

Strengthening families across the country: what NAEYC Affiliates should know

What is family strengthening work? Why now?

Significant momentum is growing in the early childhood education community around strengthening families. We know that early childhood professionals have always strengthened and supported children and families—but over the last five years or so, the field has benefited from research that provides evidence and support for the implementation of new approaches to this work. **As Affiliate leaders, it is important to know about strengthening families efforts—what is happening and where—so that you can participate in this work effectively at the Affiliate level.**

Since 2002, NAEYC has received generous support from the [Doris Duke Charitable Foundation](#) for the [Supporting Teachers, Strengthening Families](#) initiative. This effort is housed in NAEYC's Professional Development Division. The goals of the initiative are to lead early childhood educators in *intentional* efforts to promote children's healthy social and emotional development and build supportive partnerships with families in order to help prevent child abuse and neglect.

Children's healthy social and emotional development, supportive partnerships with families, and children's health and safety have always been part of NAEYC's mission and vision and are reflected throughout NAEYC's [Early Childhood Program Standards](#), especially the standards on Families and Community Relationships. High quality early childhood programs and professionals support the goals of the initiative by:

1. Providing high quality care and education through developmentally appropriate practices;
2. Developing reciprocal relationships with families;
3. Recognizing signs of abuse, situations that may place children at risk of abuse, and providing families with appropriate support;
4. Understanding, and helping families to understand and handle children's challenging behaviors;
5. Building on child and family strengths; and
6. Staying informed about professional responsibilities and engaging in professional development.

Research with early childhood professionals and parents at the outset of NAEYC's *Supporting Teachers, Strengthening Families* initiative helped identify professional development needs and opportunities in relation to initiative goals; the activities of the initiative respond to these needs. Six years of work has included:

- Resource development, including the brochure [Building Circles, Breaking Cycles](#) and [Where We Stand on Child Abuse Prevention](#). Training materials to help build effective communication skills with families—especially around difficult conversations—are scheduled to be launched in mid-2008;
- The [Supporting Teachers, Strengthening Families National Leadership Program](#), to support early childhood leaders working on initiative goals.
- Professional development opportunities, including conference sessions and full-day workshops on challenging behaviors provided in partnership with the Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning ([CSEFEL](#)) and the Technical Assistance Center on Social Emotional Intervention ([TACSEI](#)).
- Communications and outreach, including several articles in [Young Children](#) detailing these efforts, a [Web site](#), and networking opportunities at NAEYC conferences.

At the same time, the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation has provided support to other organizations to engage in work with similar goals. Fellow grantees include:

- [Center for the Study of Social Policy](#)
- [Zero to Three](#)
- [National Alliance of Children’s Trust & Prevention Funds](#)

In just the last six years or so, DDCF grantees have created significant momentum across the country around how early childhood professionals can be instrumental in strengthening and supporting families. Work varies according to the grantee’s mission, priorities, and unique organizational structure; collectively, the work is complementary and in some cases, overlapping. In states and communities across the country early childhood professionals are:

- developing specific knowledge and skills about family strengthening approaches (like promoting social-emotional competence, preventing challenging behaviors, communicating with families, building protective factors, and more) through training and technical assistance in pre-service and in-service settings;
- building new collaborations and coalitions with a variety of stakeholders;
- advocating for improvements in public policies that affect families and children;
- communicating and reaching out through trainings, presentations, and media efforts;
- developing new supportive services for children and families;
- implementing changes in licensing or credentialing;
- promoting parent leadership;
- developing curricula and tools;
- and much, much more.

Where is family strengthening work happening?

At least [40 states](#) have been touched by one or more of the DDCF grantees’ work—with varying types and levels of activity—and the list keeps growing.

NAEYC members are providing leadership on family strengthening to the early childhood education field. An article about the *Supporting Teachers, Strengthening Families National Leadership Program* and the work of many of the [more than 40 early childhood leaders](#) is

available from [Beyond the Journal](#). The 24 states where *National Leadership Program* participants are located are designated as NAEYC STSF states on this [map](#).

CSSP laid the theoretical groundwork for the Strengthening Families™ framework and identified factors that protect children and families and program strategies that build the protective factors. CSSP identified 21 early childhood programs in eight states that exemplify the Strengthening Families™ approach. CSSP also worked in seven states to pilot the use of existing state-level agencies and resources to provide information, training and other incentives to help local early childhood programs implement the Strengthening Families™ approach. CSSP recently launched the Strengthening Families National Network™ (SFNN), whereby states must provide evidence of their Strengthening Families™ work to become part of the Network. More information about the SFNN and profiles of each of the state partners and affiliated states is available at www.strengtheningfamilies.net. NAEYC is a National Partner in the Network.

Zero to Three continues to provide its Partnering with Parents training to teams of early childhood professionals, reaching teams in at least 6 states.

The Alliance of Children’s Trust & Prevention Fund’s (CTF) Early Childhood Initiative has provided nine states with seed grants to implement a state-level Strengthening Families™ plan and serve as Learning Centers. Ten additional states participate in a broader Learning Community and receive training technical assistance and travel support to participate in meetings of the Children’s Trust and Prevention Fund’s Early Childhood Initiative.

What can Affiliates do?

Many Affiliates and/or individuals active in their Affiliate are already engaged in family strengthening work. Affiliates can:

- Connect with those in your state or community who are already active and explore how you might participate in the work. While every effort has been made to ensure that the information in this brief is up-to-date, more states are continuously getting involved via one or more Doris Duke Charitable Foundation grantees. Refer to the grantee Web sites listed above to determine if your state has activity and who you might contact or contact NAEYC at strengthenfamilies@naeyc.org. If your community has little or no activity yet, here’s your opportunity! Affiliates can convene members and other stakeholders to begin the conversation;
- Connect with NAEYC at strengthenfamilies@naeyc.org to let us know what you are doing in your community! At this point, NAEYC doesn’t know what you are doing unless you tell us;
- Facilitate professional development by sponsoring in-service training opportunities, creating a track for strengthening families at your conferences, highlighting materials that are available online in your newsletters, or otherwise providing information about family strengthening in your outreach;
- Work to include policies that support children and families in your state Affiliate’s public policy agenda;
- And much more—what are your ideas, big or small?