Best Practices for Social Support Programs

FIVE CORE ELEMENTS OF SOCIAL SUPPORT

- **Reciprocity, Mutual Support, Exchange**
  Group activities must allow participants to both give and receive support. Mutual benefit is required for social support to be strengthened.

- **Genuine Acceptance & Trust**
  Parents must have the opportunity to create long-term, positive social connections that allow for the cultivation of mutual trust and respect.

- **Emotional Nourishment**
  Allowing parents to connect through empathy and shared experiences helps build a sense of belonging and relief, as parents realize their parenting and family challenges are more common than they knew.

- **Skill Building & Acquisition**
  Teaching a skill (such as positive parenting) allows parents to learn and practice strategies and techniques—and to discuss difficulties—in a safe environment.

- **Social Monitoring & Social Control**
  Defining norms and values assures clear and comfortable boundaries in a group. Participants must feel safe and non-judged in order to share their experiences.

What is social support?

Social support can be thought of as social connections. These are the relationships a family has within the community that they can rely on. They can include family members, friends, neighbors and community members who can provide emotional help and support - people to whom the family can go to for advice, for assistance, or for a sense of belonging. This support network in turn can provide parents the opportunity to "give back" to their fellow parents, which can bolster their self-esteem and also benefit the community.

Increasing caregivers' knowledge of appropriate strategies that are aligned with their child's abilities and temperament—replacing punitive and harsh discipline with positive parenting practices—helps parents feel prepared for challenges of parenting and helps establish norms for the family that ideally have a positive impact on the child's development and strengthen caregiver-child attachment, an indicator of healthy parenting.

Programs Proven Effective at Increasing Social Support

I. Home Visiting Programs

There are four types of models for working with families in their homes: educational, medical, nursing and social service. These programs are becoming increasingly common in child maltreatment prevention, and are often delivered as part of a continuum of services to at-risk families.

Home visiting programs are especially helpful in cultivating social support when they involve a group component. This allows participants to meet other similarly situated families who can call on one another for emotional support. It may also reduce feelings of isolation and parental incompetence. Two home visiting programs that include a group component are *Parents as Teachers* (PAT) and the *Early Head Start* (EHS) home visiting program.

In order to be truly effective at increasing social support, the program should adhere to the stated purpose and design of the model, with regularly scheduled meetings that are convenient for families. The program must also consider the family as a whole, taking into account the multiple competing priorities of the families, as well as the strengths and interests of each member. By considering each family's strengths and interests within the context of community, these programs can help parents develop better child-rearing skills, nurture personal and community connections, and build on the family's existing abilities and other protective factors.

II. Parent Education & Support: Group Based Programs

These group sessions are usually centered on a curriculum covering a variety of parenting skills, such as positive parenting techniques, child development, and positive discipline. These programs may stand on their own and be implemented in a specific setting (for example, a school, community center, or church), or they may be a targeted group activity within a broader program (such as a parent socialization event taking place within an Early Head Start program).

The more sessions a participant is involved in, the greater the gains in parenting practices. Further, groups that are supplemented with individual sessions yielded greater results in positive attitudes toward child-rearing than programs using only a group format.

Consider the following examples of effective, evidence-based programs whose planned group meetings have been shown to increase social support and improve parenting practices among participants: *Families and Schools Together* (FAST), *Schools and Families Educating Children* (SAFE), and *Triple P Positive Parenting Program*. Links to more information and resources on evidence-based social support programs are provided on the following page.

To effectively address the social support protective factor for families, programs must include a group component.

III. Mutual Self-Help Parent Support Groups

Mutual self-help support groups are parent-centered groups designed to help caregivers connect with peers in a safe, supportive setting. These groups allow parents to gather and discuss ideas, and share parenting skills, solutions and strategies with their peers. They are a convenient, cost-effective addition to community-based prevention programs (including home visiting) because they can be combined with existing efforts and can be customized or modified to suit the population and needs of the targeted community. Two models in particular have gained national attention for their parent-guided, support group formats: Circle of Parents and Parents Anonymous®.

These groups are regularly scheduled, led by a trained facilitator and open to any parents who wish to be involved. Circle of Parents uses a shared-leadership philosophy, encouraging parents to take responsibility and become capable leaders in the group. Parents Anonymous® promotes a strengths-based approach to working with families, allowing regular participants to address personal issues and make lasting changes in their families - supporting one another and building on existing strengths in sessions co-facilitated by a parent leader and a trained facilitator. Social support factors were strengthened for participating parents, most significantly for participants with the lowest levels of social support at the outset.

Two Ways to Encourage Group Attendance

Provide Free Child Care or Schedule Child Groups at the Same Time

This allows for greater ease in parent attendance, and can increase the sense of community and support within the group.

Incentivize Group Participation

For example, parents can be given points for involvement in the group. These points may be redeemed later for a gift.

Protective Factors Domains

Family Functioning and Resiliency	Having adaptive skills and strategies to manage stress and persevere in times of crisis, with the ability to openly share positive and negative experiences and mobilize to accept and solve problems.
Social Emotional Support	Perceived informal support (from family, friends and neighbors) that helps provide for emotional needs.
Concrete Support	Perceived access to tangible goods and services to help families cope with stress, particularly in times of crisis or intensified need.
Child Development and Knowledge of Parenting	Understanding and utilizing effective child management techniques and having age-appropriate expectations for children's abilities.
Nurturing and Attachment	Having an emotional connection along with a pattern of positive interaction between the parent and child that develops over time.

Source: FRIENDS National Resource Center

Examples of Evidence-based Social Support Programs

Circle of Parents
http://www.circleofparents.org/
Parents Anonymous
http://parentsanonymous.org/
Triple P—Positive Parenting Program
http://www.triplep.net/glo-en/home/

Social Support Programs, such as those listed here, provide important information, knowledge, and resources to families with a range of needs and interests.

Please request a review of current literature, *Evidence-Based Practices for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect* by contacting Hornby Zeller Associates at ME@hornbyzeller.com for detailed descriptions of each program.

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