

moving from protective factors to strategies



This section identifies the key strategies used by exemplary programs to build protective factors. It is written for programs committed to working with and supporting the parents of the children they serve. The program self-assessment materials in this section are applicable to early childhood programs of any size, budget, or structure, and most of the strategies described can be implemented without creating new staff positions, making significant changes to existing facilities, or raising additional financial resources.

The section contains self-assessment forms organized around the following strategies used by exemplary programs to support families:

1. Facilitate friendships and mutual support
2. Strengthen parenting
3. Respond to family crises
4. Link families to services and opportunities
5. Facilitate children's social and emotional development
6. Observe and respond to early warning signs of child abuse or neglect
7. Value and support parents

Each part of the self-assessment includes a short introduction to the strategy with examples of how it has been implemented by exemplary programs observed during this study.

USING THE SELF-ASSESSMENT FORMS

Timing

Each self-assessment form in this chapter is focused on a program strategy. While the self-assessment forms may seem long at first, most have fewer than ten items. To make the process easier, the forms address specific practices; thus, multiple practice examples often appear under a given practice.

Begin by filling out the first form and evaluating the time it took to complete it before moving on to the next one. While the time it takes will vary from program to program and from form to form, on average, each can be completed in approximately 90 minutes.

Team

Convene a self-assessment team that represents a number of different perspectives at your program, including:

- Administrative staff/program director
- Early care and education teachers
- Family support staff (if applicable)
- Parents whose children participate in the program

Process

First, each member of the team should fill out the self-assessment forms individually. Next, convene the team to share and compare assessments. Discuss rating results that differ among various team members, giving them an opportunity to describe why they rated the practice the way they did and—if appropriate—to provide an example. Once everyone has had a chance to speak, give all team members an opportunity to re-rate the practice. It is not necessary for the entire team to come to consensus on every practice, but it is important that all team members understand each other's perspectives.

Once the team has completed re-rating practices in question, highlight practice areas that a majority of the team rated as poor—these are areas to work on. Ask the team to evaluate whether each poorly rated practice should be addressed (1) immediately, (2) over time, or (3) not at all. Again, allow time for discussion and reevaluating when team members disagree. When the majority of team members identify items that should be addressed immediately, brainstorm to develop plans for doing so. Make sure to specify:

- The resource and staff hour costs
- The amount of time needed
- Who should be responsible
- Key steps toward implementation



PROGRAM STRATEGY 1: FACILITATE FRIENDSHIPS AND MUTUAL SUPPORT

Having a young child can be a profoundly isolating experience—or it can open up opportunities to connect with others. On one hand, new parents suddenly face changes in their lives that limit their free time, may prevent them from participating in activities they previously enjoyed, and make it more difficult for them to spend time with friends. On the other hand, parenting can also spur the development of new friendships and connections. Because parenting can be overwhelming, new parents are often eager to make new friends—especially parents going through similar experiences and whose children can be their child’s playmates. Early childhood programs can be conduits for parents to connect with others. This study identified a number of ways in which quality programs help to strengthen and support the development of strong bonds among participating parents.

The early care and education programs in this study offer opportunities for parents to get to know each other, develop mutual support systems, and take leadership. The activities they offer for parents include sports teams, potlucks, classes, camping and field trips, advisory groups, board leadership, and volunteer opportunities. These programs send messages of welcome and support to all the important people in the child’s life—including fathers and extended family members.

For isolated and vulnerable families, programs serve as a convener and bridge builder—encouraging families in their efforts to make connections and develop social support network. Exemplary programs work proactively with isolated families, drawing them into the social networks and activities available at the center. They invite them to social activities and play “matchmaker,” helping to link them with other parents who share their interests, have children with similar characteristics, or who can be mentors. They offer—or partner with other programs that offer—family support services, mental health consultation, support groups, or specialized parenting classes to help families develop new social skills and explore and address issues that contribute to their isolation.

For isolated parents, even the somewhat informal social setting of a childcare program can be daunting. High-quality programs welcome all parents and children equally, which sends an important message of inclusiveness and equal social value. This message is reinforced by policies such as asking parents to invite all children in a class to family parties or social activities. Staff of such programs may intervene in conflicts between parents to help reduce animosities and cliques, to ensure that small disagreements do not fester, and to enhance the understanding of cultural differences.

“I really enjoy the parent–child classes.

SELF-ASSESSMENT FORM—PROGRAM STRATEGY 1

Facilitate Friendships and Mutual Support	Excellent	Fair	Poor	Not Applicable	Comments and Examples
1 A comfortable space is available for families to meet informally					
2 The program helps parents set up formal and informal communication and support mechanisms, such as phone trees, car pools, babysitting co-ops, and play groups					
3 The program connects families with similar interests, children’s ages, and circumstances (such as those with twins, parents of infants, or those who speak the same language)					
4 The program provides opportunities for families to socialize and foster a sense of community, such as:					
a) Periodic events like coffee breaks and breakfasts					
b) Celebrations, graduations, and holidays					
c) Field trips and activities outside the center					
d) Events celebrating cultural customs, potlucks, and other opportunities for parents to share and learn about each other’s home lives and cultural backgrounds					
e) Affordable family activities					
f) Special programs for dads, grandparents, teen moms, and other caregivers					
Notes:					

They provide me with an opportunity to meet other parents.”

—RONNIE’S MOM

Facilitate Friendships and Mutual Support	Excellent	Fair	Poor	Not Applicable	Comments and Examples
5 The program encourages and provides support for parent-organized social/educational events and activities, such as:					
a) Making information available on activities for parents to attend together outside the program—for example, gathering at playgrounds, fun fairs, or libraries					
b) Providing supports such as space, childcare, food, or other resources					
6 Program staff reach out to isolated families by:					
a) Calling, sending notes, or making home visits					
b) Inviting them to the program’s social activities					
c) Offering support with transportation, childcare, or other barriers to participation in social activities					
d) Making special efforts to connect them with other families					
e) Connecting them with resources, such as mental health consultation, that can help them explore difficulties with forming social connections					
7 The program models positive social skills and community building:					
a) Welcoming all families to the program					
b) Inviting all children and families to parties or social events					
c) Helping to resolve issues among families					
d) Promoting understanding of different cultures and backgrounds					
Notes:					

PROGRAM STRATEGY 2: STRENGTHEN PARENTING

Early care and education programs are a natural place for parents to turn for parenting information and support. Parents know that staff see their children every day and will thus have some context for issues they want to ask about. Their day-to-day interaction with teachers and other program staff makes the program a convenient place for them to turn when they have questions or concerns. Finally, parents know that teachers work every day to help children develop and learn—they view teachers as knowledgeable experts.

The exemplary programs in this study offer many ways for parents to get support on parenting issues when they need it—including classes and support groups, opportunities to meet with teachers, family support workers or other staff, home visits, and lending libraries. Most importantly, they make sure the information is convenient, easy, and there when the parent needs it—in other words, “just-in-time support.” A parent whose child is teething or acting out can talk with his child’s teacher that day, as opposed to waiting six weeks until the issue is scheduled as the topic of a parenting education class or during a parent–teacher conference. Just-in-time support also enables program staff to use children’s day-to-day classroom experiences as an opportunity to raise and discuss parenting and child development issues with parents. Every pick-up or drop off becomes a “teachable moment” during which a child’s behavior can be highlighted and discussed, and parenting information and tips imparted. Staff and teachers exchange both written and verbal information to parents on a regular basis, using such tools as daily

At Sheltering Arms, parenting education is assumed to be taking place all the time—not as a separate activity that happens only in a class. However, the program also offers regular opportunities for formal education and information sharing on parenting and other issues.

During monthly parent meetings, parents identify areas in which they would like more information. The program then invites outside service providers to speak to parents about these issues and hard-to-learn skills. Other parents are also called upon to share their expertise. For example, one parent conducted a workshop on home ownership; as a result, another parent went through the process to become pre-approved for a home loan.

Family support coordinators are trained to provide parenting classes based on specific curricula, which highlight the ages and stages of child development. The classes offer parents guidance for dealing with children’s different behavioral stages and teach fundamental attitudes and skills necessary for parenting young children. They are available in English and Spanish, as is other parenting information. A Vietnamese translator is provided as needed.

logs to record child behavior, eating habits, and experiences during the day. When parents come to pick up their children, teachers tell them what the children did that day, raise any issues or concerns, and discuss ways the parents can reinforce at home what their children are learning in school—and vice versa.

Most exemplary programs have classroom designs or technology that allow parents to observe their children easily—windows installed into the walls or doors, video camera recordings, or one-way glass windows through which parents can observe their children in the classroom. Using such techniques, they create a space where it is easy for staff members to guide parents through observing their children in the classroom. In the focus groups for this study, both parents and staff described the importance of this opportunity for parents to understand their children’s behavior and respond to it more effectively. Parents especially appreciated when staff helped them to “notice their children being good.” Such guided observations provide a particularly powerful opportunity for parents who are concerned or frustrated with their children’s behavior to see them through another individual’s eyes and appreciate their strengths and capacities.

Quality programs also educate parents about discipline. In general, they are not directive about how parents should discipline their children within their own home, but they are very clear that hitting, spanking, and yelling are not appropriate in the center. They educate parents about the reasons behind these policies and offer them information on alternative disciplinary methods. They also provide parents with written materials on discipline and cover the topic in parenting workshops.

Finally, these programs pay particular attention to parenting education and support for families with children with special needs. Staff understand the stress that the initial identification of special needs in a child causes for a parent—and they reach out to families during this time to support them and help them address not only what they need to know to parent effectively, but also to deal with issues of guilt, anger, denial, and other emotions. In addition, they connect parents of children with special needs to relevant parenting resources, such as classes, support groups, specialists, and information on their children’s special conditions.

“They helped me see that my kid’s biting was normal behavior, but it’s not okay. They gave me many ideas to deal with it.”

— KIMBERLY’S MOM

SELF-ASSESSMENT FORM—PROGRAM STRATEGY 2

Strengthen Parenting	Excellent	Fair	Poor	Not Applicable	Comments and Examples
1 Information on parenting is available through:					
a) Books and videos in a resource library					
b) Parenting classes and discussion groups					
c) Regular postings on bulletin boards in public spaces					
d) Take-home materials distributed regularly to parents					
e) Opportunities for parents with similar concerns to come together and share					
f) Specific information campaigns on such issues as Shaken Baby Syndrome, SIDS (Sudden Infant Death Syndrome), toilet training, and scalding					
2 Parenting information is available in the language spoken by families					
3 Staff are knowledgeable about the parenting practices of different cultures and ethnic groups					
4 Opportunities are created for parents to explore:					
a) Cultural/ethnic expectations and practices about parenting					
b) How they were parented					
c) New parenting practices					
5 Teachers share parenting tips and discuss parenting issues with parents during:					
a) Pick-up and drop-off times					
b) Parent–teacher conferences					
c) Occasions when it appears that a parent is frustrated or stressed and needs support					

“We’re learning here. If you miss a workshop, you miss a lot.”

— JESSICA’S MOM

Strengthen Parenting	Excellent	Fair	Poor	Not Applicable	Comments and Examples
6 Parents are invited to visit and observe their children in the classroom					
7 Staff spend time with parents when they are observing their children to help them recognize:					
a) Their children’s growth and development patterns					
b) Positive social skills and developmentally appropriate emotional behavior in their children					
c) Activities they can use at home					
8 Information is provided on regular developmental challenges, such as bed wetting, potty training, appropriate discipline, eating, sleeping, and aggression					
9 Family activities provide opportunities to strengthen bonds between parents and their children—for example, listening to each other, playing together, and cooperative games					
10 Physical discipline (spanking or hitting) is not allowed in the center by staff or parents					
11 When staff talk with parents about discipline, they:					
a) Explain why physical discipline is not allowed in the center					
b) Explain why the center uses the forms of discipline it does					
c) Provide information on age- appropriate discipline and reasonable expectations					
d) Offer ideas for alternate forms of discipline and how to recognize and reinforce desired/appropriate behavior					
e) Encourage parents to discuss discipline challenges they may have at home					

SELF-ASSESSMENT FORM—PROGRAM STRATEGY 2 (CONTINUED)

Strengthen Parenting	Excellent	Fair	Poor	Not Applicable	Comments and Examples
12 When staff are concerned about parenting techniques or behavior, they:					
a) Proactively and respectfully reach out to parents and share their concerns about the children or about the parents’ parenting practices					
b) Acknowledge young children’s frustrating behavior and recognize parents’ efforts					
c) Connect parents to resources and supports that may help to address the parenting issues					
d) Connect parents to other parents who can share/model positive parenting approaches					
13 For parents with children with special needs, staff:					
a) Connect parents with parenting materials and websites, support groups and play groups, and community resources specific to their children’s special needs					
b) Check regularly with parents about parenting issues					
c) Are sensitive to parents’ frustration, protectiveness, guilt, loss, and other related feelings, and acknowledge challenges					
d) Support parents in developing appropriate developmental expectations for their special needs children					
e) Check in with parents about the impact their children’s special needs are having on family dynamics and parental stress					
f) Are especially supportive at the time that special needs are initially identified					
g) Provide speakers/resources for parents on topics of interest/concern					
h) Ensure that parent-child activities are appropriate for families with children with special needs					
Notes:					

**PROGRAM STRATEGY 3:
RESPOND TO FAMILY CRISES**

In addition to their day-to-day contact between teachers and parents, the exemplary programs in this study offer extra support to families when they face illnesses, job loss, substance abuse, financial problems, and other issues. Staff are available to speak to family members that need help and, in some of the smaller programs, directors maintain an open-door policy so that anyone can come to them for help. Larger, more complex programs employ family support workers to respond to families in need. At one program, parents and staff alike know they can turn to “Dr. Mike,” the mental health consultant, with any problem. At all programs, parents know that if they have a problem, they can go to someone on staff for timely, sympathetic, and confidential support.

Staff at these exemplary programs are knowledgeable about community resources and available to help families get the services they need. They maintain strong collaborative relationships with other service providers within the community, so that they can make referrals to agencies they themselves know and trust. When they refer parents to services, they follow up with the parents to see whether or not they accessed the services suggested and, if not, to continue to help them resolve their problems. In addition to making referrals, they create internal resources to help families resolve crises. One program, for example, uses money generated from selling classroom pictures to maintain an emergency fund for parents. Another has a foundation-supported fund to which families can apply for emergency grants. Still others mobilize families to support each other in the event of a crisis, such as a death in the family, a fire, or another disaster.

“When there was a problem in my house and I separated from my husband, my daughter was crying all the time. They really helped me and they helped her. She doesn’t cry anymore.”

— CARMEN’S MOM

Staff work together to identify when a family is in crisis and to make sure that the family does not fall through the cracks. They convene regular meetings in which they share information and review class lists to make sure there are no red flags that indicate a particular child or family might be in trouble. They monitor unexplained absences, failures to make payments, or signs of parental or child stress, and reach out to families about which they are concerned.

No staff member is alone when working with a family in a crisis. At some programs, staff team up to meet with parents in order to resolve problems or draft plans to address crises. At all high-quality programs, staff know how to respond effectively—and can turn to their supervisors and colleagues for information, ideas, and support. They have access to up-to-date information about community services and organizations to which they can refer families. And they are recognized and acknowledged for efforts to “be there” for families that go above and beyond their job descriptions.

Providing support in times of crisis takes an emotional toll on staff—model programs recognize that staff cannot create a supportive emotional climate for parents if they are not supported in dealing with their own issues. They encourage staff to take personal time if needed to care for themselves and give staff the same access as parents to resources for dealing with emotional problems—including mental health consultation, stress reduction opportunities (such as spa packages), and support groups.

Palm Beach Head Start is one of 18 Head Start programs to participate in Free to Grow, a national alcohol, tobacco, and drug prevention initiative. Through Free to Grow, Head Start case managers (called “family service specialists”) identify circumstances that increase families’ risk of substance abuse, identify those families at risk, assess their needs, and determine appropriate interventions. The family service specialists receive special training to help them effectively serve families with the highest risk and develop and use skills in community building as an important component of prevention. Through the program, they learn how to coordinate interventions with a variety of other agencies to make sure that families receive the services they need; facilitate outreach to families along with family advocates; provide resources and referrals; and establish links with other service agencies for intensive case-management, substance abuse treatment, and other needed services and follow up.

SELF-ASSESSMENT FORM—PROGRAM STRATEGY 3

Respond to Family Crises	Excellent	Fair	Poor	Not Applicable	Comments and Examples
1 Staff develop personal relationships with parents by taking time to get to know them individually—listening and learning about their interests, families, and current activities					
2 The message that parents can turn to staff in the event of a crisis is conveyed:					
a) Informally in the day-to-day interactions that staff have with parents—by listening, showing concern, and sharing their own personal challenges or desires					
b) Formally through outreach materials sent out when families enroll in the program					
3 The program provides parents with information on the role of all staff members and which staff members can help them with particular issues					
4 Staff respond to family crises immediately by:					
a) Ensuring that a staff person is available at all times to help families needing crisis support					
b) Making space available for staff to meet with parents privately					
c) Ensuring that parents can talk with staff members with whom they are the most comfortable					
5 The program offers a small emergency fund to assist families in crisis					
6 The program maintains resource and referral links to such crisis services as:					
a) Food pantries					
b) Domestic violence services					
c) Shelters					
d) Respite care for children					
e) Alcohol and substance abuse services					
f) Mental health services					
g) Economic supports					
h) Legal assistance					

SELF-ASSESSMENT FORM—PROGRAM STRATEGY 3 (CONTINUED)

Respond to Family Crises	Excellent	Fair	Poor	Not Applicable	Comments and Examples
7 Staff know how to respond appropriately to family crises. Staff receive training on:					
a) Maintaining confidentiality					
b) Resolving conflicts					
c) Talking to families about difficult issues					
d) Recognizing such issues as domestic violence, depression, developmental delays, mental illness, chronic health problems, substance abuse, and other signs of imminent crisis					
e) Helping families make immediate and long-term plans					
8 If appropriate, staff mobilize other parents in the program to help out families in crisis					
9 If parents bring up issues staff feel are beyond their ability, staff can refer them to a:					
a) Supervisor					
b) Specialist with knowledge in the area					
c) Cross-disciplinary staff team					
d) Community resource					
10 Staff proactively respond to signs of parent or family distress by:					
a) Expressing their concern and offering help					
b) Offering to connect families to needed resources					
c) Making themselves available to parents if they need to talk					
d) Sharing information about a parent help-line or warm-line					
e) Being sensitive and responsive to the impact of family stress on children					
11 Staff receive support when working with families under stress through:					
a) Acknowledgement of their efforts					
b) Supported opportunities to process their own emotional reactions					
c) Time off if needed					

**PROGRAM STRATEGY 4:
LINK FAMILIES TO SERVICES
AND OPPORTUNITIES**

Exemplary early childhood programs recognize that a child's well-being is grounded in the well-being of his or her family. Working with families to help them meet their social, psychological, economic, and career goals is an important part of the work they do. Because early care and education programs are places parents visit regularly, staff at these programs are in a good position to help families identify and access services.

The programs in this study all connected parents with such family-strengthening services as job training, educational opportunities, health care, and other essential services. A number of programs are embedded in a larger program—a settlement house, an economic opportunity program, a family support center, or a “one-stop shop center” that houses multiple services. Others bring in providers on an occasional basis to deliver services such as immunizations, screenings, or education on site. Parents benefit from this access, which connects them to services they might not otherwise know about or use. Connecting parents with services like mental health counseling also helps overcome the stigma that might otherwise keep them from accessing the service.

Regardless of how they structure these service links, programs make a deliberate effort to identify families' goals and needs and to connect them to the services and supports that will help them meet those goals and needs. Many use a formal intake and assessment process with families when they enroll their children in the center, through which staff help families develop plans for reaching their goals. Staff then works with parents throughout the year to help them implement their plans. Smaller programs do this more informally, allowing family plans and service referrals to develop out of the day-to-day conversations staff have with parents.

SELF-ASSESSMENT FORM—PROGRAM STRATEGY 4

Link Families to Services and Opportunities	Excellent	Fair	Poor	Not Applicable	Comments and Examples
1 The program develops family plans with parents that:					
a) Identify their interests, skills, needs, and goals for themselves and their children					
b) Identify services and opportunities within the program that may help them achieve their goals and use their skills and talents					
c) Identify other community resources and opportunities that may help them achieve their goals, continue their learning, and/or provide other avenues for involvement					
d) Are regularly revised and updated in conjunction with families					
e) Other:					
2 Staff and parents have access to up-to-date information about services that are available in the community that includes hours of business, fees, location, eligibility, language capacity, etc.					
3 When staff make referrals to outside services, they:					
a) Brainstorm with families about what resources would be helpful					
b) Help parents address barriers to utilizing services, such as lack of transportation or childcare, language difficulties, or fees					
c) Follow up with families to see if they used the referral and ensure that they were satisfied with the services they received					
d) Try to make a personal connection between families and service providers					
Notes:					

“It’s a lifelong relationship with the parents and the kids. It’s been several years, but I still call Jane for resources.”

— MARIA’S MOM

Link Families to Services and Opportunities	Excellent	Fair	Poor	Not Applicable	Comments and Examples
4 The program actively builds collaborative links with other service providers in order to:					
a) Bring other services on site when possible					
b) Ease the referral process by ensuring the workers in different programs work together					
c) Share information with parents about resources					
d) Identify and fill gaps					
5 The program encourages parents to share information about community resources for families—such as toy exchanges, resale shops, play lots, family activities, and more formal services					
Notes:					

**PROGRAM STRATEGY 5:
FACILITATE CHILDREN'S SOCIAL
AND EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

Promoting children's social and emotional development has long been considered central to early care and education programs. Most programs in this study used "Second Step," "I Can Problem Solve," or another curriculum focused on helping children to articulate their feelings and get along with others. What is less obvious is how the social and emotional development work done with children in the classroom affects relationships between parents and their children.

In focus groups for this study, parents were asked, "How has your child's participation in this program affected you and the way you parent?" One of the most common first responses was that the child's ability to articulate his/her feelings—a skill commonly taught through social and emotional development curricula—had changed how the parent viewed the child. Parents began to see their children as independent people with feelings, needs, and rights.

"The teachers model respect that is shared from teacher to child to parents. It makes us better parents."

— JENNIFER'S MOM

At the Haitian Center Early Care and Education in Dorchester, Massachusetts, emotional competence is a core value. "There are lots of examples of teenagers who are bright doing violent things. Researchers have shown that if a child is not nurtured emotionally, he doesn't learn to deal with his own feelings," says the center's director, Nicole St. Victor. "We work with children to develop emotional skills, and this becomes the foundation for cognitive learning. Teaching ABCs is easy after that."

The Haitian Center Early Care and Education has developed its own multilingual and multicultural curriculum called "Creole Tet Ansnm," which means "Connections." Activities centered around teaching emotional competence are built into every lesson plan, regardless of the subject matter. Teachers keep journals of what works and what doesn't, brainstorm with each other about how to teach each lesson from an emotional base, and use a tool they developed to evaluate the social and emotional competence of classrooms.

Parents invariably notice changes in their children's behavior at home. "A mother came to me and said, 'What do you do with the children here?'" recounts St. Victor with a smile. "She went on: 'I smacked my daughter last night and she said to me, 'When you are mad, Mommy, this is not what you do. You use your words. You don't smack people.'" I explained, 'That's what we do here. We are teaching children to resolve problems peacefully. Your child is talking back to you, but that is exactly what we want. It means your child is carrying what we teach her in school into her life.'"

When children respect themselves, they will understand how to respect other people. When they feel powerful, they will not need to struggle for power. At the Haitian Center Early Care and Education, children learn to behave well out of a feeling of responsibility and accountability to themselves and to the group. Staff at the center believe that this has important and far-reaching social implications. By helping four- and five-year-olds understand their feelings and develop skills for relating to themselves and to others, teachers and parents are consciously planting the seeds for a safer, more peaceful, and more vibrant democracy.

Many early care and education programs teach specific social and emotional skills in the classroom—such as sharing, cooperation, and taking turns—that make parenting easier and reduce the stress in families' homes. This occurs whether or not there is a parenting education component in the social and emotional development curriculum. Some programs also help parents develop new disciplinary skills by carrying out children's social and emotional development work in conjunction with parenting education curricula, such as "Magic 1, 2, 3." Parents in this study seemed to value and use the new techniques they learned. The techniques helped parents expand their range of responses to their children's challenging behavior.

For parents with particularly challenging children, the social and emotional work program staff do with children provides welcome added support. Parents can discuss their children's challenging behavior with staff, learn from the strategies being used in the classroom, and place their children's behavior in the larger framework of children's social and emotional development. At the exemplary programs in this study, staff offer individualized support—directly or by referral—to help parents deal more effectively and lovingly with their children's challenging behavior. They convey to parents that their children are lovable and loved and help parents "catch their children being good."

In addition to using formal social and emotional development curricula, many programs use arts activities to encourage children's social and emotional expression. These activities serve as a bridge to draw parents in and engage them in thinking about their children's social and emotional development. One program in this study employs a local mental health provider to provide art therapy classes for parents and children together. Through art, children can literally illustrate difficulties they are having in their lives, and their creations often serve as an invitation for staff to discuss concerns with parents. Another hosts monthly children's performance events that foster parents' participation in the program and engage them in parent-child activities.

Because families often differ significantly in their cultural expectations of children's social and emotional development, programs make sure that all social and emotional development activities are compatible with families' culture. Concepts such as a child's need to separate from the parent or the importance of independent thinking have significant cultural components. Programs create opportunities to discuss children's social and emotional development with parents so that home and center efforts are aligned and mutually reinforcing. This also encourages both program staff and parents to examine their assumptions and expectations and to reconcile them, providing important opportunities for growth on both sides.

SELF-ASSESSMENT FORM—PROGRAM STRATEGY 5

Facilitate Children’s Social and Emotional Development	Excellent	Fair	Poor	Not Applicable	Comments and Examples
1 The program uses a social and emotional development curricula for children that:					
a) Is culturally sensitive to the families it serves					
b) Encourages children to express their feelings					
c) Encourages sharing, taking turns, and cooperative play					
2 The program introduces parents to social and emotional development curricula at the beginning of the school year by:					
a) Informing parents of the importance of supporting children’s healthy social and emotional development—and its connection to success in school					
b) Helping parents understand age-appropriate social and emotional skills and behaviors					
c) Providing opportunities to discuss social and emotional issues with parents within a cultural context					
d) Encouraging parents to be aware of their children’s social and emotional development					
e) Offering parents ideas on how to foster a child’s social and emotional learning at home					
3 The program teaches parents about children’s social and emotional development in parenting classes and informal discussion with parents					
4 Parents have opportunities to observe their children interacting with other children and teachers in the program					
Notes:					

“The children say, ‘Use your words.’ That’s what they hear at school, and they sure have learned how to use them!”

— TIFFANY’S MOM

Facilitate Children’s Social and Emotional Development	Excellent	Fair	Poor	Not Applicable	Comments and Examples
5 Staff coach parents about how to interact effectively with their children (listening; appreciating ideas, efforts, and feelings; creating a non-threatening environment)					
6 Staff encourage children to express their feelings through words, artwork, and expressive play					
7 Staff model behavior toward children that encourages social and emotional expressiveness					
8 If staff are concerned about a child’s social and emotional development, they:					
a) Discuss concerns with the child’s parent(s)					
b) Connect the family to resources that can support the child’s social and emotional development (such as play therapy, mental health services, or parenting classes)					
c) Help the parent(s) develop strategies for addressing the issue at home					
Notes:					

**PROGRAM STRATEGY 6:
OBSERVE AND RESPOND TO
EARLY WARNING SIGNS OF
CHILD ABUSE OR NEGLECT**

Day-to-day interactions between staff, children, and parents provide an important opportunity for program staff to identify concerns early and intervene immediately. Rather than focusing simply on mandated reporting, the exemplary programs in this study all train and support staff to observe children carefully and respond at the first sign of any difficulty. They use such indicators as frequent absences, missing payments, late pick-ups, or signs of parental stress as opportunities to proactively reach out to families and connect them with family support or other services. Most perform daily health checks on children that not only capture any signs of physical abuse but also help to identify more subtle signs of neglect. When issues are identified, their response is immediate and helpful—with staff expressing concern for families and offering to help them solve any problems they may be experiencing.

When staff see signs of possible neglect, they intervene proactively with parents, explaining the legal definitions of child abuse and neglect, helping to

connect them to resources, explaining the impact that the issue could have on their children’s development, and stressing that the issue needs to be addressed. They follow up regularly with these parents to send the message that the issue is important and needs to be addressed—and continue to be available to help and support them as they resolve the problem. They also conduct home visits as a way to reach families who might be at risk of neglecting their children.

When staff have serious concerns, they follow protocols for reporting child abuse or neglect to provide continuity and support for families who are the subject of reports. Parents at several of the programs in this study told personal stories of how the programs had helped them alter situations that were dangerous for their children. That these parents continue to be involved with the programs demonstrates the effectiveness of this approach. Maintaining strong relationships through reporting of child abuse and neglect is not always easy. Yet teachers and staff at these programs remain supportive even when met with initial hostility. Their willingness to keep reaching out—even to parents who are hostile or angry—is an important reason why parents view them as a support and resource, rather than a policing agent.

“They connected us to a behavioral therapist we have now been seeing for five years.”

— STEPHEN’S MOM

Jane Boyd's Community Center's Preschool Program— A Community Partnership for Protecting Children Site

For more than 50 years, the Jane Boyd Community Center in Cedar Rapids, Iowa has offered a high-quality preschool experience for children of low-income parents. A basic philosophy guiding the preschool is the importance of parents in the educational process. To that end, teachers do much more than teach. They always visit the child's home before s/he is enrolled and they follow up with additional visits if problems arise with the child or family. In addition, the Center nurtures connections between parents, teachers, and children by hosting celebrations throughout the school year. And, every month, mothers, fathers, and children meet for a "first book" experience where supper is provided, parents are helped to select and read books to their children, and families work together on craft projects. Says Dorothy Peterson, preschool director "Upwards of 60 people attend these meetings, with fathers participating as actively as mothers ... Most families linger over supper and spend time getting to know one another, offering advice, and just sharing experiences."

What makes the Jane Boyd Center unique is its participation in the nationally known model, Community Partnerships for Protecting Children. Initiated in four pilot sites across the U.S. in 1997, including Cedar Rapids, more than 40 states are implementing Community Partnerships as a way to reduce child abuse and neglect. Community Partnerships engage child welfare agencies in changing their practice; develop networks of neighborhood services; and provide a hub like the Jane Boyd Center that offers a friendly open door for families and depends on an inclusive partnership of resident, service providers, and child welfare agencies to govern its work.

Like other Community Partnership sites, child protective services (CPS) workers are housed at Jane Boyd, offering consultation to preschool staff if concerns related to child maltreatment are identified. Peterson notes "Having CPS here has helped us to better understand what to look for if we are concerned about a child. CPS staff also know about our program and often refer families to us. We have a strong alliance with them."

If a family is struggling with problems that pose risk to their children, center staff readily offer a planning process integral to the Community Partnership approach to help alleviate such problems. This "family team meeting" brings the family, its support system, and various agency representatives together to work out a plan that will help the family progress and keep their children safe. Many families involved with the preschool have benefited from participating in family team meetings. "Our parents make us what we are," says Peterson. "They know we are their allies and that they and their children are accepted and cared for here ... they are our backbone."

SELF-ASSESSMENT FORM—PROGRAM STRATEGY 6

Observe and Respond to Early Warning Signs of Child Abuse or Neglect	Excellent	Fair	Poor	Not Applicable	Comments and Examples
1 All staff are trained to recognize early signs of child abuse and neglect					
2 Staff monitor the following signs that a family may be under stress:					
a) Physical signs (such as bruises), acting out, distress, challenging behavior, fearful behavior, inappropriate language/behavior (such as sexual acting out), or other child symptoms					
b) Unusual parental behavior at pick-up or drop-off times					
c) Repeated unexplained absences					
d) Repeated late pick-ups					
e) Missed payments					
f) Divorce, job loss, or other family crises					
g) Parents' acknowledgement of stress or problems					
3 When a family is experiencing extreme difficulties but there is no sign of imminent harm to the child or other family members:					
a) Staff work with the family to discuss concerns and appropriate actions					
b) At least one staff member reaches out to the family to address the issues causing concern					
c) Staff attempt to connect the family to resources that can help address the issue, including such intensive services as respite care, shelters, or emergency crisis services					
d) Staff continue to support the family and monitor the situation daily until the situation is resolved					

Observe and Respond to Early Warning Signs of Child Abuse or Neglect

	Excellent	Fair	Poor	Not Applicable	Comments and Examples
4 All staff are trained to follow the program’s protocols for reporting child abuse and neglect					
5 Staff are oriented to the state’s child welfare reporting guidelines and understand how cases are generally handled once a report is made					
6 All parents, at the time of entry into the program, are informed about the program’s protocols for reporting child abuse and neglect					
7 When staff must file a child welfare report, they:					
a) Notify the parent(s) that a report is being made, when possible					
b) Explain their status as mandated reporters					
c) Explain the reporting process to the family and describe how the child protective services system typically responds					
d) Strive to be calm, caring, and supportive during the reporting process					
e) Act as advocates for families with the child protective services system, when possible					
8 Program staff help families find suitable respite care and/or emergency crisis services					
9 If a child is placed in custody, staff:					
a) Maintain contact with the parent					
b) Advocate for the family with the child protective services system, when possible					
c) Help the parent(s) connect with resources to help reunite them with their child					
Notes:					

PROGRAM STRATEGY 7: VALUE AND SUPPORT PARENTS

Positive relationships with parents are the foundation of program efforts to prevent child abuse and neglect. Quality early childhood programs treat parents respectfully and partner with them on their children’s education. Staff make parents feel welcome by:

- Reaching out individually to each and every parent
- Connecting parents who need supports with others who can provide help
- Involving parents in decisions about their children and about the program
- Setting aside space and time for parents in the program

In focus groups, parents repeatedly described how important it was that when they entered the program, everyone they met went out of their way to welcome them and make them feel like an important part of the community. Again and again, parents described staff as “family” and the program as “home.” Many small gestures added together help to create a nurturing environment where parents feel they can come to staff with issues or problems. When parents know and trust staff, they are more likely to reveal problems, such as feelings of frustration or domestic violence, and ask for assistance.

Quality programs create ways to help parents feel at home in their space—sending the message that it is a place not just for children, but for the entire family. They accomplish this through regular parent-specific activities, dedicated parent spaces, volunteer opportunities, or just creating an environment where parents feel comfortable and welcome, where they want to linger during pick-up and drop-off times. They create clear opportunities for parents to contribute to the program, to their child’s learning, to other parents, and to the community. Programs have found that when parents’ efforts are noticed, valued, recognized, and rewarded, they receive the message that they are important to the program. Programs reach out proactively to parents who seem most in need of encouragement and support, offering them opportunities to volunteer and to participate in children’s activities.

To strengthen the relationships between parents and staff—which are essential to programs’ ability to connect with parents—exemplary programs support, train, and supervise staff as they learn to implement this strategy effectively. They involve supervisors in many day-to-day activities and make sure they are accessible to staff and parents. Good programs encourage teachers to take initiative in their relationships with families and address concerns when they arise, knowing that they have support from supervisors and their colleagues within the program. They recruit male staff members to send the clear message that men are an important and valued part of children’s lives and a significant source of loving care. They also recruit staff who are bilingual and who reflect families’ cultural and ethnic backgrounds, to create an environment where families’ cultural and linguistic identities are honored.

The commitment of programs to care about and support parents serves as an important model to parents as they go about raising their own children, especially for parents who themselves may not have been adequately nurtured when they were children. The experience of being cared for in a relationship is an important factor in helping parents who may have been abused as children to break the cycle of abuse and develop new patterns with their own children. Often, these parents are struggling with a host of issues associated with abuse and neglect, including alcohol or substance abuse, domestic violence, or depression. While early childhood program staff cannot be expected to provide individual or family psychotherapy, they can connect families to the services they need—and offer caring supportive relationships that promote parental resiliency.

“The teachers make one-on-one connections between the parents. They’ll say to you, ‘This parent is going through the same thing you are.’ It’s so important being able to talk to other parents who are going through the same things.”

— JASON’S MOM

SELF-ASSESSMENT FORM—PROGRAM STRATEGY 7

Value and Support Parents	Excellent	Fair	Poor	Not Applicable	Comments and Examples
1 Parents are active in making decisions about their children’s education					
2 Staff get to know parents individually and regularly inquire about how they are doing					
3 Staff get to know all family members by name					
4 Parents have opportunities to volunteer and contribute to the program					
5 Parents have opportunities to share skills, talents, and cultural traditions with children and other parents					
6 Staff recognize and value parent contributions					
7 Parents have regular opportunities to engage in activities in the center’s physical space					
8 Parents have opportunities to participate in:					
a) Parent-only social activities					
b) Support groups					
c) Activities designed to relieve stress, such as spa days, date nights (parents’ night out), or exercise classes					
d) Other:					
9 The program offers specific activities for fathers, mothers, and other family members					
Notes:					

really. I trust everyone here. Whenever I need help, I call them.”

— JEREMY'S DAD

Value and Support Parents	Excellent	Fair	Poor	Not Applicable	Comments and Examples
10 The program offers specific activities that get fathers involved					
11 Parents have opportunities to discuss how they were parented and how it affects the way they parent					
12 Parents are connected to resources that help them explore different ways of parenting, including:					
a) Parent education groups					
b) Counseling					
c) Support groups					
d) Mentors/coaches					
e) Sisterhoods/brotherhoods					
f) Faith-based activities					
g) Other					
13 Staff recognize parents' growth and efforts					
14 The program provides parents opportunities for:					
a) Personal growth—such as attending conferences or special events and collecting and sharing information of interest to other parents					
b) Leadership development					
c) Input into programmatic decisions					
d) Input into staff hiring and training					
Notes:					