or links to services. Parent Services Project started as a technical assistance and training program to help early childhood programs emulate the multifaceted family centered approach developed at San Anselmo Children's Center near San Francisco. Military bases, community based organizations and tribal councils adopted the idea for their own communities. The concept of strengths-based, comprehensive support for

families to build their capacity in parenting caught on with mainstream institutions as well, and family support practices transferred from stand alone programs into libraries, health clinics, welfare offices, programs for incarcerated parents, teen parents, parents of children with special needs, and a variety of home visiting programs. (Goetz and and Peck 1994, Pooley 1991)

Academicians and leaders in professional fields related to family support were often engaged in advising or planning local family resource programs and began to write about the unique practice emerging from these programs. In 1981, a well known Chicago area program, Family Focus, received a small grant from the federal Administration on Children and Families to invite family resource programs around the country to meet together. More than 200 programs attended the first meeting and formed an official network, the Family Resource Coalition, as a vehicle of communication and networking among them. The Family Resource Coalition (renamed Family Resource Coalition of America in 1997 and later, Family Support America) served as the central clearinghouse of information, research dissemination, technical assistance and new ideas for the field over the next 25 years. In 1983, the first listing of programs was published by the Yale Bush Center on Child Development and the Family Resource Coalition. *America's Family Support Programs*, edited by Sharon Lynn Kagan, Douglas Powell, Bernice Weissbourd and Edward Zigler in 1987, featured chapters on the emerging movement that included cultural diversity and ethnicity, new perspectives on parent education, and the many linkages family support offered to schools, parents of children with special needs, early childhood programs, child abuse prevention, and parent support groups.

In the 1990's individual programs began to connect through networks that provided funding, training and technical assistance through state or county support. This represented the first consistent public funding for family support and had the impact of encouraging many new programs to form under the banner of family support or adapt what they were doing to qualify as a family support program. Network size and structure varied, as well as their relationship to the constituent programs within the networks. In a number of states, state Children's Trust Funds, established to prevent child abuse and neglect, provided funding, technical assistance, training and other support to local programs. The city of Seattle was the first city to adopt family

resource centers city-wide, followed by Rochester NY, and Allegheny County (Pittsburgh) PA. State networks soon followed. Maryland established Friends of the Family, an outstanding statewide network of programs aimed at teen parents. Kentucky established family resource and youth service centers in the majority of its elementary schools as part of a statewide school reform effort. Other networks were voluntary associations of programs coming together under the banner of family support, such as the Mothers Center Development Project and the National Lekotek Center, serving families of children with disabilities. (FRC Celebrates Ten Years of Leadership 1991) The California Family Resource Association came together in this way in the early 1990s. The networks represented the first organized infrastructure for family support, utilizing training, technical assistance and support to develop consistency across programs and sustain standard programmatic practice on the ground.

Growing Consensus and Support

Although the populations and locations served by the expanded number of programs differed greatly, the philosophy behind them was remarkably similar. By the end of the 1980's basic premises of family support were agreed to and adopted by programs and practitioners across the country through the network and biannual meeting offered by the Family Resource Coalition. The official premises reflected the strong interest of family support leaders to influence public opinion and policy on behalf of families as well as to provide opportunities for all kinds of parents to participate actively and productively in their children's lives and in their communities:

- Primary responsibility for the development and well-being of children lies within the family, and all segments of society must support families as they rear their children.
- Assuring the well-being of all families is the cornerstone of a healthy society, and requires universal access to support programs and services.
- Children and families exist as part of an ecological system.

- Child-rearing patterns are influenced by parents' understandings of child development and of their children's unique characteristics, parents' personal sense of competence, and cultural and community traditions and mores.
- Enabling families to build on their own strengths and capacities promotes the healthy development of children.

The developmental processes that make up parenthood and family life create needs that are unique at each stage in the life span.

- Families are empowered when they have access to information and other resources and take action to improve the well-being of children, families, and communities.

(FRC Celebrates Ten Years of Leadership 1991)

At a time when national interest in supporting families was at a peak, the federal government joined in support of the growing interest and funded a National Resource Center on Family Support Programs. In 1990 the Family Resource Coalition won the contract to operate the center. This was followed four years later by legislation intended to support state networks of family resource programs through child abuse prevention funding. These dollars ensured that family support programs and networks had an opportunity to be part of the architecture of every state and territory's child abuse and neglect prevention efforts. A new federal technical assistance resource center was established to help states respond to the requirements in the new legislation. The Family Resource Coalition, in partnership with the University of Iowa School of Social Work, received the contract to provide technical assistance to states under the National Resource Center for Family Centered Practice (NRC FCP). The funding later became the Community-based Family Resource Networks and Support Services Program and today is the Community Based Child Abuse Prevention Program (CBCAP) of the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA).

A Big Federal Boost for Family Support

Family support received its biggest boost from passage of the Family Preservation and Family Support Services Program in 1993, a five year program that provided \$1 billion in funding to expand community based family support programs and services in conjunction with expansions in family preservation services. (Kagan, Langford and Kim, et al. 1999) 25% of the funding was designated for family support. The collaborative state planning processes required for the family support funds reflected the participatory, comprehensive nature of family support at the local level in the extensive community input that became a hallmark of the planning. Michigan had perhaps the best local planning process in the country, still evident today in the Great Start Collaboratives that had their beginnings in this process. These new federal dollars had a dramatic on family support:

- They brought new resources to fund statewide family support efforts.
- They brought new prominence and broad acceptance for family support as a part of a larger state infrastructure of services and supports for families.
- They created the need for guideline and practice tools that would start to codify and frame family support practice to provide for expansion of practice and creation of new programs and resources to develop the tools.
- They forced the collection of independent family support programs that made up the field of family support to begin to develop systemic support for hallmark family support practices that had developed at a programmatic level: parent engagement and leadership; community partnerships and planning processes, and culturally responsive practice.

Guidelines for Family Support Practice

The advent of federal funding and requirements for state planning efforts around family support required a more consistent definition of family support services and the practice that accompanied it. With the growing interest in family support practice—and the accompanying

questions about accountability, quality of practice, or even what to fund under the rubric of family support—there was a crucial need for the field to agree upon and establish a more unified framework for family support practice. Standardizing practices that had emerged in fiercely independent local programs led by charismatic leaders was a daunting undertaking. The Annie E. Casey Foundation provided funding to the Family Resource Coalition in 1993 to engage programs and practitioners throughout the country in the process. Hundreds of programs provided information and examples, many participants vigorously debated and discussed the findings, and thousands of pages of focus group reports were analyzed and included. The process was important, unifying, and deeply challenging -- over the course of several years. It exposed deep fault lines within the family support community—especially around issues of race and culturally appropriate practice—but also lifted up these issues as focal points for honest debate and eventual agreement. Ultimately nine principles of family support practice were adopted and published in *Guidelines for Family Support Practice*. (Family Resource Coalition 1996)

Principles of Family Support

1. Staff and families work together in relationships based on equality and respect.
2. Staff enhance families' capacity to support the growth and development of all family members—adults, youth, and children.
3. Families are resources to their own members, to other families, to programs, and to communities.
4. Programs affirm and strengthen families' cultural, racial, and linguistic identities and enhance their ability to function in a multi-cultural society.
5. Programs are embedded in their communities and contribute to the community-building process.
6. Programs advocate with families for services and systems that are fair, responsive, and accountable to the families served.
7. Practitioners work with families to mobilize formal and informal resources to support family development.
8. Programs are flexible and continually responsive to emerging family and community issues.
9. Principles of family support are modeled in all program activities, including planning, governance, and administration.

(Family Resource Coalition 1996)

The resulting *Guidelines for Family Support Practice*, still in use today, included commissioned papers by noted researchers, a research rationale behind each of the principles, guidance for program development as well as individual staff practice, and many examples of how the principles played out in different racial and ethnic communities. The definition of principles and extensive examples of good practice in the field led to additional materials and tools designed to help local programs and practitioners develop their unique programs in response to the families they served and adhere to practice guidelines at the same time. *Guidelines* served as the foundation for a series of tools that to provide continuity and a level of accountability to family support practice across the country. The primary among these was *How Are We Doing?* (Ahsan and Cramer 1998) a self-assessment tool-kit for family support programs, essential in an era when many new programs were being created or newly funded to take on family support practice. *How are We Doing?* applied the family support principles to key aspects of family support program practice—governance, outreach and engagement, programs and activities, one-on-one work with families. The tool provided detailed checklists in ten areas of practice to provide programs with a roadmap for starting an effective program and for enhancing and deepening practice going forward.

Cornell University developed a curriculum for training family support workers and established the Family Development Credential used in 18 states to accredit family support workers. (Forest 1996 (updated 2003)) The state of Wisconsin began a competency based system of training workers in all of the family resource centers in the state network. Other states with networks of programs, such as Kentucky, Maryland and Connecticut, have developed their own local standards for training and program quality.

From Practice to Policy

The later 1990's was a time of exploration of additional uses for family support concepts in community building, planning and governance, culturally appropriate practice, and in leadership development for parents. These expanding efforts helped key aspects of family support practice move from abstract principles to documented practices that could be adopted by audiences beyond family resource programs. Widely disseminated tools emerged from hands on

experience in working directly with local communities and state planning processes and were put into use by a broader constituency. *Know Your Community*, published in 1995, contained a host of tools, worksheets, surveys to support a comprehensive community needs and resource assessment process. (Samuels, Ahsan and Garcia 1995) *Making Room at the Table*, published in 1997, (Jeppson, et al. 1997) was a hands on guide on how to engage parents in decision-making in state funded child and family serving systems. This guide is still widely used in many areas of the country; *Know Your Community* became a recommended tool for community assessment for Head Start programs and YWCA programs across the country.

Experiments in devolving governance for allocation of resources for children and family services to the community level were initiated by several states, supported by national leaders in the family support movement. Parent leadership institutes and training for citizens to learn to participate more fully in decision making about programs and resources for children and families were part of the experiments in devolution.

Family support also played a role in efforts to reform institutions and governmental agencies, directing them toward greater participation by families they served and integrating family support practices into their work. Linking schools and family support services for families became a particular focus of attention as the nation recognized a need to reform what was perceived as a failing education system and to address the increasing racial and ethnic disparities in student achievement. Community partnerships for preventing child abuse and innovations in child welfare agencies built on family support principles were the focus of an extensive multi-year effort funded by the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation supported a multiyear effort in eight states to incorporate family support into coordinated, comprehensive children's agendas under development in the states. The Pew Charitable Trusts, the Carnegie Corporation and other national foundations also mounted multi-year efforts to help states implement comprehensive plans for improving outcomes for children, including family support as a significant part of the services provided to families as well as a philosophical base for the community-based prevention programs developed through these initiatives.

2000: Half Full, Half Empty

As the 1990's ended, the position of family support could only be described as "half full, half empty", as an extensive unpublished report to the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation on family support described it (Kagan and Langford, 2000). Family support practices had been adopted in most fields serving children and families and integrated into each field's work, including adaptations in training and university level courses. Family resource programs, including parent education and support, were widely accepted as an important element of community resources for children and families, and many states continued to see their established networks of programs thrive, supported by federal funding and technical assistance. Family support ideas about full participation and community engagement were flourishing in state reform efforts across multiple disciplines and in governance innovations at the local level. At the same time, family support had not developed a professional field of study at the higher education level that would continue refinement, evaluation and analysis of family support practice, which limited development of evaluated standards for family support programs and practices. The boost from federal funding in the early 1990's was not sustained with follow up practice changes and sufficient support for implementing the excellent community plans that were developed in many states. While the Family Resource Coalition, academicians, researchers and networks of practitioners had developed and provided widely used materials and technical assistance on family support, no real national infrastructure had developed to promote consistency in training or program development outside of state or local standards. Policy development that included family support emerged from a variety of fields such as education, child welfare and mental health, but in each case, family support played a supporting role to achieve the goals set by the primary endeavors. As a new, cross cutting idea that emerged from grass roots efforts, family support had successfully inserted its ideas everywhere, but the necessary research, evaluation and infrastructure to sustain it and help it improve over time were not fully in place.

After 2001, the shift in national attention toward terrorism and national security and away from innovations in social policy or education compounded the challenges of family support's struggle to build the necessary infrastructure to become a distinctive field of practice.

Public funding and foundation attention turned away from a focus on prevention and new ideas for supporting families, which in turn limited funding for research, evaluation and the continued expansion and improvement of practice. By 2006, Family Support America was forced to close because of a lack of funding for its operations and family support lost the national center for further development. Leadership in family support passed on to thriving state level initiatives and networks of programs, which continue to develop and use family support ideas and practices.

2009: Family Support in the Current Context

Family support practices, programs and program components are being implemented today in many settings regardless of whether they are officially identified as *family support* or linked to family support definitions of the past. The original ideas have been sustained over time in individual programs and embellished by a variety of adaptations.

Family resource programs that provide a variety of services to families exist in large numbers in many states, some sustaining and expanding their programs for more than 20 years. They are funded through multiple funding streams including child abuse prevention, teen parent services, early childhood programs and schools and continue to be linked with other local services such as medical clinics and early intervention services. States adopting family resource programs early have continued to be leaders over time: California (particularly Los Angeles County and San Francisco), Connecticut, Kentucky, Maryland, Pennsylvania (particularly Allegheny County), and Wisconsin. Home visiting programs, including Parents as Teachers, Healthy Families, Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters (HIPPY) and Early Head Start, continue to use their strategies based on the family support principles and practices.

Many early care and education programs engage families actively in their programs and provide supportive services through the normal course of the program. NAEYC accreditation includes provisions for family support and links to community services as part of demonstrating that the program is of high quality. Head Start from the beginning placed a strong emphasis on parent education, involvement in the program and providing services for families outside the program as needed, through a designated family services worker. Other programs, including

some state preK programs, follow the Head Start lead on family support, with a staff member dedicated to family services. Georgia's universal PreK Program, which serves 32,000 children, includes provisions for Resource Coordinators to provide family support services through home visits and other parent activities. Early Head Start and other programs working intensively with parents of children 0-3 include a strong family support component through home visits as well as opportunities for social connections, parent education, and other services.

A Step Forward in Defining Family Support

The Strengthening Families Initiative, funded by the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation and launched in 2003, has provided a new research based perspective on family support that has been widely adopted by early childhood programs, by services for families with young children including child welfare agencies, and by comprehensive planning efforts for early childhood systems. The approach provides simple, evidence based goals for all families that can be used across agencies to coordinate planning and that have allowed a variety of public and private programs to support the families they work with more effectively. The new NAEYC accreditation standards and renewed emphasis on families in early childhood programs resulted from the Strengthening Families work. United Way of America, Zero to Three and the National Alliance of Children's Trust and Prevention Funds, along with several federal agencies, have joined with the Center for the Study of Social Policy to promote the approach. More than half the states have interdisciplinary leadership teams that include parents, organizations, and state agency leaders implementing Strengthening Families. (Center for the Study of Social Policy 2008)

Strengthening Families started from a family support orientation and a commitment to defining measureable results based on existing research about resilience in families. Using strengths based results rather than a focus on reducing risks opened up the possibility of expanding the number of venues that could head off early signs of trouble without asking universally available programs such as early childhood programs to take on a role of "fixing" families in trouble. Identifying and building on family assets also removed the stigma that many families feel in programs that identify participants by risk factors, which are often interpreted by families as racial or ethnic stereotypes.

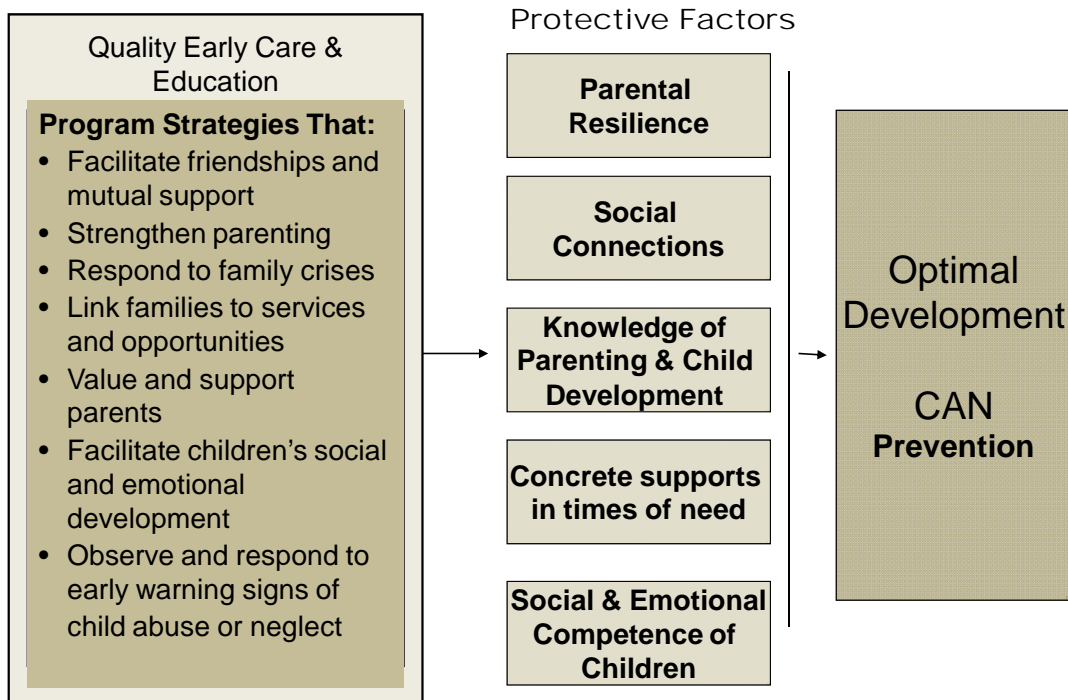
The Strengthening Families research process (which included an active task force of distinguished researchers in early childhood and child abuse prevention) sought family characteristics and capacities that were strongly linked with reduced child maltreatment and with a higher likelihood of optimal child development. The protective factors that emerged from the process were easily adopted by early childhood programs and others, since they articulated goals that programs already intuitively understood. The protective factors framework for the first time provided a research-based logic model for most of the work that family support had been doing all along, which provided an opportunity to make the work more defined and intentional, with the strategies in use in the programs aligned with specific results. The Strengthening Families Protective Factors are:

Parental Resilience	The ability to establish positive relationships, including attachment to a child; capacity to cope with stresses of daily life and recover from challenges.
Social Connections	Friends, family members, neighbors, and others who provide emotional support and concrete assistance to parents.
Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development	Accurate information about child development, appropriate developmental expectations, and knowledge of alternative discipline techniques.
Concrete Supports in Times of Need	Financial security to cover basic needs and unexpected costs; formal supports like TANF, Medicaid and job training; crisis services including mental health, domestic violence and substance abuse.
Children’s Social and Emotional Competence	A child’s ability to interact positively with others and communicate his or her emotions effectively.

(Strengthening Families through Early Care and Education 2003)

Subsequent field research in exemplary early childhood programs known to provide extensive support to families yielded a wealth of information, again adding definition and intentionality to the original family support ideas. The strategies discovered by the

Strengthening Families team became the basis for widely disseminated materials, guidebooks and a program self assessment that have guided implementation in the states. The strategies are all part of excellent family support practice, but added to the protective factors, it is easy to see that the goals of the strategies are the development of the protective factors, which in turn produce the final result that the program is seeking: optimal development for children and reductions in child abuse and neglect. (Strengthening Families through Early Care and Education 2003)

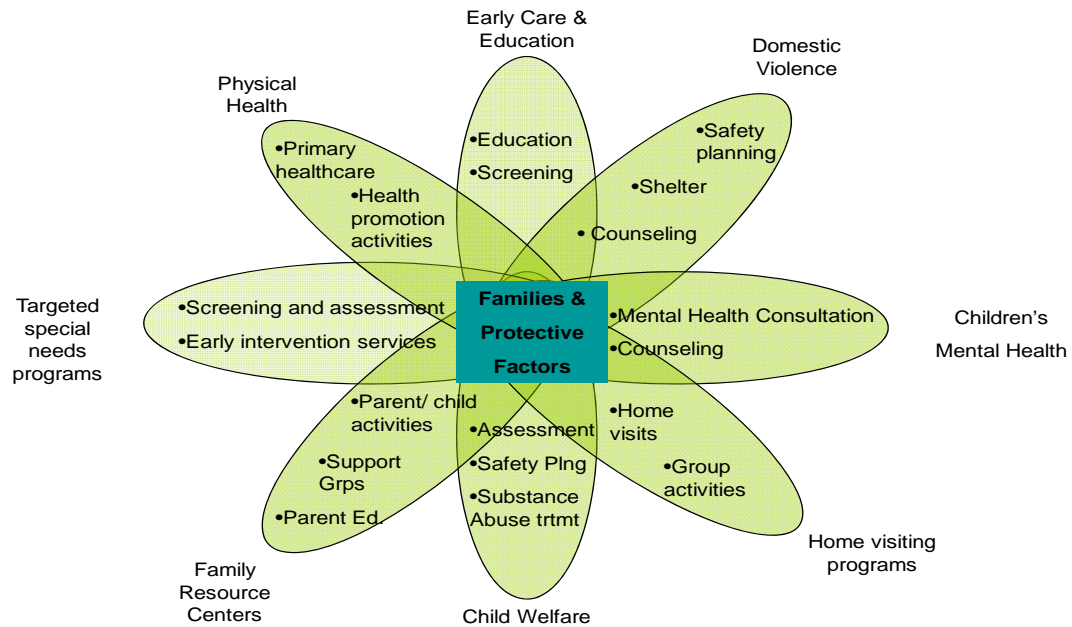


The Strengthening Families protective factors framework has provided state planning efforts with common language and common goals for families that could be used across all aspects of a comprehensive early childhood system. Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems planning grants, provided to all the states by the federal Maternal and Child Health Bureau, have used the framework as a consistent way to better define the results of family support and parent education, which are recognized by all states as an essential component of early childhood systems. Family support in many ways is the “glue” among early care and education, health and mental health, services for special populations of children (such as early intervention or children

with special needs) and the basic needs kinds of services their families need to provide for their development, such as TANF, housing or job training.

The BUILD Initiative, a national effort funded by the Early Childhood Funders Collaborative to support development of comprehensive early childhood systems in selected states, has linked with Strengthening Families in several instances to create a uniform perspective on what families need and how each service system can make a contribution to strengthening families. All the services that are provided to children in a comprehensive system also have the opportunity to make a contribution to the families of the children if they make an effort to see how their work builds protective factors with families. This approach does not change the basic goal or basic services that are being provided in each sector or put additional service burdens on each of the program areas. It does help each individual part of the system understand the overarching goals for families that all elements of the system care about, and helps to define the role of each part in supporting the development of protective factors in the daily work they do with children.

A diagram of this idea has been used by BUILD and by the ECCS planning groups in several states.



Judy Langford BUILD Initiative 2008 1
(Langford 2008)

Family Support in Place Based Initiatives

A different dimension of family support has emerged in a variety of place based initiatives that have been designed and funded by foundations in partnership with local communities in the last decade. While one branch of family support has focused primarily on parents with young children, resident-led community change initiatives have built out other aspects of the original vision of family support such as supporting reciprocity, neighborhood activism and community building. These initiatives, while unique to their own cities and populations, have focused in common on economic development and neighborhood revitalization as well as on improving outcomes for children, through a variety of strategies for organizing, capacity building and leadership development. These aspects of family support are

not “services” and are not funded through governmental funding streams, but they remain a vital part of the family support paradigm, addressing inherent inequalities and racism by offering a pathway for parents to become community leaders and advocates for their children.

Annie E. Casey’s *Making Connections*, the largest and longest place based initiative in the nation, adopted a “family strengthening” approach from the beginning, with an explicit focus on improving results for two generations at the same time. The underlying assumption of the initiative was that children thrive when their families thrive. Helping families thrive requires access to economic success opportunities including jobs and financial assets, strong social ties in the community that provide a network of mutual assistance and many opportunities (including schools that reach out to families) to help young children be successful in the early years of school. This extensive engagement of families with both their children and with their communities was guided by principles reminiscent of the original family support premises and principles:

Guiding Principles for Resident Engagement

- Primary responsibility for the development and well being of children lies with the family. All neighborhood efforts should support the creation of optimal conditions for families to carry out this vital task.
- Families and neighborhood residents are either already competent or have the capacity to become competent to make positive changes in their own lives and the neighborhoods. With adequate knowledge, skills, and resources, residents can recognize the wealth of talents in their neighborhood, mobilize resources, and find solutions to their own problems.
- Relationships between *Making Connections* site teams and resident families are based on equality and respect, recognizing that all partners in the process have something to give as well as to receive.
- Supporting individual family needs and caring for one’s own children come first. We can expect parents to attend to the broader needs of their neighbors only after their children’s needs are met.
- If we expect parents to participate meaningfully in a neighborhood initiative, we need to provide ample logistical supports, such as child care, translation services, transportation, and economic compensation. We also need to provide safe spaces where parents are comfortable expressing their most personal feelings and thoughts.
- Community change requires participation from everyone. Everyone matters and everyone should have a chance to be a part of the process: child and youth; adults and the elderly; the quiet and the outspoken; people of all races, languages, sexual orientation and faiths.
- Developing and sustaining community change takes a long time and ongoing efforts to involve residents at multiple levels of leadership. Neighborhood institutions, service agencies, informal networks, and families themselves can all provide opportunities for participation and leadership in long –term change.

--From *Residents Engaged in Strengthening Families and Neighborhoods*, Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2001.

Implications for Family Support in New Integrated Services Initiatives

New integrated services initiatives, enhanced by federal leadership in expanding early childhood opportunities and neighborhood partnerships for development, offer an opportunity for building on the family support accomplishments of the past. The learning from previous early childhood and neighborhood efforts makes a strong case for families as an important (maybe the most important) target of integrated strategies designed to improve outcomes for children. Family support has a history of providing the right mix of engagement, services and encouragement for families who face barriers to their children's success, and its long standing ideas can make a major contribution to new initiatives. The unique contributions of family support to new initiatives include:

Family engagement that includes multiple outreach strategies, many opportunities for social connections and mutual assistance among families is an essential element of efforts to improve outcomes for young children, as several research studies have shown. Families need timely opportunities to learn about child development and their role in promoting it, ideally delivered through familiar, culturally aligned messengers in their own communities in ways that do not undermine the traditions and relationships that are important to a parent and their extended network of family and friends. Social connections and circles of reciprocity have long provided families of all cultures with concrete assistance as well as support in parenting; building these connections for isolated, vulnerable families plays a vital part in strengthening family capacity to provide an optimal environment for their children. Excellent family support programs have long standing experience in providing this kind of intensive, tailored family engagement that includes all family members.

The step beyond engagement to **parent leadership and community building** has been a hallmark of family support from the beginning, with multiple opportunities for families to participate in decisions about programs that serve them as well as about decisions about their communities. Many programs set an expectation that families understand and participate in community decisions and learn to take leadership roles outside the program. The strong

community building thread that runs through family resource programs provides a link between building the capacity of families to take leadership for themselves and their children and encouraging them to take on leadership roles in their communities as well. The connection between families, community change and optimal development for children is one that is increasingly clear to program planners and researchers, as several of the community building initiatives have shown.

Respectfully providing a bridge to concrete services that families need, such as links to substance abuse treatment, job training, or early intervention for children remains more of an ideal than a reality in most programs that serve families. Family support programs have worked on this practice for years and have developed **innovative, culturally adapted ways of building trust** with very hard to reach families – and being an ongoing bridge for them as they access the many other services they may need. The most vulnerable families with the greatest barriers to success are in the greatest need for this type of consistent, encouraging support that goes far beyond referrals and hand-offs to service providers.

The fundamental nature of family support to be **embedded in a community context**, including hiring people from the community as staff, aligning with the cultural and ethnic identity of participants, and actively establishing and maintaining close relationships with service providers and public agencies in the community is also fundamental to renewed efforts to create community change and better outcomes for young children at the same time. Many professionally delivered services continue to operate in their own silos with few links to other providers and a lack of comfortable connections to the families they serve. Family support can be a model for other services and also assume a linking, bridging role for other service providers in the context of a new initiative.

The underlying ideas of family support that marked **policy innovations** in the past – actively engaging consumers, creating and sustaining working relationships among community resources, addressing families as a whole unit – remain essential in the landscape of new initiatives. To create programmatic responses that work to get better outcomes, the policies and

procedures that surround services have to be aligned to support the comprehensive, family supportive practices that new initiatives are designed to develop. There are changes that should be made at the federal, state and local level to promote a more comprehensive, family support agenda across service sectors.

Strengthening Family Support for Future Use

To make use of family support practices and concepts in new initiatives, attention and potential investments at several levels are required to allow for full utilization of the practice, program and community, and policy innovation ideas that have emerged from family support. Each of these would build on the many ways that family support has already been integrated into policy and practice at all levels and would provide a platform for further development.

- 1) ***The successful family engagement and leadership development practices currently in use need to be fully documented, analyzed, evaluated and shared among programs and practitioners.*** These practices are so much a part of local programs that they are not always recognized as unique or worthy of replication. Although practice has continued to develop and adapt, little analysis of it has been done since Guidelines for Family Support Practice was published in 1995. A new study could uncover:
 - The current state of practice in diverse settings with diverse populations and staff,
 - An analysis of the practice adaptations for different populations,
 - How staff are selected and trained to use the practices,
 - An initial agenda for evaluating diverse practice models and training,
 - An analysis of how these practices could be integrated into a variety of professional development and training opportunities,
 - Recommendations on disseminating the results and integrating it into practice through the family support field.

- 2) ***The use of family support services as links to services and supports for achieving outcomes in diverse service sectors should be documented and evaluated.*** Family

support is often much more than “glue” among service sectors, but this vital linking mechanism has never been fully documented or analyzed, and its impact has not been evaluated. A study to identify the scope of the services should precede a true evaluation. The study would include:

- Analysis of different definitions and uses of family support or family support-like practices as a link among service sectors,
- Identification of how effective linkages with community resources and other services are developed and sustained,
- Adaptations of services and practices to serve diverse populations,
- Selection and training of staff who do this well,
- Recommendations for evaluating effectiveness of family support as a linking and bridging component of service integration.

3) *Evaluation and accountability continue to be a challenge for family support strategies; it is difficult to measure activities that are intentionally individualized across a range of issues, fill in gaps between other services, and is committed to doing “whatever it takes” to help each individual family than adhering to a simple program model.*

Recent agreement on using increased family protective factors as a measure of program outcomes for families is one step forward, with other research now underway to bolster this line of thinking. In the meantime, new efforts should be made:

- to define common child and family outcomes for family support across programs and services,
- to identify and develop easily used instruments that will measure impact on both children and families,

- to link activities being provided to the results being measured, and
- to measure community impact as a result of family support.

Family support has significant contributions to make in the coming years as new early childhood initiatives and stronger community change efforts take root. Its history and principles have led to powerful practices that are strongly connected to the families and communities most in need of resources --and power – to raise their children in an optimal environment. Harnessing and honing the knowledge and inspiration generated by family support can lead to renewed hope for better outcomes for families and their children in a new era of greater responsibility for better futures for all children.

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