

## **Florida's Family Strengthening Foundation for Trauma Prevention Five Protective Factors**

Across the country, early care and education programs, child welfare departments, and others are using the Strengthening Families approach (developed by the Center for the Study of Social Policy with funding from the Doris Duke Foundation) to prevent child maltreatment. The approach works by identifying and promoting protective factors that may serve as buffers for families that would otherwise be at risk for abuse and neglect. Protective factors help families become familiar with alternate resources, supports, and coping strategies that will allow them to parent more effectively under stress.

- **Parental resilience** – Parents who can cope with the stresses of everyday life, as well as an occasional crisis, have resilience; they have the flexibility and inner strength necessary to bounce back when things are not going well. Multiple life stressors, such as a family history of abuse or neglect, health problems, marital conflict, or domestic or community violence—and financial stressors such as unemployment, poverty, and homelessness—may reduce a parent's capacity to cope effectively with the typical day-to-day stresses of raising children.
- **Social connections** – Parents with a social network of emotionally supportive friends, family, and neighbors often find that it is easier to care for their children and themselves. Most parents need people they can call on once in a while when they need a sympathetic listener, advice, or concrete support. Research has shown that parents, who are isolated, with few social connections, are at higher risk for child abuse and neglect.
- **Knowledge of parenting and child development** – There is extensive research linking healthy child development to effective parenting. Children thrive when parents provide not only affection, but also respectful communication and listening, consistent rules and expectations, and safe opportunities that promote independence. Successful parenting fosters psychological adjustment, helps children succeed in school, encourages curiosity about the world, and motivates children to achieve.
- **Concrete support in times of need** – Partnering with parents to identify and access resources in the community may help prevent the stress that sometimes precipitates child maltreatment. Providing concrete supports may also help prevent the unintended neglect that sometimes occurs when parents are unable to provide for their children.
- **Nurturing and attachment / Social and emotional competence of children** – A child's ability to interact positively with others, to self-regulate, and to effectively communicate his or her emotions has a great impact on the parent-child relationship. A child's social and emotional development is highly dependent on the quality of a young child's primary relationships. How caregivers respond to children's emotional expression profoundly influences how they learn to process, understand, and cope with such feelings as anger, happiness, and sadness. Promoting positive behavior and responses in children could strengthen parent-child relationships. Also, children who have experienced or witnessed violence need a safe environment that offers opportunities to develop normally.

Research shows that these factors reduce the incidence of child abuse and neglect by providing parents with what they need in order to parent effectively, even under stress. By building relationships with families, programs can recognize signs of stress and build families' protective factors with timely, effective help. This strategy for dealing with child abuse and neglect shows great promise because:

- The protective factors work and are informed by extensive, rigorous research.
- Activities that build the protective factors can be built into programs and systems that already exist in every state, such as early childhood education and child welfare, at little cost.
- Strengthening Families has widespread support from social science researchers, state child welfare officials, early childhood practitioners, and policy experts. Currently, the Strengthening Families approach is being applied in 36 states.