

Supporting Teachers, Strengthening Families

A New NAEYC Initiative

For the past year, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) has been involved in an exciting national initiative—Supporting Teachers, Strengthening Families—with the dual goals of helping early childhood professionals prevent child abuse and neglect and promote healthy social and emotional development. This project rests on NAEYC’s conviction that early childhood professionals are uniquely positioned to play a key role in meeting these goals through their relationships with families and their capacities to provide information and support to families of young children.

Beginning phase

The first phase of the Supporting Teachers, Strengthening Families initiative was an ambitious research project, helping NAEYC ascertain how best to support early childhood educators in meeting the identified goals. NAEYC worked with Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research, Inc., on the research program, which included conducting a series of six

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focus group meetings with ethnically diverse early childhood professionals in May 2002 in Washington, D.C., Chicago, and Houston. Qualitative research like this helped NAEYC better understand the language and thoughts of early childhood educators in a more open setting and helped to establish initial patterns of thought. Using information obtained from the focus groups, the research team developed a survey that was mailed to 5,000 early childhood educators, both NAEYC members and nonmembers.

Identical surveys were mailed to a random sample of 3,000 NAEYC members and 2,000 nonmembers (generated from a national list of educators), with an overall response rate of 38 percent. More than 1,800 professionals working in early childhood education participated in the survey, which was available in both Spanish and English.

This research attempted to learn whether early childhood professionals were willing to take even more active parts in preventing child abuse and neglect, what their roles might be, how prepared they feel to assume more active roles, how NAEYC can support teachers as they work to prevent child abuse and neglect, and more.

Research findings

The findings confirm present knowledge that early childhood educators are committed professionals, actively engaged with the families of children under their care. Survey findings also indicate that the overwhelming majority of early childhood educators are willing to participate more fully and intentionally in preventing child abuse and neglect—given adequate information, resources, and support. Specifically, the research reveals that

- 1. Early childhood educators are willing to take an even more active part in preventing child abuse and neglect.** Survey participants almost unanimously confirmed their willingness to be even more active in preventing child abuse and neglect and promoting positive development. An impressive 98 percent of members and 96 percent of nonmembers participating in the survey said that they are willing to join NAEYC’s expanded efforts to help prevent child abuse and neglect.
- 2. Early childhood educators feel a strong professional and personal responsibility to help prevent child abuse and neglect.** This willingness is not surprising given that educators are well known for having a deep professional and personal commitment to helping children. More than three-quarters of the survey participants *strongly* agreed with the statement, “As an educator, I have a professional responsibility to do whatever I can to prevent—and not just report—child abuse and neglect.” Seven in ten also agreed strongly that they have a “personal responsibility” to prevent, and not just report, child abuse and neglect.
- 3. Early childhood educators see helping families promote positive development as critical in preventing child abuse and neglect.** Eighty-five percent of all respondents said that giving families more

guidance about promoting positive social and emotional development and early learning for their children is a key to helping reduce child abuse and neglect. Educators (67 percent) believe that strong relationships with families are crucial to being able to provide this guidance.

4. Many early childhood educators are unsure about their qualifications and comfort level in discussing difficult topics with families. Survey participants expressed some uncertainty and discomfort about discussing difficult topics (such as personal or family difficulties in the home, as well as child abuse and neglect) with parents and families of the children under their care.

Only 44 percent of the educators said that they are *very* qualified to discuss behavioral or disciplinary problems with parents, and only 25 percent of members and 30 percent of nonmembers believed that they are *very* qualified to discuss child abuse and neglect with parents and families.

5. Early childhood educators want more training and resources, especially on handling challenging behaviors and developing better communication strategies when talking with families about difficult topics. These specific requests for more support and resources were expressed repeatedly in responses to numerous survey questions asking participants directly and indirectly to comment on their professional development needs. Educators indicated they want hands-on, face-to-face training—such as courses and seminars, professional conferences, and discussions with other teachers and caregivers—that provides concrete guidance.

When asked to choose the areas in which they personally would like more or better professional development, 58 percent of educators selected *challenging behaviors* as their first or second choice from an

extensive list of topics. The next two highest ranked topics included *prevention of child abuse and neglect* and *social and emotional competence*, with 43 percent of the early childhood educators noting these as their first or second choices. Thirty-six percent of the educators indicated *family relationships and involvement* as a first or second choice of topic on which they wished to receive more support and resources.

When directly asked how NAEYC might help educators prevent child abuse and neglect, participants selected as the top two supports (from a list of 11 options) that NAEYC could provide:

- giving educators tools to address children's challenging behaviors and to help families do so
- giving educators better communication strategies when talking with families about difficult topics

What's next?

This study is the first step in NAEYC's efforts to support early childhood professionals in taking a more active part in preventing child abuse and neglect and promoting children's healthy social and emotional development. In the coming months NAEYC will develop Web-based and other resources in the following focus areas:

- developing positive, reciprocal relationships and partnerships with families;
- communicating with families about difficult issues;
- recognizing children at risk for abuse or neglect; and
- handling challenging behaviors more effectively.

These planned resources will be useful in professional development efforts undertaken by NAEYC Affiliates, NAEYC-accredited programs, and other groups concerned

with preventing child abuse and neglect and promoting positive social and emotional development.

Selected NAEYC resources

Books

- Honig, A. 2002. *Secure relationships: Nurturing infant/toddler attachment in early care settings*.
- Kaiser, B., & J. Rasminsky. 1999. *Meeting the challenge: Effective strategies for challenging behaviours in early childhood environments* (from the Canadian Child Care Federation).
- Morrison, K., & D. Diffily, eds. 1996. *Family-friendly communication for early childhood programs*.

Young Children articles

- Caughey, C. 1991. Becoming the child's ally: Observations in a classroom for children who have been abused. Vol. 46 (4): 22–28.
- Hyson, M. 2002. Emotional development and school readiness. Vol. 57 (6): 76–78.
- Manning, D., & P.J. Schindler. 1997. Communicating with parents when their children have difficulties. Vol. 52 (5): 27–33.
- Powell, D.R. 1998. Research in Review. Reweaving parents into the fabric of early childhood programs. Vol. 53 (5): 60–67.

Online

- www.naeyc.org/resources/position_statements/pschab98.htm
Position statement on the prevention of child abuse in early childhood programs and the responsibilities of early childhood professionals to prevent abuse. Adopted 1996.

Videos

- Cultivating roots—Home/school partnerships*. 1996. The Early Childhood Program series. Produced by Stark County (Ohio) School District, North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, Iowa Department of Education, Nebraska Department of Education, Ohio Department of Education, Jennings Foundation, and NAEYC. 30 min.
- Make a difference: Report child abuse and neglect*. 1996. Child Care Collection. Produced by the State of Indiana and Ball State University. 28 min. Also available in Spanish.

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