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Caregivers of Young Children: Preventing and Responding to Child Maltreatment

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Supporting Parents and Preventing Child Maltreatment

Early childhood agencies providing care for young children and supporting their families are in an excellent position to prevent child abuse and neglect. All families benefit from time away from their children; however, for some parents, time away from their children is essential to their ability to function as good parents. Without this respite, they are not able to cope with their child-rearing responsibilities.

For many families, early childhood programs are their only links to the community from the time the child is born until he/she begins school. Programs can provide support to parents to reduce their isolation and help them to develop effective parenting skills. It is not unusual for parents of young children to seek advice about common problems in child rearing, and early childhood programs are a nonthreatening source of such information. Because teachers, caregivers, and providers already are well known to parents and are accepted authorities on child rearing, early childhood programs can play a vital role in improving the quality of parental care and preventing child maltreatment.

Providing Ongoing Support for Parents

Recent studies have shown that the most effective early childhood programs are those that actively promote and encourage the involvement of families. Early childhood education programs serve as an extended support system for families just as friends and relatives might have in the past. No matter how much time children spend in

child care, their parents are still the most important people in their lives. Supportive relationships with parents enable staff to be more responsive to children's needs and increase parents' abilities to care for their children. Strong partnerships between parents and caregiving professionals should be based on trust, respect, and the understanding that the child's development will be enhanced when all the adults who care for the child work together. Supportive services can help parents feel more competent and relieve some of the stresses that accompany parenthood. When parents feel less stress, they are more likely to interact positively with their children and less likely to take out their frustrations on their children. Specific ways that early childhood education programs can support parents are discussed below.

Developing Positive Relationships With Parents

Early childhood education professionals can show warmth, friendliness, and concern and listen to parents' feelings and thoughts, without making judgments. They can demonstrate respect for parents' views, even when they do not agree with them, and help them to feel competent in their parenting roles. When parents learn to trust caregiving professionals, they will come to them for advice and support during difficult times.

Being Alert to Signs of Stress in Parents

When a family is under stress, the parents may seem disorganized and frequently forget important items, such as diapers or bottles of formula. A parent might seem frustrated when a child is slow to get ready to go home or state that he/she doesn't know how to handle the child's independent behavior. Parents under stress might be unwilling to accept help or more interested in talking about their own problems than their child's. When early childhood education professionals notice these signs of stress, they can discuss them with parents and, if appropriate, refer them to community resources where they can get the assistance they need to learn how to balance their parenting and other responsibilities.

Providing Opportunities for Parents To Become Involved

Many parents of young children are isolated and have little time to establish relationships with other adults. Becoming involved with the program's activities can provide a social network and allow parents to feel connected, thus reducing the isolation that might otherwise lead to child abuse and neglect. Program staff can offer activities such as potluck dinners or parent discussion groups where parents can get to know each other, share similar concerns, and learn techniques that others use to manage their lives.

Communicating Regularly With Parents Concerning Children's Progress

Parents and early childhood education professionals have different perspectives about the child based on how the child behaves at

home or at the program. Combining their knowledge about a child gives both adults a total picture of the child and helps them better meet the child's needs. For example, letting a parent know that a teething infant has been cranky all day allows the caregiver to discuss ways to help ease the infant's pain and prepares the parent for the difficult evening ahead. Because the parent knows why the infant is crying, he/she is less likely to be frustrated or angered by the crying and more likely to provide the comfort the child needs.

Providing Parent Education

Parent education includes both group classes and spontaneous conversations between parents and teachers, caregivers, and providers. It addresses topics such as appropriate ways to guide children's behavior, stages of child growth and development, and the role of play in facilitating children's learning. Parents often look to early childhood education professionals for solutions to common childhood behavior problems such as tantrums, biting, bedwetting, and resistance to toilet training. Caregiving professionals are usually able to help parents develop plans to help children change this behavior. Many times, parents who abuse or neglect their children or have the potential to maltreat their children do not know much about child development or parenting. Because these parents have inappropriate expectations for their children's behavior, they may lash out at the children rather than help them learn appropriate behavior. Parent education can help parents understand their children's behavior and learn ways to help children learn self-discipline. If an early childhood education agency does not offer its own parent education programs, staff can refer parents to programs in the community.

Modeling Developmentally Appropriate Practices

During dropoff and pickup times and longer visits during the day, early childhood education professionals, without any extra effort or planning, model for parents what are developmentally appropriate ways to meet children's needs. Parents might see a caregiver encouraging a toddler to help put away the blocks, taking the time to talk and laugh with an infant as she diapers him, or asking a preschooler a question about his painting: "Tell me how you made these long, squiggly lines." The parent might comment: "I can't get her to put her toys away at home," "She squirms around so much at home I just want to get the diaper changed as quickly as possible," or "All his paintings look the same to me." The caregiver can use these parent comments to open a conversation about why they encouraged the toddler's self-help skills, took advantage of the diapering routine to communicate with the infant, or supported the preschooler's creativity by asking about his painting. Caregiving professionals demonstrate positive ways of working with children that can help parents improve their interactions with their children.

Providing Information About Community Resources

In addition to problems directly related to raising their children, parents may face problems that the early childhood program cannot

address. It is unrealistic to expect that early childhood programs can handle all of the problems faced by today's parents. For example, parents might complain to staff about problems communicating with their spouses or establishing credit so they can buy a much-needed car. While these problems can have an effect on the child's well-being, clearly the agency cannot provide direct assistance with these concerns. It can, however, provide information about other community agencies that will provide the needed assistance. The agency can maintain a bulletin board listing events and services available in the community, and staff can establish personal contacts with individuals at other agencies.

Special Issues in Supporting Families Experiencing Child Abuse and Neglect

All of the activities described above will support abusive and neglectful parents. Additionally, parents need opportunities to become involved in their child's daily activities; to learn about child development, appropriate expectations, and positive guidance techniques; and to focus on the future. Early childhood education agencies can provide support in various ways.

- **Schedule more frequent conferences** to discuss the child's progress in the program. These are opportunities to give parents feedback, share information about the child's home and program activities, and assess the need for referrals to other agencies. If referrals are needed, staff can provide the information during the conference. Conferences also are opportunities for parents to communicate with staff about their problems and their own progress, which can help parents feel less isolated.
- **Conduct home visits** to see the child's home environment firsthand and possibly avert potential problems. Home visits give parents a sense of the program's concern for them and their child. Early childhood education professionals may be the only individuals who visit the parents in their home; parents may perceive them as helpful and nonthreatening.
- **Focus on the future in discussions with parents** and how the program can help counteract the effects caused by a child's developmental lags. When parents are included in discussions about the child's future, they are often relieved to be able to contribute to meeting the child's needs.
- **Help parents experience success by averting potential problems.** When caregiving professionals observe that a parent appears to be getting upset, they can step in to help. "Let me help you find that mitten. It must have dropped on the floor."
- **Help parents get to know their children by telling them what good things have taken place during the day.** "Sammy tried a new vegetable today, green beans. And I think he liked them."

- **Set up a parent library** with guidance materials for parents to borrow.

The most important way early childhood education professionals support families experiencing child maltreatment is by providing a safe and caring place for the child while the parents learn nonabusive ways of coping with their problems. Most of these parents are capable of learning new ways to handle their lives, and time away from their parenting responsibilities is time they can use to plan for a better future.

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