

Creating Supportive Communities for Families with Young Children



A report of the
Institute on Family and Neighborhood Life
Clemson University

Creating Supportive Communities for Families with Young Children

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Creating Supportive Communities for Families with Young Children

Introduction	1
<i>Recent early childhood initiatives</i>	4
Characteristics of good-quality child and family support initiatives	8
<i>What are high-quality early childhood services?</i>	8
<i>What constitutes good child care?</i>	9
<i>What do children need to be ready for school?</i>	11
<i>How can families be strengthened and supported?</i>	13
How can communities help young children and strengthen their families?	16
<i>How can services be made available so families will use them?</i>	17
<i>How can communities enhance the availability of high-quality early child care and education?</i>	19
<i>How can parents and families be encouraged to become involved in activities that benefit them?</i>	21
<i>How can communities use public awareness efforts to enhance aid and support to families?</i>	23
<i>How can children's health and safety be strengthened through community efforts?</i>	23
<i>What comes next?</i>	24
How one community is putting it all together to support families	25
<i>Some background</i>	25
<i>Golden Strip joins the demonstration project</i>	26
<i>Integrating the HFA model into the Golden Strip community</i>	27
<i>Just beginning</i>	27
<i>Building relationships and encouraging reciprocity</i>	28
Mobilizing the community: How to get started	30
<i>An orientation to mobilization</i>	31
<i>Learn to lead, learn, and communicate</i>	32
<i>Phases of community work</i>	33
Conclusion	36
Notes and References	37



Introduction

Most families work hard to bring up happy, healthy children who are ready and eager to learn. They nurture their children, teach them values and social skills, give them emotional support, and provide them with a sense of belonging. But many parents today, particularly young parents, face more challenges than their own parents or grandparents did when rearing their families.

- More mothers work outside the home, and there are more single-parent households (usually headed by women). Recent welfare reform has added even more women to the workforce.
- Parent(s) may have to work multiple jobs to make ends meet, leaving them less time to spend with their children. Often this means working nights, weekends, or other non-standard hours.
- Families have greater geographic mobility, which can lead to weaker social ties to extended family and neighbors.
- Many young families are living in poverty.
- Good-quality child care is both difficult to find and expensive, which means many families must settle for less desirable and more affordable child-care settings for their children.

Under these circumstances, a growing number of families find it difficult to provide their children with the foundation that they need to become healthy,

responsible, productive adults. Perhaps even more than previous generations, they need help from their neighbors and friends, community and government leaders, members of faith-based institutions, business people, and all those who have the potential to make a difference in their lives and the lives of their children.

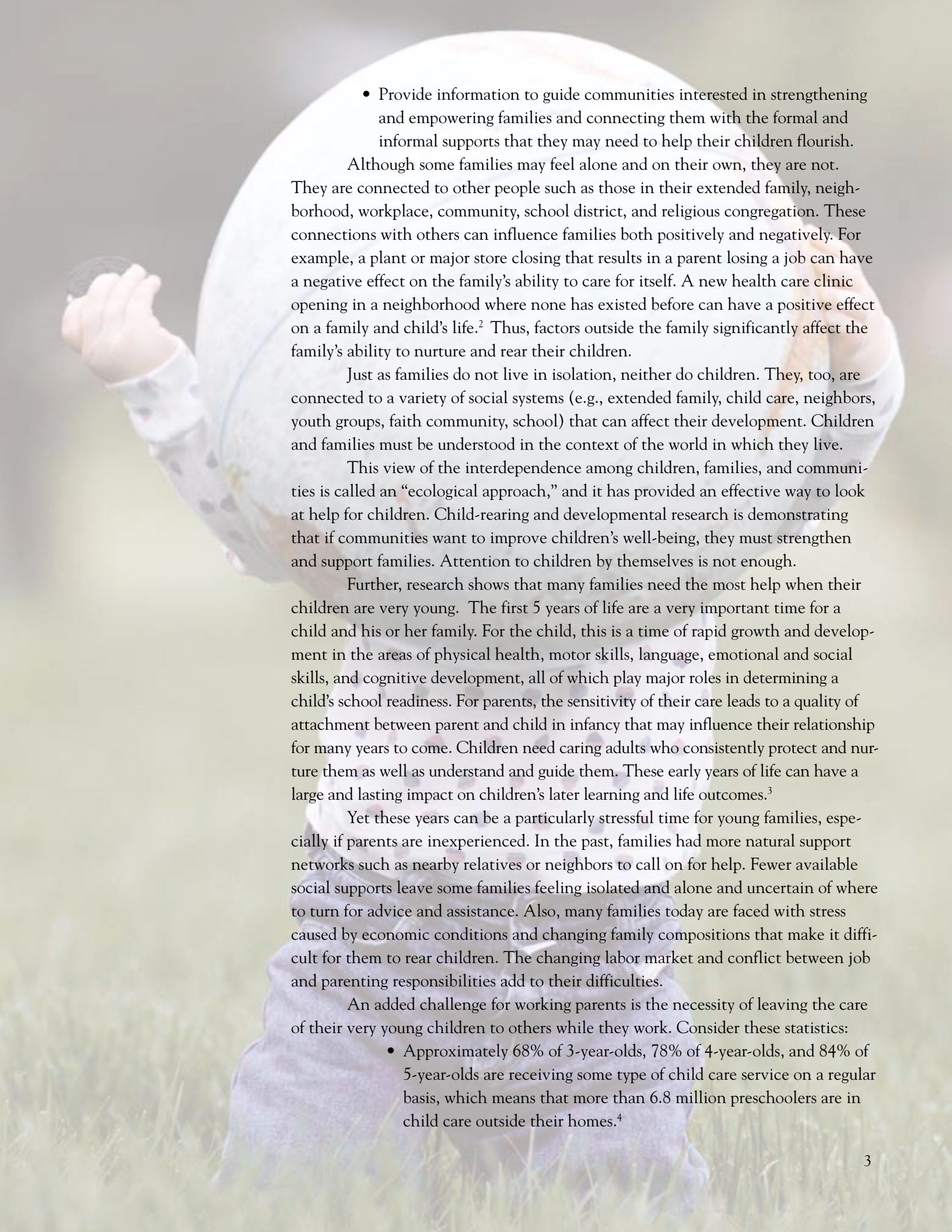
“If parents are stressed by the hardships of poverty, the uncertainty of losing a job, or the prospects of marital dissolution, their ability to meet the needs of their young children is jeopardized. If such parents receive help or support from relatives, friends, or social institutions, the home environment they create for their children may be enhanced.”¹



Communities have a responsibility to assure that all children have a good beginning. This booklet looks at what communities can do to fulfill this responsibility. Communities that work to build a supportive network for young children and their families are likely to find that their efforts will lead to stronger, healthier communities for all citizens.

Specifically, this booklet will:

- Identify the kind of care, skills, and environment that very young children need to develop socially, emotionally, and cognitively so they will be ready to learn when they enter school.
- Describe the supports that families need to help them rear their children in the best way possible.

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- Provide information to guide communities interested in strengthening and empowering families and connecting them with the formal and informal supports that they may need to help their children flourish.

Although some families may feel alone and on their own, they are not. They are connected to other people such as those in their extended family, neighborhood, workplace, community, school district, and religious congregation. These connections with others can influence families both positively and negatively. For example, a plant or major store closing that results in a parent losing a job can have a negative effect on the family's ability to care for itself. A new health care clinic opening in a neighborhood where none has existed before can have a positive effect on a family and child's life.² Thus, factors outside the family significantly affect the family's ability to nurture and rear their children.

Just as families do not live in isolation, neither do children. They, too, are connected to a variety of social systems (e.g., extended family, child care, neighbors, youth groups, faith community, school) that can affect their development. Children and families must be understood in the context of the world in which they live.

This view of the interdependence among children, families, and communities is called an "ecological approach," and it has provided an effective way to look at help for children. Child-rearing and developmental research is demonstrating that if communities want to improve children's well-being, they must strengthen and support families. Attention to children by themselves is not enough.

Further, research shows that many families need the most help when their children are very young. The first 5 years of life are a very important time for a child and his or her family. For the child, this is a time of rapid growth and development in the areas of physical health, motor skills, language, emotional and social skills, and cognitive development, all of which play major roles in determining a child's school readiness. For parents, the sensitivity of their care leads to a quality of attachment between parent and child in infancy that may influence their relationship for many years to come. Children need caring adults who consistently protect and nurture them as well as understand and guide them. These early years of life can have a large and lasting impact on children's later learning and life outcomes.³

Yet these years can be a particularly stressful time for young families, especially if parents are inexperienced. In the past, families had more natural support networks such as nearby relatives or neighbors to call on for help. Fewer available social supports leave some families feeling isolated and alone and uncertain of where to turn for advice and assistance. Also, many families today are faced with stress caused by economic conditions and changing family compositions that make it difficult for them to rear children. The changing labor market and conflict between job and parenting responsibilities add to their difficulties.

An added challenge for working parents is the necessity of leaving the care of their very young children to others while they work. Consider these statistics:

- Approximately 68% of 3-year-olds, 78% of 4-year-olds, and 84% of 5-year-olds are receiving some type of child care service on a regular basis, which means that more than 6.8 million preschoolers are in child care outside their homes.⁴

- The typical infant in the United States is in child care prior to 5 months of age and is in care over 40 hours a week.⁵

This increased dependence on child care for very young children comes at a time when research is demonstrating that: (1) the quality of children's early life experiences influences their readiness for school;⁶ (2) a large majority of available child care settings are poor to mediocre, with care for infants and toddlers, on average, even worse;⁷ and (3) good-quality child care is often beyond the financial reach of most parents.

Recent Early Childhood Initiatives

In response to the growing number of young children in child care settings outside of the home, the increased emphasis on school readiness, the support needs of young families, and the recognition of the importance of the early years in children's lives, several organizations have launched major initiatives in recent years to address the needs of young children and their families. A brief description of these collaborative, comprehensive initiatives follows.

Starting Points

The Carnegie Corporation's *Starting Points* initiative began in 1994 when the organization issued a report, *Starting Points: Meeting the Needs of Our Youngest Children*, which challenged states and communities to improve the well-being of very young children by "promoting responsible parenthood, providing quality child care choices, ensuring good health and protection, and mobilizing communities to support young children and families."⁸ In 1996, the foundation began providing *Starting Points* funds to state and local efforts to support these goals. Eleven sites (Baltimore, Boston, Colorado, Florida, Hawaii, North Carolina, Pittsburgh, Rhode Island, San Francisco, Vermont, and West Virginia) have been funded. Other states, including South Carolina, have received planning grants. The sites have implemented a number of strategies to improve outcomes for young children and their families. These include developing new programs and improving existing ones, generating policy change, improving fiscal resources, and mobilizing public attention to child and family issues.

Success by 6®

Success by 6®, created in Minneapolis in 1988, is a national early childhood development initiative that the United Way of America is disseminating nationwide through its local United Way organizations. In South Carolina, the United Way of South Carolina coordinates the statewide initiative. In an effort to help children begin school healthy and ready to learn, *Success by 6®* seeks to raise awareness about early childhood development, improve access to critical health and human services, leverage resources, and advocate for public policy that supports all children.



In partnership with local United Way agencies, more than 200 communities in the U.S. are developing or have implemented a *Success by 6*[®] initiative. Local initiatives identify goals and priorities that address the needs of children and families in their communities. United Way agencies convene community leaders to coordinate the efforts of business, government, labor, faith community, civic groups, education, and health and human service providers. *Success by 6*[®] fosters the development of community collaborations that encourage public-private partnerships focused on prevention and early intervention.

United Way of America provides support to local communities to develop an early childhood initiative through consultation and technical assistance; resource materials; training and workshops; networking opportunities; on-site presentations; special grants; and national leadership.

South Carolina communities that support strong *Success by 6*[®] initiatives include Aiken, Beaufort, Charles-

ton, Columbia (Midlands), Foothills (Anderson), Greenville, Greenwood, Spartanburg, Sumter, and York. Ten additional communities are in the process of establishing *Success by 6*[®] initiatives. (For more information about the United Way, the United Way of South Carolina, and both national and state *Success by 6*[®] initiatives, visit this website: www.unitedway.org).

Healthy Families America

Healthy Families America (HFA) is a national initiative to help parents of newborns get their children off to a healthy start. HFA offers home visiting and other services to families. Participation is strictly voluntary. HFA, based extensively on Hawaii's Healthy Start program, was developed in 1992 by the National Committee to Prevent Child Abuse, known today as Prevent Child Abuse America. (For more information, visit their website: www.preventchildabuse.org).

The initiative's goals are to promote positive parenting and to prevent child abuse and neglect. To accomplish these goals, HFA seeks to enhance parent-child interactions, foster children's growth and development, and improve how families function in areas such as solving problems, using community services, and developing social support. In addition, HFA encourages the creation of community systems

of support to assist parents in caring for their newborns.

More than 300 communities in more than 40 states, the District of Columbia, and Canada have implemented HFA initiatives. Most HFA program sites have multiple funding sources in the public and private sector. PCA America serves as the national headquarters for HFA.

In South Carolina, Prevent Child Abuse South Carolina, the SC Department of Social Services, the SC Department of Health and Environmental Control, the SC Department of Health and Human Services, several foundations, Clemson University's Institute on Family and Neighborhood Life, and five communities have worked together to develop HFA initiatives in Allendale, Beaufort, the Golden Strip area of Greenville County, Greenwood, and Lower Richland County.

I Am Your Child Campaign

Launched in 1997, the *I Am Your Child* national campaign seeks to educate parents and caregivers on the importance of a child's first 3 years of life. The educational and public awareness campaign is designed to help families and communities learn what they can do to promote healthy development in young children.

The initiative is based on research that shows the important role that early experiences have in determining a child's brain development. The campaign, founded by actor and director Rob Reiner and his wife, Michele Singer Reiner, is a coalition of entertainment leaders, children's organizations, developmental scientists, elected officials, health professionals, foundations, and corporations who seek to focus attention on work being done around the country to promote family and community involvement in young children's healthy development. Reiner's leadership led to the passage of Proposition 10 in California, which uses an increase in cigarette taxes to fund new early childhood programs. (For more information, see their website, www.iamyourchild.org).

In South Carolina, the Institute on Family and Neighborhood Life staff led the campaign in partnership with the state's public library system and the United Way of South Carolina. Packets of materials were developed and circulated through the public library system and the *Success by 6*® initiatives. The Institute continues to serve as the state's point of contact.

State-Implemented Early Childhood Initiatives

In recent years, a number of states have launched comprehensive early childhood programs and initiatives. These efforts are aimed at improving children's health, social, emotional, and school readiness outcomes by trying to meet the needs of children and their families. Examples of comprehensive early childhood initiatives include "preschool programs with nutrition, health care, and family support components; home-visiting programs designed to help parents in high-risk





families establish positive relationships with their infants and toddlers; and family resource centers, sometimes linked to schools or neighborhood centers.”⁹

Testifying before a Congressional subcommittee in July 1998, Jane Knitzer, deputy director of the National Center for Children in Poverty, said that NCCP’s 1998 report, *Map and Track: State Initiatives for Young Children and Families*, showed that 24 states reported funding statewide comprehensive programs for infants and toddlers, and 34 states were funding programs for preschoolers.¹⁰ She said that a growing number of states (27) report working with community leaders and citizens in an effort to help them plan how better to meet the needs of their community’s young children and their families.

“More and more states appear to be recognizing that promoting the well-being of young children and families is everybody’s business: parents, business leaders, community leaders, and service providers,” Knitzer testified.¹¹

The 1998 Map and Track report identified eight states, Colorado, Georgia, Minnesota, North Carolina, Ohio, Oregon, Vermont, and West Virginia, as those that met NCCP’s criteria for comprehensive early childhood initiatives. These criteria included some combination of high-level leadership, integrated program and community mobilization strategies, continued commitment to increased funding, and a framework for state action.¹²

In South Carolina, *First Steps* is a move in that direction. (For more information, visit SC *First Steps*’ website, www.scfirststeps.org).

Summary

All the initiatives listed here have merit. Some emphasize certain elements and approaches (e.g., home visitation is a major element of the *Healthy Families America* initiative) more than others, but each recognizes the need for extending support to families in order to help children, and most provide a central role for communities in doing so. Communities that want to help children and recognize the importance of strengthening their families would do well to learn more about these initiatives. This booklet will demonstrate what communities can do to help young children and families, and in the process, improve their communities. As Lisbeth Schorr says in her book, *Common Purpose*, “The research makes clear that the capacity of families to do their child-rearing job is powerfully dependent on the health of their communities.”¹³

Rather than taking the traditional “parent-child” approach to early childhood efforts, this publication presents a more comprehensive “community-family-child” approach that includes enhancing healthy child development, supporting families, linking all parents and children to needed services, and fostering community development. The goal is to prevent problems before they occur. Ultimately, this comprehensive family support approach should lead to better-prepared children, stronger families, and more robust communities.

The next section of the booklet will outline some of the major objectives that comprehensive early childhood initiatives and family resource/support initiatives should have. These should prove useful to communities interested in creating new or enhancing existing programs or developing comprehensive family support initiatives within their neighborhoods.

Characteristics of Good-Quality Child and Family Support Initiatives

Although initiatives that support young children and their families are diverse, they are typically concerned with early childhood development, child care quality, school readiness, and family support. This section of the booklet considers each of these crucial elements of community initiatives.

What are High-Quality Early Childhood Services?

Historically, early childhood services have been divided into two main categories – child care and early childhood enrichment/education. The term “child care” is used most often to describe situations where someone other than children’s parents care for children (infants up through elementary school age) during an extended portion of the day (usually while parents are working). The term “early childhood enrichment (or education),” on the other hand, is used to describe nursery school or preschool programs designed to promote children’s social and cognitive development. There is a growing recognition that rather than being distinctly different, these two strands of early childhood services have much in common and are part of a continuum of services that should be available to families and their young children. In fact, the National Association for the Education of Young Children, in its 1993 *Conceptual Framework for Early Childhood Professional Development*, includes both of these strands in its definition of early childhood education. Early childhood education is defined as “any part- or half-day group program in a center, school, or home that serves children from birth through age eight, including children with special developmental and learning needs.”¹⁴ The definition includes services provided in child care centers (both for-profit and nonprofit); Head Start; family child care; home-based day care by an adult other than the child’s parent(s); and public or private kindergartens, primary grades, and before- and after-school programs.

NAEYC’s position states that although child care and early education services are usually funded and regulated by different agencies or groups, the “essential nature of the service varies little when done in an appropriate manner for an individual child.”¹⁵

“Although historical traditions have focused on either the child’s needs for a program that promotes her or his development or meeting



parents' need to provide child care when they are unavailable, there is increasing recognition that this represents a false dichotomy. Good programs must meet children's needs as well as families' needs."¹⁶

Child care and early childhood education professionals have had distinct concerns and issues over the years. Many of these practitioners and professionals are beginning to work together because they have come to understand the crucial link between quality day care services and school readiness.

Research shows that good early childhood programs are ones where children are safe from harm, nurtured, respected, encouraged, and challenged. They are programs that meet children's individual social, emotional, and cognitive needs and ensure that good health practices are followed. Good programs also provide comprehensive services to families and make families feel welcomed and included in their child's care outside the home.

What Constitutes Good Child Care?

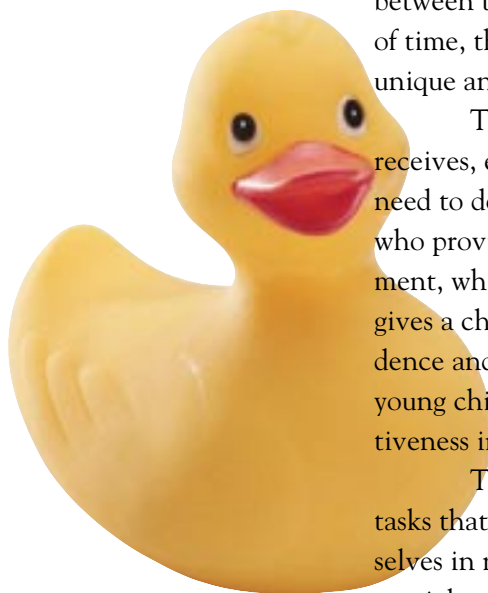
Most discussions about early child care focus on three issues – affordability, availability, and quality. Of these, this booklet will only focus on quality, although the three issues are interrelated. Often high-quality programs are expensive and few. A lack of transportation and funds forces many families, particularly those who are poor, to choose child care services based on accessibility and affordability rather than on quality. Ideally, all child care initiatives should strive for top-quality care. What should high-quality child care initiatives have that will foster a young child's optimal growth and development? What do young children need?

Child Caregivers

Regardless of where child care is provided (a center, a group of children in a care provider's home, a provider in the child's home, care by a relative or friend), the key to good child care is the adult who provides the care. Is it someone who understands and is responsive to the needs of young children? Does the caregiver communicate with the child or infant in a way that fosters an emotional bond between them? Does the child have the same caregiver each day and over a period of time, thus giving the child some consistency and enabling the child to develop a unique and special relationship with that person?

The answers to these questions help to define the quality of care that a child receives, especially for infants (up to 1 year old) and toddlers (ages 1 to 3). Infants need to develop a secure attachment or bond with their parents and to the person who provides for their care in their parents' absence. An emotionally secure attachment, which comes in part from having a warm, consistent, responsive caregiver, gives a child a sense of trust and encourages them to explore their world with confidence and to learn from this exploration. When caregivers are warm and responsive, young children begin to understand cause-and-effect relations and their own effectiveness in getting help from others.¹⁷

The first 3 years of a child's life lay the groundwork for many developmental tasks that follow as a child matures into adulthood. Children begin to define themselves in relation to the world, including the people and objects in it. They form special attachments to family and start to communicate ideas and emotions. "During



the first 3 years, children begin the construction of complex social, psychological, and intellectual ideas – efforts that must be accomplished before they can continue their developmental progression to the next stage.”¹⁸

Because very young children are so dependent on adults, the child’s immediate environment and the adults in it represent the child’s world. This small world is where the child must develop. Over time, as the child grows older and becomes more independent, his or her world will expand to include school, peers, teachers, and their family.¹⁹

Environmental Considerations

Although the most important factor in good child care is the adult(s) providing the care, there also are many environmental issues to consider.

- Are children’s basic physical needs (food, sleep, hygiene) met promptly and safely? Is the environment free from toxins and disease?
- Are children encouraged to play, explore, look at books, listen to music, and interact socially with others rather than watching television or other passive activities?
- Are children watched carefully in order to prevent accidental falls, cuts, and bruises?
- Is there space for children to move about?
- Are there safe, clean, developmentally appropriate toys to manipulate?
- Are there a variety of toys and objects for the child to feel, look at, and listen to and a variety of activities that foster cognitive, social, emotional, language, and personality development?

The answers to these questions are important in determining whether the child care environment is conducive to optimal growth and development. Young children, particularly infants and toddlers, need to develop motor coordination. In order to do that, they need space to move around and safe, clean objects to manipulate. The environment has to be free of poisons and other hazards, and an adult must be available to protect the child from falls.

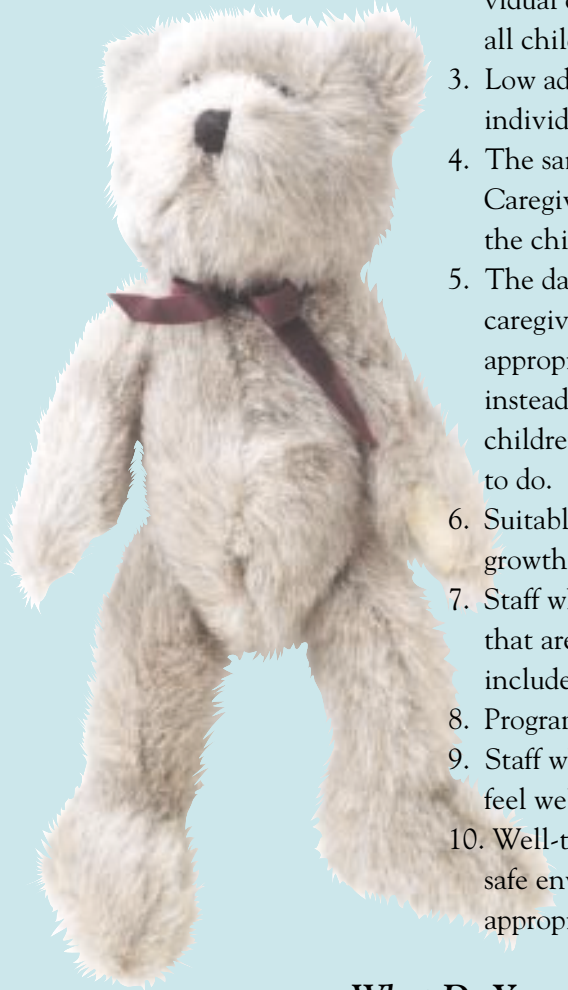
To develop cognitively, very young children need toys or objects that will stimulate their tactile, visual, and auditory senses. The mind develops as it is exercised, which is why activities in child care that stimulate and provoke children’s thinking are essential. Very young children need a variety of textures to feel, objects to look at, and sounds to hear (especially the sound of the human voice, in the case of infants). And they need people who take a positive interest in them as a unique individual.



Summary

A review of several early childhood articles and reports listed in the reference section at the end of this booklet shows that good child care services for infants and toddlers should have:

1. Warm, sensitive, responsive caregivers who understand infants and toddlers' verbal and nonverbal communications and respond to their individual needs.
2. Small groups in order to manage noise levels, meet the needs of individual children within the group, and provide reasonable stimulation to all children.
3. Low adult-to-child ratios so teachers/caregivers have time to provide individualized, responsive attention to all children.
4. The same primary caregiver, based on the child's own preference. Caregivers should stay with a child for numerous months, if not years, so the child can form a consistent bond with the caregiver.
5. The daily program should be developmentally appropriate, and caregivers should explain it to the child's parent(s). A developmentally appropriate program doesn't have "formal" lessons as in school, but instead provides structure, consistency, and activities that are based on children's individual temperaments and on what they indicate they want to do.
6. Suitable toys, materials, and experiences that will foster a child's own growth.
7. Staff who work closely and collaboratively with other services/agencies that are important to the family. Primary health care should always be included.
8. Programs that are sensitive to the language and culture of the family.
9. Staff who communicate well with the children's families and make them feel welcome and encourage them to be involved.
10. Well-trained staff who understand children's development and provide safe environments and learning experiences that are developmentally appropriate for each child.



What Do Young Children Need to Be Ready for School?

The skills that a child learns at home, in a child-care setting, or preschool educational program are the very competencies that he or she will need to make a successful transition to school. The same elements that help determine good-quality child care programs also apply to early childhood education or enrichment programs.

Generally speaking, children are ready to learn when they are in good physical and mental health, are socially and emotionally well-adjusted, and possess age-appropriate cognitive competencies. Children need to know how to behave in the classroom, follow instructions, be sensitive to others' feelings, communicate their own thoughts and feelings, and not disrupt the classroom.²⁰ School readiness is not just intellectual readiness, but also (and perhaps primarily) social and emotional readiness.

These skills can essentially be categorized into three main competencies to achieve readiness for school. First, children must be intellectually capable when they enter school. This does not mean that they must know the alphabet and how to count to 20, although those skills are certainly helpful and desirable. Rather, children need to have the competencies necessary for new learning: the ability to solve problems, the motivation to learn, and a good understanding of language so they can communicate and listen.

Second, children need to be able to regulate themselves. These capacities include emotional self-regulation; social competence; the ability to comply with instructions and rules in an age-appropriate way; and the capacity to restrain aggression and other egocentric impulses in an age-appropriate manner and to get along socially with adults and peers.

Third, children need self-confidence, which means approaching new challenges with the eagerness and optimism that comes from the expectation of success. Self-confidence also means that when failure (inevitably) occurs, young children know that they can eventually achieve success with greater effort and persistence.

Children's early experiences, whether in their homes with their parents or in a child care or preschool setting with a caregiver or teacher, affect their ability to be successful as they begin school in the following ways. Children need secure relationships with people both within and outside of their family to encourage self-confidence and security. The ability to form relationships is not only important for school readiness, but also for socialization and the growth of nonviolent, prosocial behavior.

An important key to school readiness is the development of self-control in thinking, feeling, and acting toward others. Children need consistency and predictability in child care to achieve the skills of self-control because consistency enables children to learn about the consequences of their actions and how to manage the events that influence them. Children who live in uncontrollable or inconsistent environments, who cannot predict what will happen next in their everyday experience, are likely to show deficits in self-control in their inability to pay attention, sit still, or get along with others.

The development of school readiness also is based on knowledge of early brain development that shows how important is the care and nurturance of adults. The developing brain is nurtured when children are provided safe environments at home and in child-care settings that protect them from harm, provide adequate nutrition, and ensure that they are safeguarded from environmental toxins (e.g., lead paint), drugs, and viruses. Parents can promote early brain development by seeking good prenatal and postnatal care for their children, and through



early and periodic health screening, vision and hearing checkups, and regular immunizations, which child care providers can encourage.

School readiness has been recognized by researchers, educators, and public policy makers alike as an important key to later school success. For example, state governors recognized the importance of preschool education by endorsing the first objective of the Goals 2000 Educate America Act: "By the year 2000, all children in America will start school ready to learn." To achieve this goal, all children, particularly low-income and at-risk children, need access to high-quality preschool education and quality child care.

How Can Families Be Strengthened and Supported?

Earlier, this booklet pointed out the need to focus on providing support to families in order to improve outcomes for children, particularly for very young children. Family support can take many forms. It can be a formal program that provides a variety of services to families such as health care, parent education, job training, and social support. Or, it can be the informal support that families, friends, co-workers, and neighbors provide each other naturally such as babysitting, offering a ride, providing advice, or cooking a meal.

"Stated most simply, the goals of family support programs focus on enhancing the capacity of parents in their child-rearing roles; creating settings in which parents are empowered to act on their own behalf and become advocates for change; and providing a community resource for parents," say noted family support experts Bernice Weissbourd and Sharon Kagan.²¹

The goal of family support is to provide families with the help that they need to become as strong and confident as possible. In the past, extended families often provided the kind of help that young families need. For example, when a first-time mother came home from the hospital, her mother, mother-in-law, or another relative would stay with her for a few days while she got used to caring for her newborn and would then be available to help as needed. Other relatives and friends would bring food and help with house cleaning. But today, distance often separates extended families, which makes it more difficult, if not impossible, for them to provide the social support they once did.

Family support is difficult to define because it encompasses several things. Family support is a set of beliefs about helping families. It can be a type of community-based initiative that provides comprehensive services to families that encourage and strengthen parents' abilities to nurture, provide for, and rear their children. And it is a movement to make communities and formal helping systems work for families.²²

Formal family support focuses on identifying parents' strengths and building on them while supporting and assisting them in areas where they may need help. Families are viewed as members of a neighborhood and a community. They are to be respected, listened to, empowered, involved, and included. Formal family support programs are effective, in part, as they are coordinated with and strengthen informal sources of support to families. "Today, family support is defined as programs with discernable characteristics, as principles that guide relationships between services

and families, and as the expression of common values derived from our founding fathers' vision of democracy – respect for human dignity, responsible citizenship, and concern for the welfare of others,” say Weissbourd and Kagan in their book, *Putting Families First*.²³

Family support can be offered in many settings. For example, it can be included in a home visitation initiative such as Healthy Families America or provided at a community-based family resource center. Or, it may be part of a comprehensive school-based child care and family support program, such as noted psychologist and early childhood expert Edward Zigler's School of the 21st Century. Regardless of the initiative's name or structure, family support is based on “the ecological premise that factors outside the family affect the family's capacity to nurture and rear its children.”²⁴

Formal family support initiatives provide various activities that usually include one or more of the following²⁵:

- parent education and support groups
- parent-child activities that focus on child development and promote healthy family relationships
- a drop-in center, which offers an opportunity for families to visit informally with other families and program staff
- child care while parents are involved with other activities offered by the family resource program
- information and community referral services for things like child care, health care, nutrition programs, and counseling
- health and nutrition education for parents
- developmental checks and health screening for infants and children.



Principles of Family Support

Weissbourd and Kagan²⁶ have identified four main principles that characterize family support initiatives. These initiatives:

- *Focus on prevention and recognize the importance of a child's early years.* Rather than trying to intervene when a problem occurs, family support initiatives stress prevention and also promote optimal development of children and families.
- *Employ an ecological approach to delivering services.* Children are part of families and families are part of the community, thus services for children cannot be independent of families and their environments. An ecological approach helps to ensure that services will reflect family

needs and strengths. Ultimately, this approach also will help to build the community. “The ecological orientation stresses our interdependence: building strength in one area, with one family, has a ripple effect that strengthens a community’s collective capacity.”²⁷

- *Take a developmental view of parents.* Family support initiatives focus on helping parents to become more effective in their parenting roles. “How parents feel about themselves influences how they rear their children, how they model behavior, and how they interact with others.”²⁸ Family support initiatives identify parents’ strengths and build on those rather than only focus on “fixing” deficiencies. Ultimately, family support initiatives seek “to enable families to be independent by developing their own informal support networks.”²⁹
- *Understand the universal value of support.* Social support can help to reduce feelings of isolation and loneliness, which in turn may prevent problems like abuse and neglect. Developing social networks helps families to form friendships, obtain advice and information from others, and link with groups in their communities. This support helps families to cope better and to become more independent. As parents become more independent and feel more control over their lives, they may participate more in neighborhood and community activities.

Family Support America (formerly the Family Resource Coalition of America) provides the following list of principles³⁰ (in italics) for family support practice on its World Wide Web page (www.frca.org/fam_issues/principles.htm). These principles provide a framework for developing effective family support services.

- *Staff and families work together in relationships based on equality and respect.*
- *Staff enhance families’ capacity to support the growth and development of all family members –adults, youth, and children.*
- *Families are resources to their own members, other families, programs, and communities.*
- *Programs affirm and strengthen families’ cultural, racial, and linguistic identities and enhance their ability to function in a multicultural society.*
- *Programs are embedded in their communities and contribute to the community-building process.* As parents, community leaders, businesses, church members, and others work together to develop more and better services to support families and children, they, in turn, often find that these improvements have made the community better for all citizens.
- *Programs advocate with families for services and systems that are fair, responsive, and accountable to the families served.* For example, staff might accompany parents to a pediatrician’s visit, or discuss housing problems with a landlord.
- *Practitioners work with families to mobilize formal and informal resources to support family development.* For example, staff might work with parents to

help them meet and socialize with neighbors, access welfare benefits, or participate in activities at the child care center.

- *Programs are flexible and continually responsive to emerging family and community issues.* For example, programs might arrange parent support activities during times that do not conflict with parents' work schedules, or coordinate their program activities with community events of interest to families and young children.
- *Principles of family support are modeled in all program activities, including planning, governance, and administration.*

Family support initiatives are an effective, non-stigmatizing approach to help families obtain the services and support that they need to meet their children's health, developmental, and nurturing needs.

How Can Communities Help Young Children And Strengthen Their Families?

Previous sections of this booklet identified the main goals of high-quality early child care, school readiness, and family strengthening/support and, in part, provided some general principles or guidelines for achieving them. This section presents strategies and suggestions for communities to consider as they develop their own comprehensive initiatives to improve the quality of care and early learning opportunities for young children and to support and strengthen families. The information is organized around a series of questions related to service delivery, high-quality early childhood services, parent and family education and involvement, public awareness, and health and safety. These strategies and suggestions are offered as examples of actions that communities might consider as they develop locally based initiatives to improve outcomes for young children and their families.

Communities have different needs, resources, and strengths. What works in one community may not work in another. Each community must develop the kind of initiative that best serves the needs of its citizens. Ultimately, these efforts will lead to stronger, healthier communities. Information about how communities can get started developing their own plan of action is provided in the final section of this booklet.





How Can Services be Made Available so Families Will Use Them?

This is one of the key questions to think about when trying to develop family support initiatives: What can be done to get families to use the services that are offered? Research shows that families are more likely to use services that are convenient, supportive, accessible, affordable, flexible, and nonthreatening. Services or programs that focus more on families' needs rather than on a program's organizational needs most likely will be more attractive to parents.

In recent years, early childhood and family support practitioners and researchers have identified a number of ways for state, local, and federal government agencies to work together with local nonprofit, grassroots, and private organizations to create "seamless, nurturing environments,"³¹ where children and their families can get the help they need to succeed in life. The following recommendations, developed in 1994 by representatives of 50 prominent national organizations attending a Washington, D.C., conference, focus on developing community-based and school-linked initiatives that provide a continuum of health, social, educational, and family support services.³² Many of these suggestions reflect the principles of family support identified earlier in this booklet.

Services should be based and delivered in the community. Initiatives should be planned, operated, and evaluated with broad public and private involvement, including families and youth. There is no "one-size-fits-all" initiative that will suit every community. Rather, each community must develop what works best for its residents by listening to and involving families and youth in a way that affirms their

value and dignity. When families and youth are given an opportunity to voice their opinions and ideas about services and feel that they have been heard, they are more likely to participate as well as enlist others they know to use the services.

Services should center around the family, build on strengths, and address the needs of children and families. Services should be developed that “are welcomed by families, support their independence, and strengthen their community ties.”³³ Families must be included in decision making and given opportunities to participate in meaningful ways.

Needed services should be available and accessible in a variety of settings to all who need them. This can be done through a combination of public, private, community, and personal resources. For example, services might be provided at a shopping mall, local school, religious institution, or community center, or provided by telephone (hot lines, warm lines), or even on the Internet. Whenever possible, eliminate transportation problems that make it difficult for some families to access services. This might require looking closely at public transportation, evaluating the affordability, and determining whether schedules and services are well-suited to family needs.

Services should be culturally competent. Initiatives should consider and provide for the needs of people with disabilities and for various cultural, ethnic, language, and economic backgrounds.

Services should focus on primary prevention, early intervention, and strengthening the ability of children, youth, and families to help themselves. This focus should help to resolve potential problems before they develop, or to deal with them as soon as they develop, before more intensive, remedial services are necessary.

Services should be flexible and comprehensive in order to meet the individual needs of families. Children and families will need a variety of services to fit their individual needs. For example, some families will require more intensive services than others. Other families will need help in one area (such as health services) before they are ready for help in another (job training). Services, then, must be individualized, not standardized.

Public, private, and community organizations should coordinate, integrate, and deliver services collaboratively. Efforts should be made to eliminate the barriers that often prevent cooperation such as turf issues or different funding sources and requirements. The focus should be on serving families through a coordination of formal and informal support.



Services should be of high quality and developmentally appropriate. Program staff should be well-trained and fully qualified to work effectively with children, youth, and families. Accountability measures should be used to ensure that desired outcomes are achieved.

Services should be cost-effective. Resources should be used for programs or initiatives with high likelihood of improving the lives of children and families.

How Can Communities Enhance the Availability of High-Quality Early Child Care and Education?

Communities interested in improving the quality of existing early child care and education for very young children and in developing more of these programs might find the following strategies and suggestions helpful. The strategies come from a review of several reports, journal articles, informational brochures, books, and information on the World Wide Web, many of which are listed in the references at the end of this booklet.

- *Promote the professional development of early education and child care practitioners.* This can be done in a number of ways. For example, (1) enlist local public school districts and area colleges and universities to provide professional development programs and training opportunities to child care providers who work in centers or provide care in their homes; (2) make parents aware of the importance of training so they will ask about it when seeking child care for their young children; (3) increase training qualifications that are required to work as an infant/toddler caregiver; and (4) increase wages in the context of subsidies for lower-income families.
- *Encourage more stringent child care regulations.* Research has shown that child care centers in states with stronger child care regulations “tended to have better staff-child ratios, staff with more child-related training, and lower staff turnover rates,”³⁴ the three key ingredients of high quality programs. These essential elements of high-quality child care can be regulated, which can help improve the quality child care available in the community.



- *Encourage or advocate that child care programs meet accreditation standards of the National Association for the Education of Young Children or other accrediting organizations.* Accreditation will lead to better-trained providers, improved environments, and overall quality improvements. Offering financial incentives for accredited child care centers or home programs, as well as financial support to cover the accrediting process, might encourage more programs to improve and seek accreditation.
- *Link early childhood programs with other community resources through collaboration.* Collaborating with other services and resources can help to ensure that children and their families get the support and services that they need through referrals and information provided via child care and early childhood programs.
- *Encourage and support the development of family child care support networks and help to link family child care homes to child care centers.* The majority of young children receiving child care and education from someone other than their parent(s) or guardian(s) are receiving care in the home of a relative, friend, or day care provider rather than at a child care center. Usually, these caregivers have neither licences nor special training and are most likely to be isolated from other adults and providers while they are caring for the children. Networks could be formed that would link these home-based providers to one another, to center-based services, and to other community services. In addition, local school districts could offer information or training in child development and basic health and safety to these caregivers. Zigler's School of the 21st Century model, previously mentioned in this booklet, includes this kind of support to home child care providers.
- *Use all available sources of funds and seek new ones to supplement and maximize efforts that support high-quality early child care and education,* strengthen after-school care, and provide respite care for families with special needs or sudden emergencies. For example, apply for local grants from public and private agencies to enhance existing programs or to develop new ones.
- *Promote more family-focused, comprehensive child care models that link and make more accessible a variety of services that young children and families may need,* such as community-based health services, parenting education, home visitation, and social support. Also, try to improve the availability of child care during nonstandard hours for those parents who work evening and night shifts.
- *Urge employers to offer work policies helpful to families,* such as flexible time and workplace options, on-site child care, child care offered during nontraditional work hours, family leave policies, job sharing, and

employer-sponsored activities for families. Employers also can be encouraged to provide educational information to employees about child development and child care in company newsletters or flyers in pay checks. Employees who believe that their children are receiving good-quality care in their absence are more likely to focus on their work better.

- *Engage in efforts to strengthen community cohesion by supporting school-based programs and activities.* In some communities, local schools are perceived as the most respected and accessible agencies for families. After-school child care programs, community resource and referral networks, parent support groups, and family resource centers are among the many kinds of community-building activities that can be school-based.

How Can Parents and Families Be Encouraged To Become Involved in Activities That Benefit Them?



Being a good parent does not necessarily come naturally. Some parents, particularly those who are young, inexperienced, or suffering from financial or emotional stress, need child-rearing information and assistance to help them better care for their children. Effective parenting involves a lot of skills, many of which can be taught or modeled in parent education and support programs. For some parents, the most effective way to learn these skills is through a home visit or series of visits. For others, attending a parenting education and support program at a local school, church, library, or community organization might work best. For some, simply participating in activities with other families is most beneficial. Whatever the approach, parents may benefit from learning more about child development, child management and discipline techniques, and better communication skills. They also might profit from being involved in a support group with other parents, where they can share experiences and feelings with one another, as well as learn about resources available to them and their families (e.g., health clinics, literacy training, child care). Some parent education and parent support programs have used volunteers (adult men and women as well as couples) trained in parenting and child devel-

opment as mentors to families who need parenting help.

Parents and families are a key ingredient in early child care and education initiatives. Research shows that their involvement improves results for children. “It increases children’s chances of success and achievement in school and later life, and decreases the likelihood of negative results.”³⁵

Communities can encourage parent and family involvement by providing parents with useful, objective information, presented in a variety of formats and settings, that helps parents to know how to get the care that they need for their children and to become knowledgeable consumers of early care and education services. Communities should try to involve parents as partners in early care and education programs and increase links to family support initiatives. “Programs must engage parents as full-fledged partners, transforming traditional family involvement activities so that parents have opportunities to take part in major program, service, and governance decisions.”³⁶ Communities can urge service providers to focus on empowering families rather than on designing activities that are most convenient for staff and administrators.

In addition, communities can offer special programs at museums and parks where children and their parents can share fun experiences together, thus strengthening the bond between them. Communities can establish a children’s museum or develop programs for young children and their parents at existing museums or libraries. Recreational programs are another kind of community-sponsored activity that can appeal to families of all kinds and to people of all generations. Communities should find ways that encourage children of all socioeconomic and ethnic groups to attend, such as free admission, making transportation available, or taking a program to children in their own communities or neighborhoods. As another example, a community could develop a family literacy program at its community center or local library that encourages parents to read to their infants and young children. Many communities that already offer this kind of program give young children a new book when they attend a reading program with their parent(s).

Community leaders also should remember that families not only gain from activities that directly benefit them, but also from opportunities to serve others. Encouraging participation of people of all ages in service programs (e.g., adult literacy, Meals on Wheels) is another way to enhance family involvement in the community and strengthen families.



How Can Communities Use Public Awareness Efforts to Enhance Aid and Support to Families?

Many recent early child care and education reports recommend developing public awareness campaigns to provide accurate information about how children learn and the ways that parents, early childhood professionals, and communities can support children's optimal growth and development. Public awareness can be strengthened through news reports, media conferences, interviews with public officials or child development experts, and other activities carried in local newspapers and on radio and television. Such campaigns can reach families as they enlist the participation of other institutions that families trust such as faith-based communities and schools.

Public awareness campaigns also can be developed to educate parents, child care providers, public officials, employers, faith-based organizations, and interested citizens about the importance of early child care services, and to describe what high-quality services look like. For example, Nebraska's *Early Childhood Quality Matters* campaign stresses the urgency to improve the quality of early childhood care and education and shows that "high-quality care is linked to well-prepared early childhood professionals trained in child development."³⁷

In addition to the educational value of a public awareness campaign about the importance of children's early years, this increased awareness "can lead to mobilization of public and private resources for the significant, sustained community investment required to finance the true cost of quality care."³⁸

How Can Children's Health and Safety Be Strengthened Through Community Efforts?

Very young children need health, dental, and developmental screening and follow-up services, and immunizations from dangerous viruses to ensure their healthy development. They must be adequately nourished before and after birth. And they must be protected from exposure to environmental toxins (e.g., lead, pesticides, poisons), drugs, alcohol, diseases, and other hazardous substances. There are a number of strategies described below that communities can follow to see that children get the services they need. In addition, communities should improve children's health outcomes even *before* they are born by encouraging new and prospective mothers to get prenatal and postnatal care. Maternal malnutrition, diseases (e.g., rubella, HIV), alcohol and drug use, and chronic stress can seriously affect the brain development of a fetus.³⁹

Research on brain development has shown that environmental toxins, malnutrition, and maternal use of drugs or alcohol can lead to children having learning problems. For example, some children who have attention and learning difficulties may have been exposed prenatally to drugs, alcohol, chronic maternal stress, or other problems.

Here are a few suggestions to guide communities in the area of health and safety.

- *Encourage the development of home-visiting services where home visitors meet with first-time mothers and their newborns at home and provide them with or link them to needed health and support services.* Also seriously

consider home visiting programs for expectant mothers. Voluntary home visiting services offered to all new parents is a non-stigmatizing way to provide support to families. Healthy Families America is one established home visiting initiative that could be considered.

- *Develop programs to provide supplemental nourishment to children and their families who are poor. An inadequate diet in a child's early years can have life-long consequences for brain functioning.*
- *Strengthen public health programs, and find ways to link children and their families to available health services provided by schools, physicians, clinics, and social service agencies. Encourage new mothers to seek prenatal and postnatal checkups, as well as immunizations and regular health care for their children. Discover why some families do not obtain these services and strive to remove these barriers to access. Publicize the availability of services through schools, faith-based communities, and other community institutions.*
- *Encourage and support initiatives that promote environmental and child safety in children's homes, child-care settings, playgrounds, schools (including after-school programs), and other places where children congregate. For example, communities could develop programs designed to rid residential areas of lead-based paint and other environmental hazards. Accidents are the leading cause death of young children.*
- *Strengthen neighborhood support and community pride for families through seed funds to support neighborhood beautification projects and community policing activities (e.g., Neighborhood Watch) that make neighborhoods safe for young children.*

What Comes Next?

The strategies and suggestions that have been described in this section are only a few of the many things that communities can use to develop a network of support to families with young children. The possibilities are limited only by the amount of creativity, resources, and effort that community members are willing to put forth.

The next section will provide an example of a community that is using the Healthy Families America model to build a supportive community for families with young children. The final section the booklet outlines some steps that communities can take to begin developing their own initiative to help children and their families.

How One Community Is Putting It All Together To Support Families

Efforts of a fast-growing, suburban community in the upstate of South Carolina to combine the elements of good quality early childhood services with the principles of family support exemplify how a community can develop an environment that supports families. Throughout the following example, one can see how this community built upon existing resources and strengths to develop an even stronger, more comprehensive formal and informal support network for children and families.

Some Background

In 1992, community leaders and health and human service providers in the Golden Strip (southern Greenville county and northern Laurens county) community of South Carolina recognized the need for more health and social services so residents could get assistance locally without having to travel to the city of Greenville. Community leaders and public and private service providers (e.g., Golden Strip Emergency Relief and Resources Agency, Department of Social Ser-

vices, Greenville County Health Department, Golden Strip Literacy Partnership, Piedmont Mental Health Center) worked together to create the Golden Strip Family and Child Development Center, a family resource center that began operating in May 1997. The center, located in an old elementary school, provides a wide variety of on-site services (e.g., health, counseling, emergency relief, comprehensive early childhood programs) to the Golden Strip community.

Recently, Prevent Child Abuse South Carolina approached leaders in the Golden Strip community about applying to become a pilot site for a Healthy Families America (HFA) demonstration initiative being funded in South Carolina. HFA, a national strength-based model developed in the early 1990s, is aimed at preventing child maltreatment by providing voluntary early childhood home visitation to *all* new parents. Over the years, however, limited resources have often led communities using this model to limit services to families at greater risk for serious parenting problems.

Prevent Child Abuse South Carolina's five-site demonstration project (funded primarily through a 3-year, \$5 million contract with the SC Department of Social Services) plans to use the Healthy Families America model as it was originally intended: as a universal, voluntary home visitation and family support program for families with young children. The HFSC initia-



tive also receives support from the SC Department of Health and Environmental Control (DHEC), the Duke Endowment, the Sisters of Charity Foundation of South Carolina, and the Self Family Foundation. Clemson University's Southeastern Center for Family Support and Parent Leadership, through a contract with the SC Department of Health and Human Services, will provide technical assistance to HFSC and evaluate the demonstration project. DHEC is integrating its postpartum home visitation and family support programs with the HFSC program in the pilot communities.

The HFSC demonstration project seeks to create a community-wide system of prevention by bringing together existing programs in a community and by filling in any gaps in the service network. Thus, this new community network will be able to offer a wide variety of services of varying intensities in a non-stigmatizing and useful way that supports all families wherever and whenever they need help. HFA is designed to improve individual parent-child relationships as well enhance the community system of support for families.

"We know that home visiting is a core component of services necessary for new parents, but we also know that it can't stand alone," says Beebe James, PCASC director. Families need a variety of services, which is why Healthy Families seeks to build on existing services, connect families with services already available within a community, and work collaboratively with community leaders and service providers to develop new services when necessary, she says.

"HFA provides a structure and program design based on 12 critical elements, but it leaves a lot of flexibility to communities to develop home visiting in the most appropriate way to that community," Ms. James says.

In keeping with the Healthy Families model, all families will be linked to a medical provider to assure optimal health and development (e.g., timely immunizations, well-child care). Additionally, home visitors may link families, based on need, to other services such as food, housing assistance, financial assistance, school readiness programs, child care, job training programs, family support services, and substance abuse treatment programs. Many of these services are already available at the Golden Strip Center.

Golden Strip Joins the Demonstration Project

Just as community leaders came together to form the Golden Strip Family and Child Development Center, they decided that they should apply to PCASC to become an HFA demonstration site. Recognizing that the Center would be a good place to base this initiative, they approached Center Director Linda Smith about managing it.

The Golden Strip community was chosen as a pilot site. Those involved formed an advisory board that included representatives from the school district, health department, social services department, and the hospital system. The group decided to initiate HFA services at birth rather than prenatally, because prenatal services are already offered through the health department. (The Healthy Families America model lets communities choose whether they would like to initiate services at birth or prenatally.) The board appointed a working task force and named the Golden Strip Center as the fiscal agent.

Integrating the HFA Model into the Golden Strip Community

In keeping with the HFA model, the task force looked for ways to integrate the Healthy Families initiative into the Golden Strip community. They worked with representatives of existing home visiting programs in the school district (Parents as Teachers program) and health department (pre- and post-natal home visits to all new mothers) to enhance and expand services rather than duplicate them. As fiscal agent for the HFA project, the Golden Strip Center subcontracted with the local school district to hire and share supervision of the new home visitors added under the HFA demonstration project. The school district trained the new home visitors in both the Parents as Teachers and HFA home visiting models, and it trained existing school district PAT home visitors in the HFA model. Through this cross-training, home visitors are able to provide families with the service elements of both PAT and HFA.

In addition, Ms. Smith worked with the area health department supervisor to arrange for PAT/HFA home visitors to accompany the health department's home visitors when they do their postnatal home visits. This provides a good opportunity to introduce HFA home visitors to new mothers in the area.

The HFA model seeks to integrate existing home visitation programs in a community so all home visitors get the same training and can provide the same kind of support. That way, more home visitors are available to help more families, and they can offer a broader variety of support services.

"We've had good pieces of parent support, but we have not had all the pieces and levels of support that we would like. Healthy Families offers an opportunity to really pull things together and build on resources already in our community," says Ms. Smith.



"In an ideal situation, we would have an array of supports available to any new mother at whatever level of intensity that they needed," she adds. This range of supports could be anything from a community volunteer sending parents a card periodically to say that they're being thought of to a home visitor seeing a family once or twice a week.

Just Beginning

After months of planning, the Healthy Families America initiative at the Golden Strip recently got underway. Home visitors through the PAT program will visit all new parents briefly before they leave the hospital and provide them with some brochures or fact sheets that they might find helpful, such as information about breast feeding or what to

expect during those first few weeks with their new baby. The home visitor also will try to find out whether the family has a relative or friend who will be available to help them when they get home with their newborn. Once the parent(s) and new baby are home from the hospital, the home visitor will follow up with a visit or phone call to let them know that he or she is available to help, if needed. When families want help, the home visitor will assess what kinds of support and assistance the family needs and also how frequently the family should be visited (e.g., once or twice a week, once every two weeks). Based on their needs, families can receive home visits for up to 5 years through the HFA model.

“The biggest thing about Healthy Families America that makes it different from other programs is that it is a family support service. The primary mindset of the HFA model is building a supportive relationship with the family or the mother so they come to see the home visitor as a friend, a neighbor, somebody they trust and to whom they can express their joys and their sorrow, their concerns and their questions,” says Dottie Campbell, a research associate of the Institute on Family and Neighborhood life who served as interim project coordinator of the South Carolina HFA initiative.

“Until you build that strong trust, you’re really not going to get at what the family needs most and what resources are really there for them because they won’t open up and tell you. This doesn’t happen quickly. It happens over time,” she adds.

Building Relationships and Encouraging Reciprocity

Developing strong, trusting relationships is also important among service providers, community leaders, civic and faith-based institutions, and community members. As these groups work together toward a common goal of supporting families, they begin to collaborate and integrate their services in new and creative ways to the betterment of all the community’s citizens.

“Getting relationships built and people talking, concerned about, and interested in the same thing by virtue of them relating to each other more and more frequently and in new ways creates an enormous amount of synergy,” Ms. Campbell says.

This synergy is evident in the Golden Strip community. Many service providers, area churches, civic groups, and community leaders in the Golden Strip community were involved in the efforts to create and now maintain and enhance the Golden Strip Family and Child Development Center. The relationships they have built over the years have made it easier for them to embrace the Healthy Families initiative as they work to create even better ways to support families in their community.

Those who devised the HFA model intended that it foster the creation of a broad-based community development framework in which all citizens, over time, begin to look out for their neighbors and extend help and support to them naturally, just as neighbors often did years ago when strong neighborhoods were the norm.

“In this sense, families may well get the assistance they need without asking or without identifying what takes place as a helping experience. Such activity strengthens the social fabric of the community and leads to increased attachment to the community, higher levels of reciprocal neighboring, greater cohesion, and



increased neighborly action for the benefit of the community as a whole,⁴⁰ says James McDonell, director of the Southeastern Center for Family Support and Parent Leadership, which is evaluating and providing technical assistance to South Carolina's HFA initiative.

In keeping with the view that HFA is intended to be a *community* initiative, other organizations around the state have become partners in implementing the program in a variety of settings.⁴¹ The diverse auspices of the various HFSC sites include: Healthy Start (Allendale); Success by 6® (United Way of Beaufort County); a school-related family resource Center (Golden Strip); a pediatric clinic and community center (Greenwood Children's Center) in Greenwood; and a child abuse prevention program (Prevent Child Abuse SC's Midlands program) in Lower Richland. The development of a collaborative with critical components can be done with various kinds of leadership. In all instances, all players contribute and change.

Leaders in the Golden Strip community, as well as those evaluating the Healthy Families America initiative in South Carolina, will be watching closely over the next few years to see if HFA enhances development of community support, improves child and family outcomes, and ultimately makes a difference in community life.

Mobilizing The Community: How To Get Started

The final section of this booklet focuses on how communities can begin to create effective formal and informal support systems that promote healthy development of young children and their families. The high-quality early childhood initiatives highlighted in the first section of this booklet all involved major community mobilization efforts. This section summarizes some of the key actions that community leaders must undertake to be successful with such efforts.

These initiatives are not simply about developing another program or service package, but rather require a major commitment of many different leaders from all sectors of the community. Such efforts involve learning to get organized, to collaborate, to discover and share resources, to link organizations, and, in some cases, to create new ones. They involve inter-agency cooperation and communication, and they require greater communication and conversation with community residents than is typical. They call for communities to engage a wide variety of people, including children, to assess the present; envision a future, improved situation; and work strenuously and thoughtfully to implement new ways to relate to and support one another.

Because so much information is available about the community-building processes, this booklet provides only a brief description of the principles necessary for sustained community action. The section summarizes the guidelines found else-



where in this booklet that promote a certain kind of orientation to community mobilization. In addition, this section highlights the major phases of work needed to mobilize sustainable community action. Communities interested in knowing more should review the works listed in the endnotes accompanying this section.

An Orientation to Mobilization

In many communities a growing sense of collective accountability and responsibility is present. Civic culture is changing in many places. The most dynamic examples demonstrate that when residents focus their conversation on what they can do collectively for their children as well as themselves, people get involved and things happen. From the hundreds of communities in America that have mobilized around the theme of creating supportive communities for families with young children, several key community-building guidelines have emerged.

- *Use broad definitions of community, health, development, and family.* Discuss what factors contribute to overall quality of life and normal growth and development of children.⁴²
- *Create a shared vision from the community's values.* Visions that reflect the core values of its residents are both powerful and inspiring and compel people to action.⁴³
- *Address quality of life for everyone.* Even if families with young children are the primary focus, strive to provide the basic emotional, physical, and spiritual needs of all family members in the community.⁴⁴ For example, families with young children often struggle to support aging parents and siblings.
- *Build diverse citizen participation and community ownership in the process.* When visions and plans are developed and understood by community members, they are more apt to be sustained financially. More people will be available to make things happen. Residents need to be invited to participate actively and have ongoing responsibility for themselves, their family, their property, and their community.⁴⁵ Successful community leaders constantly strive for strong civic participation so that decisions are owned by all and the community feels empowered to influence both what is done and how it done. For example, young mothers engaged in the Healthy Families SC efforts need to be involved in developing that initiative.
- *Focus on systems change.* Changing a system requires thinking and acting systemically. For example, think about what changes might be needed in the ways that people connect with and work with each other. Look systemically at the way formal and informal support is provided, information is shared, public and private services are operated, and business is conducted. Systemic change is about looking at current community connections and building new connections that support families with young children.
- *Build capacity using local assets and resources.* Look at what the community has going for it relative to supporting families with young children

and the conditions necessary for normal growth and development to occur. Build endeavors by enhancing what already exists.⁴⁶

- *Benchmark and measure progress and outcomes.*⁴⁷ Develop performance measures and community indicators about the safety and development of children, youth, and families⁴⁸ and inform residents of the results. Be accountable by engaging in evaluation and reporting results. Timely, accurate information is very important to sustain action, leverage resources, and recognize when to head in another direction.

These guidelines now appear in many publications. They are principles that help orient the way one should think and act when building communities that support families with young children. Each guideline can be turned into a question that participants in the process can ask themselves. Are we asset-oriented? Are we accountable? Are we directed toward outcomes and results? Are we visionary? Are we action-oriented? Are we practicing diversity in thought regarding whom we include, and do we allow for various kinds of improvements along the way? Are we thinking and acting systemically? Are we thinking ecologically in terms of child growth and development? Are we promoting participation and democracy?

Learn to Lead, Learn, and Communicate

What follows is a very brief summary of what has worked in many communities across America that are striving to create supportive community environments for children and families.⁴⁹ Although most communities would like a cookbook with step-by-step instructions for creating the kinds of changes featured in this booklet, experienced community leaders know that there is not just *one* way to mobilize communities for effective action. However, there are some key phases of community action that should occur. And for community leaders guiding the development, implementation, and evaluation of a community effort, there are three leadership actions that must happen repeatedly and continuously.

First, sustained leadership, an active learning orientation, and effective ongoing communication are necessary. Successful community building involves the art of developing effective partnerships among diverse people in a community to set directions. Build a critical mass of people to create long-term change. *Success By 6*[®] efforts are a good example of effective partnership building. When effective community leaders lead, they are committed to building relationships of trust and caring and aligning shared resources with community values. They share a commitment to targeted goals.

Secondly, community leaders and members need to learn how to learn together. In order to improve, the community must learn to reflect continuously on its actions. Measurement and evaluation should be a part of individual and group actions, and they should be seen as learning tools. Becoming a learning community is a commitment to mutual accountability for positive outcomes for children and youth and all participants. Learning together becomes the springboard to lasting change and renewal.

The third sustained action necessary is communicating meaningfully and routinely with community residents. The continual practice of meaningful community dialogue



means developing authentic conversations that frame and ground issues, discover assets, promote critical thinking, allow and incorporate diversity of thought, and allow expressions of what being a community that cares about children and families really means. Visions and action plans are only meaningful to those involved in creating them, because it is through conversation that social understanding is created. Those left out of the initial development must be brought in through conversation until the groups' meaning becomes their meaning. To secure sustained community improvements, visions and actions must be promoted constantly. Community cohesion cannot happen without community conversation: It involves communicating often, boldly, and with compassion.

Phases of Community Work

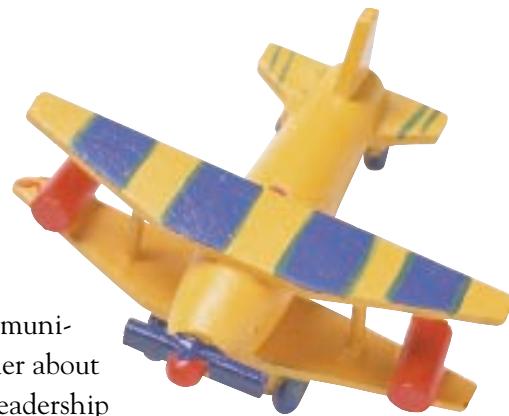
Again, there is not one approach to community mobilization that fits all situations. While leading, communicating, and learning continuously, these leadership functions focus on different phases of work over time. Six major phases of work are involved in mobilizing a community to support families with young children. All of the initiatives highlighted at the beginning of this booklet used these phases, but did not use them in the same order or employ the same techniques to engage people in planning and implementation efforts. These phases are presented as if one follows another, but in practice these phases can go on together, one by one, one before another, and repetitively.

One phase involves *assessing a community's readiness for action*. It involves assessing and engaging the individuals and organizational resources required to act wisely. Getting all the people on board who are needed early on in community change efforts makes all the difference in what is done, how it is done, and how effective the results are relative to the costs involved. For example, it took a group of community leaders from throughout South Carolina more than a year to do all that was necessary to begin the Healthy Families SC initiative. A state leadership team was formed. Each agency leader had to assess readiness, roles, commitments, and responsibilities. Finances had to be secured in addition to those that were available to start the effort, and a general plan of leadership action had to be established.

A second phase of action involves *energizing leaders to take action*. As the core leadership gets underway, new leaders will be found as the effort becomes more broadly based. Leaders may need to learn new skills about how to collaborate and lead people through change processes. Because any given community change effort is, in many ways, something that has never happened before, leaders will need time to think it through and figure out the best ways to support each other. A plan must be created that addresses how to engage significant leaders and as many residents as possible. For example, the five communities involved in the Healthy Families SC initiative have spent many hours talking together as they have organized themselves



into a leadership team. The state team is organizing themselves at the same time that they are trying to support each community team's organizing efforts. Each community team is experiencing different challenges, and the state team has to learn to address them. One community's efforts are beginning to inform other communities involved. Everyone is learning together about what needs to be done and how. As one leadership group finds an effective way, others are energized by it, and ultimately the whole initiative moves forward. It is not an "I know, you don't know" orientation, but rather a "together we will figure this out and move forward" process. The former is demoralizing, the later orientation is energizing.



A third phase of action involves *defining activities that will bring early wins*. Roles and responsibilities of groups and people must be clarified. Initiatives that can be achieved within a year or two need to be identified, while also keeping in mind the longer-term civic infrastructure development that is needed. Local people who have the needed content background (e.g., those who know child and adolescent development; people who can help evaluate efforts) should be involved. Locate people who know how to handle conflict so that diverse thought is handled and incorporated appropriately during community discussions and planning sessions. Find people who can effectively lead conversations about how to build the support structures and resources necessary to accomplish identified action plans. Identify people who can develop achievable action plans that are based on people's visions and sense of child growth and development outcomes. These are the kind of people who can take ideas and make them happen because they are gifted in making things concrete so that others can get involved and understand what to do.

A fourth phase is *energizing community members* to become involved by providing learning experiences and building skills and relationships. Doing this enables people who "own" certain issues to act on the ones that mean the most to them. For example, some people will be interested in improving play areas for children that have become unsafe while others will be more interested in forming after-school study centers that help children with their home work and offer supervised recreational activities. Find ways to involve everyone meaningfully in producing the changes envisioned. Continually equip citizens for meaningful, wise action by providing discussion about effective practices. Bring in other community groups to mentor residents. Provide many tools and examples of what might be done and why.

A fifth community mobilization phase involves *clearly setting the direction for change*. A rich array of information should be gathered and presented to community members in ways that help them understand how to support families with young children. Integrate many forms of information and link it to committed leadership and specific action steps. Actions need to be informed actions.

A sixth phase of work involves *implementing the change desired*. Define pathways of improvement (often called "projects, strategies, action plans"). Community-wide efforts often have several pathways, with community members organized into

task groups around their interests. Refine, enhance, and sustain initiatives by constantly reminding people what the group envisioned as positive outcomes for children, families, and in the community. Continuously remind those involved about the processes chosen to get to envisioned outcomes. Avoid spectators (i.e., community members who watch others do all the work). Interested community members should have meaningful tasks to do. Clearly link tasks to the actions and outcomes sought in the written plan of action. Sustained community action includes developing leadership capacities in community members and allocating necessary resources. Efforts may involve making policies that enforce and promote desired changes.

In addition, participants must learn to think systemically about the connections among people and organizations and the flow of resources needed to enhance those connections. Figure out how those human connections can behave in ways that produce the desired results of supporting families with young children. Periodically rethink and restructure community organizations and collaboratives so that results are obtained. Lots of activity goes on during the implementation phase of community initiatives such as those described at the beginning of this booklet. The actions listed here are just a few of the major kinds of efforts done by community groups.

As community leaders learn to communicate constantly, orient their actions around proven guidelines of community practice, and lead citizens through the work phases outlined in this section, the community will mount significant, sustainable initiatives that support families with young children.

Conclusion

Today's children are tomorrow's parents, workers, leaders, and citizens. The future of our nation will be determined by the work they do, the relationships they build, the knowledge they create, and the decisions they make as adults. Although parents have the primary responsibility for rearing their children, the community has a responsibility to assure that all children have a good beginning.

As noted early childhood researcher and psychologist Edward Zigler says, "Everything that happens in a community that affects parents affects children in some way."⁵⁰ Because of this, wise communities invest in strengthening families and the children in those families. The initiatives and approaches described in this booklet provide compelling evidence that such efforts are well justified by the benefits they provide.

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43. For examples of shared visions and common values that communities have created see the following websites. More than 600 communities throughout the U.S. have such statements that are guiding significant community action. See Georgia's example (Georgia Policy Council's Benchmark Initiative at <http://www.gpc-fc.org/>); Oregon's example (Oregon Shines Project at <http://www.econ.state.or.us/opb>); Minnesota's example (Minnesota Milestones at <http://www.mnplan.state.mn.us/press/mm-92.html>); Dallas' example (Greater Dallas Healthy Community at <http://www.thedallasplan.com/home.html>); and Kansas City's example (Benchmarks for Children at <http://www.pfc.org>).
44. See Jacksonville's and Pasadena's quality of life indexes for two examples that many communities have followed to begin to define their own sense of quality of life and what community conditions constitute quality of life (<http://www.jcci.org/> and City of Pasadena, Public Health Department, 100 North Garfield Avenue, Room 136, Pasadena, CA 91109).
45. See *Building Communities That Strengthen Families* published through the National Urban Civic League. It is a free pamphlet that can be passed out at community meetings (<http://www.ncl.org/ncl>).
46. See the rich array of resources on this principle from the Asset-Based Community Development Center at Northwestern University (<http://www.nwu.edu/PR/abcd.html>).
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around the world. Many of these have an emphasis of children and youth well-being, health, civic participation, education, ethical and civil norms, measures of family life. See in particular Issue 17, Spring 2000 edition *Guide to community indicators: Projects on the Web*. Order from Urban Quality Communication, 1816 Pontiac Trail, Ann Arbor, MI 48105.

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