IMAGINE THIS:

- Families feel truly comfortable and connected in a new early childhood program, instead of uncertain and isolated.
- Parents and teachers have a tool box of skills and techniques for addressing children’s challenging behaviors, no longer resorting to inappropriate discipline or expulsion.
- College students learn how to help prevent child abuse and neglect—not just report it.

Ideals for sure, but these examples represent what is becoming a new reality in early childhood practice: strong, healthy families, and professionals well prepared to help support them.

Supporting and strengthening families has always been part of the early childhood professional’s unique role in the community. Now the field has a robust research base providing evidence about effective family-strengthening strategies and the professional development that educators need to effectively implement them. The research base forms a foundation for the early childhood field’s increasingly intentional efforts to support families.

NAEYC’s Supporting Teachers, Strengthening Families initiative (online at www.naeyc.org/ecd/supporting) is a set of activities designed to provide intentional leadership and education in the family-strengthening approach. The initiative promotes the use of research-based strategies in early childhood programs and by individual professionals.
What is the strengthening families approach?

A commitment to high-quality early childhood education overarches the strengthening families approach. This approach emphasizes early childhood professionals’ roles in promoting factors known to protect children from abuse and neglect (see “Protective Factors”) and reducing known risks, such as children’s challenging behaviors. The strengthening families approach includes a framework for early childhood practice:

1. Providing quality care and education through developmentally appropriate practices. Developmentally appropriate practices are the cornerstone of NAEYC values and philosophy. By incorporating practices, such as promoting play to foster social skills and learning, and understanding cultural contexts to ensure that learning is meaningful, relevant, and respectful, quality care and education strengthens families and promotes children’s healthy development (Bredekamp & Copple 1997).

2. Developing reciprocal relationships with families. When early childhood professionals establish strong, positive relationships with families, they can respond better to signs of family stress and offer appropriate information and support more effectively. Communication about difficult issues is much easier with a good relationship in place.

3. Recognizing signs of abuse and situations that may put children at risk and providing families with appropriate support. Some early childhood programs offer specialized intervention services for vulnerable families, but most do not. However, all early childhood professionals are well positioned to help strengthen families by sharing their knowledge of child development, basic health and hygiene, nutrition, and community resources.

4. Understanding, and helping families to understand and respond to, children’s challenging behaviors. Challenging behaviors inhibit children’s development and learning and tax adults’ resources, putting children at risk for abuse. Early childhood professionals strengthen families by providing information about appropriate expectations and age-appropriate guidance techniques that help children learn acceptable behaviors, and by developing a consistent home-school approach to addressing difficult behaviors.

5. Building on children’s and families’ strengths. Resilience, social and emotional health, good peer relationships, positive self-esteem, and strong coping skills are child and family strengths that protect families and that early childhood professionals can help build.

6. Staying informed about professional responsibilities and taking charge of professional development. NAEYC resources define early childhood professionals’ legal and ethical responsibilities regarding children and families (NAEYC 2004). Individual practitioners may need more education or training to become familiar with and understand family-strengthening strategies and to use them effectively.
How does the initiative work?

As part of the Supporting Teachers, Strengthening Families initiative, NAEYC identified some 40 early childhood leaders who were interested in learning and sharing about the strengthening families approach and implementing family-strengthening strategies in their communities. In 2005 and 2006, they participated in the yearlong Supporting Teachers, Strengthening Families National Leadership Program, designing and implementing action plans to advance the strengthening families approach in their communities. To formulate their plans, participants considered the strengths, opportunities, and needs of their communities (with community broadly defined as an early childhood program; a city, county, region, or state; or an institution of higher education), existing partnerships and coalitions, and their professional interests and goals. NAEYC and partner organizations provided materials, support, and technical assistance.

What did these action plans look like? In their profiles (pp. 5–14), seven members of the leadership program describe how they planned and implemented activities that support the initiative’s goals. Their efforts

• encompass a range of ideas and opportunities for professionals at all levels and in different venues, including classroom teachers, program directors, trainers, and higher education faculty.
• can be models for your own work, tailored to your community’s strengths, needs, and capacity. The strengthening families framework allows for variation and creativity.
• show that sharing and learning about the strengthening families approach and implementing strategies can be low cost or no cost. Presenting a conference workshop, updating a course syllabus, hosting a brainstorming meeting, joining a committee, or planning an event for families are all inexpensive ways to participate in this important work.
• describe work that connects with current early childhood practice standards. The strengthening families approach reflects the NAEYC Early Childhood Program Standards (NAEYC 2005). Implementing the strategies can help you meet your program goals.

How do I get started?

Materials to support your own efforts are readily available (many for free) from NAEYC, Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP), and other partners. If you are a teacher educator or an early childhood educator in another setting, here’s what you can do:

• Use the NAEYC brochure Building Circles, Breaking Cycles—Preventing Child Abuse and Neglect: The Early Childhood Educator’s Role (NAEYC 2004) and the companion discussion guide (both are readily available online in English and Spanish at www.naeyc.org/ece/supporting.asp) to open a conversation with students in your courses or with teachers in your program. Incorporate the brochure’s content in course curricula, or discuss the content during a staff meeting. Discussions will help students and staff think about their roles in preventing child abuse and neglect. They can consider the extent to which they already...
intentionally support and strengthen families, how they might do more, and what kind of professional development support they need to be successful.

- As you move forward, another essential resource is *Protecting Children by Strengthening Families: A Guidebook for Early Childhood Programs* (CSSP 2004), with in-depth assessment tools to help you critically evaluate your current efforts on specific aspects of the strengthening families approach. (You can download the guidebook and many other CSSP resources online at www.cssp.org/doris_duke/index.html)

- Convene colleagues in your program, community, or state for brainstorming, collaboration, training, and more. In fact, there may be an existing effort in your state with which you can connect.

- Join the continuing national dialogue: look for sessions and networking opportunities in NAEYC conference programs and visit the Supporting Teachers, Strengthening Families Online Community, open to all NAEYC members (see the Members Only section of NAEYC’s Web site, www.naeyc.org).

- Go to the Supporting Teachers, Strengthening Families link (online at www.naeyc.org/ece/supporting.asp) on NAEYC’s Web site to check the map showing more than 40 states touched by strengthening families work, a complete list of the National Leadership Program participants, full information about the initiative, downloadable resources from NAEYC, and essential links to our partners and their resources.

- For more information or to connect with colleagues, write to us at strengthenfamilies@naeyc.org.

**Online Resources**

Here are some Web sites that will give you more information related to strengthening families:

Center for Evidence-Based Practice: Young Children with Challenging Behavior—www.challengingbehavior.org


Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning—www.csefel.uiuc.edu

Doris Duke Charitable Foundation—www.ddcf.org

ZERO TO THREE—www.zerotothree.org/partneringwithparents

**Community Projects That Strengthen Families and Support Teachers**

A number of early childhood professionals took part in the yearlong Supporting Teachers, Strengthening Families National Leadership Program. Following (pp. 5–14) are profiles of seven projects that grew out of participants’ action plans and were funded by the Supporting Teachers, Strengthening Families initiative. They range across the country—Georgia, Kansas, New Hampshire, New York, Ohio, Oregon, and South Carolina.

**References**


Help for Parents of Fussy Babies

My action plan focused on supporting families with the youngest children by addressing the needs of parents and others caring for infants and toddlers with behaviors that may be difficult to handle, like excessive crying. While it can be perfectly normal for babies to cry for hours, this behavior can be frustrating to even the most experienced and loving parent or caregiver, and it is a risk factor for shaken baby syndrome. Through preliminary research I discovered an immediate need in my Long Island community for greater coordination of information about resources to help families cope with infants’ and toddlers’ difficult behaviors.

The Erikson Institute’s Fussy Baby Network in Chicago (www.fussybabynetwork.org) acknowledges that while all babies cry, some cry more than others. The Network helps families find ways to soothe and enjoy their babies through coordinated services, including a Fussy Baby Warmline (a phone number to link parents to child development specialists), home visiting, a clinic, a parents’ group, and more.

My goal was to identify programs in my community providing services similar to those in Chicago and to compile this information in a directory. The result was the Fussy Baby Resource Directory for Long Island, in two formats. The first, available in English and Spanish, gives parents and caregivers information about community resources and tips for soothing a crying baby. The second, longer version is designed for service providers and other professionals to use in their own work and when making referrals. Using the $1,000 minigrant I received from the Supporting Teachers, Strengthening Families initiative, I distributed hundreds of both directories to service agencies, libraries, hospitals, clinics, and other locations throughout Long Island.

My hope is that the directory will promote Long Island’s existing programs while increasing awareness of gaps in services. A long-term goal is to create a more formal interdisciplinary network of programs that provide support and early intervention to parents and caregivers with so-called fussy babies.

—Susan Astor, Early Intervention Site Monitor, IPRO Corporation, and Adjunct Faculty, Adelphi University, Lake Success, New York
Building Relationships through Casual Get-togethers

Since 1978 the Live & Learn Early Learning Center has been providing child care and an after-school program daily for more than 100 children, ages six weeks to 13 years. Despite years of experience, we continually seek opportunities to grow and learn. After implementing the Center for the Study of Social Policy’s program self-assessment (available at www.cssp.org) and analyzing the findings, we learned that we needed to improve our early childhood center’s practices related to building relationships—between teachers and the families the center serves, and between families.

To lay the foundation for more effective teacher-family relationships, we planned and implemented an orientation meeting to welcome new families, introduce teachers and staff, provide information about the center, and increase understanding of Live & Learn’s philosophy and curriculum. The center’s previous orientation consisted of home visits for families enrolling infants. It would be a significant change to offer a well-planned orientation for all families, thus clearing the way for more open and comfortable communication between families and teachers. Ninety percent of new families and 45 percent of already enrolled families attended the event and shared positive feedback.

Another need the survey identified was increasing the positive social connections among families. In response, we planned and hosted a series of Dinner Chats for staff and families. After a simple meal, support teachers provided child care while lead teachers facilitated conversations with families about parenting issues and concerns. The dinners have become a welcome opportunity for teachers and families to laugh together and to connect about their goals, ideas, and challenges in an informal setting and atmosphere.

We also began a series of Stay and Play afternoons, during which families can enjoy—even for just a few minutes—an ice cream social, a short hay ride (Live & Learn is located on a farm), or another fun activity at pickup time. The Dinner Chats and Stay and Play afternoons create an atmosphere of trust and support. Families consider them to be fun events rather than occasions to “get help.” Staff, families, and children are all benefiting from stronger relationships.

Working as a team allowed staff to brainstorm and support each other throughout the planning and implementation process, and families are helping to further shape these continuing activities. We have started sharing our ideas and successes with other teachers and centers in New Hampshire through meetings and workshop sessions at conferences.

—Johanna Booth-Miner, Director/Owner; Sarah Miner, Co-Director; and Kate Mawson, Lead Infant/Toddler Teacher, Live & Learn Early Learning Center, Lee, New Hampshire

Dinner Chats are a welcome opportunity for teachers and families to laugh together and to connect about their goals, ideas, and challenges in an informal setting.
Establishing a Relief Nursery

A relief nursery is a multifaceted, comprehensive program that offers support and education services to families experiencing multiple challenges related to poverty, substance abuse, child welfare and/or court involvement, violence, and stress. Children’s crisis relief nurseries keep children safe, facilitate their healthy development, and help families gain stability.

Relief nurseries wrap services around a family, embodying the strengthening families approach at the highest level. In addition to developmentally appropriate child care, services include intensive case management, therapeutic early childhood classrooms, respite care, home visiting, mental health counseling for children and families, substance abuse recovery support, intensive parent training, and opportunities for parents to practice their newly learned strategies at home and in the classroom—at no cost to families.

To establish the Family Nurturing Center (www.familynurturingcenter.net), a relief nursery in my community in Oregon, I began by gathering and analyzing data about existing social services for families at risk. In addition, I researched the relief nursery model, including possible program structures, the therapeutic classroom, parenting education curricula, assessment tools, and more. I formally established a nonprofit agency, with an 11-member board meeting regularly to develop and approve a strategic plan. The board and I created public relations and marketing materials to use at meetings and speaking engagements, including a brochure, a PowerPoint presentation, and a video.

The funds for establishing the Family Nurturing Center came from numerous donors, including $150,000 from the Oregon State Legislature. The Oregon Community Foundation provided significant support—contingent upon raising additional funds from other sources, which we did. We also negotiated with a local organization that expressed interest in adopting the relief nursery as its major community service project. This partnership promises to be significant in providing long-term support for the nursery.

Since its opening in May 2006, the Family Nurturing Center has served 38 children, ages six weeks to four years old, and their families. All classrooms are full and we have a waiting list; we are already awaiting a move to a larger facility. The children enjoy the program, and their families seem to make consistent progress.

—Mary-Curtis Gramley, Director, Family Nurturing Center, Medford, Oregon
Child and Family Services Organizations Collaborate

Families benefit when early childhood education and child welfare agencies work together on their behalf. Child welfare professionals often are the brokers between families in need and services, including child care, and it is important that they understand how high-quality early childhood programs support vulnerable families and children.

For the strengthening families approach to successfully spread statewide in South Carolina, both early childhood and child welfare professionals needed to be involved from the beginning. I created a formal early childhood/child welfare work group to spark collaborative efforts and encourage mutual understanding of our respective priorities. The work group first met in the fall of 2005. An initial training on the strengthening families approach kicked off our efforts and invited broader involvement. The first participants included 30 people from across the state who had managerial and supervisory responsibilities related to early care and education programs.

By June 2006, a core group of committed professionals, now called the Strengthening Families Leadership Team, was working on various projects across the state. The group included representatives from the state Departments of Education and Social Services, First Steps (a statewide school readiness program), Prevent Child Abuse South Carolina, the Children’s Trust Fund of South Carolina, Foster Care Review Board, The Nurturing Center (a community agency providing services to families whose preschool-age children are in foster care), and many others. Here are some of the projects:

• Multiple counties are collaborating with community partners and fund-raising to support the intentional implementation of family-strengthening strategies in child care centers and family child care homes. First Steps is guiding much of this work.

• Midlands Technical College has infused the strengthening families approach into its Early Childhood Education Family and Community course. Students reinforce their classroom lessons by working with early childhood programs to complete the program self-assessment using the tool developed by the Center for Studies in Social Policy. Other technical colleges are following this lead.

• South Carolina was selected by the National Alliance of Children’s Trust and Prevention Funds Early Childhood Initiative to be part of its Learning Community, receiving training and technical assistance from the alliance to integrate the strengthening families framework into early childhood programs.

The Leadership Team’s successful efforts continue to expand throughout the state; it’s a very exciting time in South Carolina.

—Lynne Noble, Professor of Education, Columbia College, South Carolina

Both early childhood and child welfare professionals need to be involved from the beginning.
As the Early Education Consultant for the Central Kansas Mental Health Center and Smart Start of Saline County, I work with children who have challenging behaviors or other concerns in child care centers, family child care settings, and preschools in Salina, a fairly good sized town. In my interactions with children and their families, it became clear to me that parents also need support. So I formed a parent support group in May 2006 for parents of young children with challenging behaviors. Early care and education teachers also attend meetings. So far the group has reached about 40 families and teachers.

The group provides families with emotional support as well as with the knowledge and skills needed to help children replace their challenging behaviors with positive ones. It strengthens families by building protective factors for children and reducing risks—a key strategy of the family strengthening approach. Parents who understand and are able to handle children’s behaviors are more likely to be nurturing and less likely to be abusive.

In forming the parent support group, I received a lot of encouragement from groups in Saline County, including the mental health community and agencies concerned with healthy families—especially the local Child Abuse Prevention Services (CAPS) agency. CAPS already offered parenting classes with free child care and snacks, so some of the logistics were in place, allowing us to move the planning and implementation process ahead rapidly. I piggybacked on this existing system, inserting the group into the CAPS class rotation to reach my target audience of parents. I considered the topics I wanted to cover and the information families, foster parents, and early care and education teachers need, gathered background materials and information, advertised the programs and received referrals for the group, scheduled, and then facilitated the meetings.

Our two-hour meetings at a local church at first met once a month. Later the group joined with the CAPS parenting group and met for three weeks in a row. The meetings include brief presentations by a guest expert or by me and encourage and facilitate discussions on topics such as

- temperament and the goodness of fit between parent and child,
- developmentally appropriate behaviors to expect, and
- how to develop routines and schedules to support positive behavior.

Meeting content is enhanced by interactive exercises such as role-playing, small group discussions, and viewing and discussing taped scenarios. The exercises allow participants to practice their newly gained skills. For example, for the presentation on speaking kindly and using an appropriate tone of voice, the group viewed a (professionally enacted) scenario of a four-year-old yelling at a parent, then generated ideas on how to reframe the adult’s negative reaction.
and statements to be positive. Another meeting focused on creating or refining consistent routines. We reviewed appropriate schedules for various age groups, and then parents generated schedules for bedtime routines. They shared them, discussed and refined them, then took the schedules home to try for a week and report back at the next meeting. Participants also informally share their concerns and exchange ideas about specific behaviors or social-emotional development issues.

Some of the parents who attend are in jeopardy of losing their children; they participate by court mandate in order to gain new parenting skills and learn more appropriate ways to interact with their children. Other parents, struggling with their children’s behaviors, are actively seeking assistance. Children’s challenges include diagnosed mental disorders, such as bipolar, oppositional defiance, and autism; biting; and difficult behaviors that have become routine, like having tantrums, throwing items, and running from parents.

Several families have difficulty taking their children out in public because their behaviors are uncontrollable. In this situation the group and I provide support for the parent in the form of understanding, but we also outline a step-by-step plan to help the parent take the child out in public again. The parent tries the routine and reports the next week on how it worked. We then revise the plan if necessary.

CAPS is providing additional funding to support increased participation, and the program’s content has been approved for credit for relicensing of child care providers. (Each workshop is worth two hours of in-service, and early care and education teachers in Kansas needs 10 hours of in-service per year for licensing.) To meet this state requirement, training content in Kansas and Missouri needs to cover one of the core competencies for early care and education professionals, which include learning environment; families and communities; health, safety, and nutrition; interactions with children; and professional development. Core competencies include five skill levels ranging from new professional to a professional with an advanced degree.

Thanks to the initial backing from NAEYC’s Supporting Teachers, Strengthening Families initiative and the continuing support of CAPS and the Central Kansas Mental Health Center, I will continue to offer this program for families and teachers struggling to help children with challenging behaviors.

— Ingrid Pohl, Early Childhood Consultant, Central Kansas Mental Health Center and Smart Start of Saline County

Parents who understand and are able to handle children’s behaviors are more likely to be nurturing and less likely to be abusive.
Parent Workshops and Teacher Training

I coordinate an early intervention and mental health initiative for Fulton County, Georgia. Fulton County encompasses the city of Atlanta and houses approximately 10 percent of Georgia’s children ages five and under. With an estimated 25,000 children enrolled in more than 845 child care programs and 195 pre-K programs, the county recognizes the importance of early childhood education in the prevention of abuse and neglect and in the promotion of healthy child development. One of my primary job functions is to develop and implement child care staff training and parent workshops throughout Fulton County to support teachers and to strengthen families. The concepts and strategies promoted in NAEYC’s Supporting Teachers, Strengthening Families initiative are a natural fit with the training and workshops I conduct.

Since January 2006, more than 200 early childhood educators from across the county have attended in-service training sessions on the strengthening families approach. Specifically, I incorporated the seven program strategies from Supporting Teachers, Strengthening Families into staff training. These strategies include ways to facilitate friendships and support, strengthen parenting skills, respond to family crises, link families to community resources, promote social and emotional development, and recognize and respond to early signs of abuse or neglect, as well as how to truly value and support parents.

Parent workshops focus on promoting the five protective factors from the strengthening families approach: building parental resilience and social connections, enhancing knowledge of child development, providing support in times of need, and promoting children’s healthy social and emotional development. To date, more that 85 parents have heard this positive message.

Feedback from both teacher and parent participants has been consistently positive. Some of the comments captured at the conclusion of staff training sessions and parent workshops indicate that most participants learned helpful strategies they could use with children and they found the information to be beneficial. For example, one teacher explained that the best feature of the training session was “learning how teachers should talk to and deal with families.” Another stated, “I am truly thankful for this training and the early intervention program—for their part in impacting the lives of teachers so that they can be most effective with children.” A parent commented, “This workshop gave me some good ideas to try with my child. If there is another workshop, I will attend.”

One challenge has been identifying and eliminating barriers to staff attendance and generating more excitement among parents about the workshops. For both training and workshops, we offer free child care, dinner, and other incentives, such as prizes and giveaways. These enhancements were made possible in 2006 with the help of a Strengthening Families, Supporting Teachers minigrant from NAEYC in combination with Fulton County funding. To promote family participation, Fulton County also funded the development of a brochure eliciting parents’ input.

(cont’d on p. 12)
on the topics and problems they would like the workshops to address. Child care administrators distribute the brochures to families during parent-teacher conferences, orientations, social events, meetings, and the like.

To draw teachers to the in-service training and to make it more relevant, I began delivering on-site training at the child care centers. In addition, to make training sessions and workshops more convenient, I conduct them on days and at times that fit teachers’ and families’ schedules best, such as Saturdays and evenings. Since I made the adjustments, the response has been positive and there has been an increase in the number of child care centers requesting training and workshops.

I have found opportunities to work with county and city policy makers, state agencies, and local community resources by becoming involved in several committees and school-readiness task forces devoted to improving early care and education in the City of Atlanta. Through these local leadership opportunities and interagency collaborations, I am in a good position to continue promoting the strengthening families approach. Work by NAEYC, the Center for the Study of Social Policy, and other organizations has created momentum in Georgia around the strengthening families approach—everyone wants to be on board!

— Corinne Fennelly, Early Intervention Coordinator
Fulton County Human Services, Office of Children & Youth, Atlanta, Georgia

One teacher explained that the best feature of the training session was “learning how teachers should talk to and deal with families.”

(cont’d on p. 13)
I succeeded in leveraging NAEYC’s $1,000 minigrant into additional support. With it, I offered two more strengthening families workshops on developing partnerships with parents.

As a participant in the Supporting Teachers, Strengthening Families National Leadership Program, my action plan involved organizing two events. The first was Protecting Children by Strengthening Families, a one-day professional development conference in May 2005 for early childhood educators in Stark County, Ohio, a socioeconomically diverse community with both urban and rural locales. The second event, a legislative breakfast titled What Everyone Needs to Know about Early Childhood Education, took place in October 2005.

Sponsored by the Early Childhood Resource Center in Canton, Ohio, which handled registration and provided staff, the one-day conference took place at a local career center. More than 160 early childhood teachers examined child abuse and neglect from local, state, and national perspectives. They learned about the strengthening families approach, factors that help protect children and families from child abuse and neglect, and the importance of strong relationships between family, child, and teacher in early childhood programs.

Teachers then broke into small groups to discuss specific priorities to communicate to attendees at the October 2005 legislative breakfast. Each small group, representing a cross-section of early childhood settings, had a list of questions as talking points. Issues included early childhood staff compensation, parent education programming, parent involvement in early childhood settings, funding to support local child care initiatives, and public policies to support preschool for all children.

I worked with Sisters of Charity Foundation of Canton, a local funding source, to plan and organize the legislative breakfast. The goal was to advocate the importance of high-quality early childhood education. More than 200 elected city, county, and state officials and Stark County business and education leaders attended. The mayor of Canton hosted the breakfast, and a prominent local business leader delivered the keynote address on the importance of investing in young children. The priorities identified at the May conference were accompanied by suggestions for specific actions attendees might take, be they business leaders, public officials, public school administrators, or early childhood professionals. The suggestions included:

- earmarking charitable funds for investment in early care and education;
- offering families with young children early care and education benefits, such as pre-tax flexible spending accounts;
- appropriating state and federal dollars for early care and education programs;
- providing voluntary access to high-quality, universal preschool for all three- and four-year-old children and full-day kindergarten for all five-year-olds in Ohio; and

(continued on p. 14)
• reviewing how to use community block grant dollars to improve services for children ages birth to eight years.

I succeeded in leveraging NAECY’s Supporting Teachers, Strengthening Families $1,000 minigrant into additional support. I wrote two grant applications to local entities and tapped the Canton Area Association for the Education of Young Children for funds, more than doubling the original resources. With the additional funding, I offered two more strengthening families workshops on developing partnerships with parents. I requested that a director and a teacher attend the workshops as a team to reinforce the buy-in, and I provided grants of up to $100 to teams that developed a family-strengthening action plan. In all, more than $1,000 was awarded for parent education and support programs, parent resources for lending libraries, and family involvement activities at family child care homes, public preschools, child care centers, private schools, and Head Start programs.

— Joseph French, Director, Early Childhood Education Alliance Inc., Alliance, Ohio