Social Support for Families Participating in Prevention Programs

A Research Review and Report provided for
Prevent Child Abuse Iowa

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Introduction

Numerous community-based programs share the goal of preventing child maltreatment. Likewise, many programs are designed to support families who are at risk of maltreatment or who are already involved with Child Protective Services. No single program or approach is suitable for all communities or all family types; rather, it is the continuum of support that contributes to healthy individual and family-level functioning.

According to Prevent Child Abuse America, prevention programs should "include supports during both pre- and postnatal periods to ease the difficulties associated with having a new infant" and work to partner with other providers to address specific conditions known to place young children at greater risk for adverse experiences (e.g., prenatally drug-exposed or drug-affected babies, low birth weight babies and babies born with serious illness or disabilities). Prevent Child Abuse America also recommends structuring support programs to consider the child within the context of his or her family and community systems, thereby appropriately matching resources to what is needed by the child or family in an accessible way.

To help understand the impact of prevention programs on supporting communities and building family strengths, providers often consider five specific protective factors when planning activities and environments. While there may be other elements or conditions worthy of study, it is these five factors that are backed by research, and thus have become areas of priority for the U.S. Administration for Children and Families. The table below, created by FRIENDS National Resource Center, provides a brief summary of the protective factors.

PROTECTIVE FACTORS DOMAINS	
Family Functioning and Resiliency	Having adaptive skills and strategies to persevere in times of crisis. Family's ability to openly share positive and negative experiences and mobilize to accept, solve and manage 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	The emotional tie along with a pattern of positive interaction between the parent and child that develops over time.

Iowa's Child Abuse Prevention Program (ICAPP) is examining the applicable research addressing parental social support, one of the protective factors addressed by community-based prevention efforts. The major objective of this white paper is to answer two questions about support provided by group-based parent education activities in child abuse prevention:

1. What social support efforts have been proven to be effective in parent education programs?

2. How can programs intentionally build positive social support for parents?

A second objective that relates to the question about program intentionality is to identify the specific characteristics of effective activities, programs, or curricula that improve social support for involved families. For instance, do incentive-based programs work? What elements of group activities or parent education actually help parents experience an increase in support or social validation? Also, what can group organizers or facilitators do to ensure a group's dynamics and activities are leading to an increase in participants' social support?

To answer these questions, this report reviews the literature focusing on two protective factors addressed through prevention programs. The research referenced here reflects the past 20 years of peer-reviewed and scholarly work and was accessed through academic and public library databases. In addition, specific programs and curricula were reviewed, including resources cited by developers and research and information that programs provided.

Three types of programming, each with a social support component, are addressed:

- Home visiting programs
- Parent education and support programs
- Mutual self-help parent support programs

Included here is a brief definition of social support and knowledge of parenting and child development, since, through the review of literature and resources available, it was common to find both of these protective factors addressed simultaneously. Most group-based parent education programs, however, have not been rigorously evaluated for their impact on social support explicitly, with the exception of two national models: Circle of Parents and Parents Anonymous®.

Individual-based home visitation curricula, on the other hand, have been widely studied and promoted through the focus of the 2010 federal Affordable Care Act (ACA) as a means to reduce child maltreatment (Avellar *et al.*, 2012; Barth, 2009; Howard & Brooks-Gunn, 2009). Though in order for home visiting to effectively improve social support, the models should include a group element (e.g., Parents as Teachers' Group Connections, Early Head Start's Socializations) that is part of the regularly-scheduled programming (Antonucci, Fuhrer & Jackson, 1990; Gay, 2005).
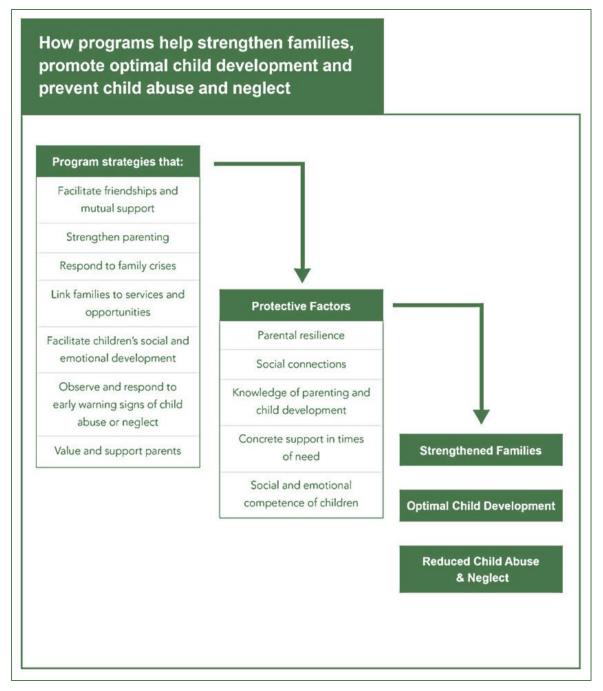
Defining Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development

It is common to find child abuse prevention programs that include a component that helps parents learn more about infant and child development along with guidance as to how to respond to typical and atypical behaviors. Increasing caregivers' knowledge of appropriate strategies that are aligned with their child's abilities and temperament 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.

The Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) further explains this protective factor under their framework, "Accurate information about child development and appropriate expectations for children's behavior at every age help parents see their children and youth in a positive light and promote their healthy development" (CSSP, 2012). This factor is closely related to nurturing and attachment, though it is not included in the CSSP model (shown in the diagram on the following page). Positive, nurturing relationships and caregiver-child attachment are often indicators of healthy parenting and knowledge of child development (FRIENDS, 2008).

Defining Social Support

The Center for the Study of Social Policy describes social support as *social connections* under its protective factors framework; it describes this concept as "friends, family members, neighbors and community members who provide emotional support, help solve problems, offer parenting advice and give concrete assistance to parents." Thompson further defines social support as, "social relationships that provide (or can potentially provide) material and interpersonal resources that are of value to the recipient, such as counseling, access to information and services, sharing of tasks and responsibilities, and skills acquisition" (Thompson, 1994). "Networks of support are essential to parents and also offer opportunities for people to 'give back,' an important part of self-esteem as well as a benefit for the community" (CSSP, 2012).

How programs help strengthen families, promote optimal child development and prevent child abuse and neglect

Program strategies that:

- Facilitate friendships and mutual support
- Strengthen parenting
- Respond to family crises
- Link families to services and opportunities
- Facilitate children's social and emotional development
- Observe and respond to early warning signs of child abuse or neglect
- Value and support parents

Protective Factors

- Parental resilience
- Social connections
- Knowledge of parenting and child development
- Concrete support in times of need
- Social and emotional competence of children

Strengthened Families

Optimal Child Development

Reduced Child Abuse & Neglect

© **Center for the Study of Social Policy's Strengthening Families Framework**

CSSP also states that these positive and supportive connections help buffer parents from stressors and "support nurturing parenting behaviors that promote secure attachments in young children."

[4]

The major objective of eliminating child abuse and neglect can be accomplished by offering support and services that promote nurturing and attachment between caregivers and their children and positive parenting practice in place of punitive and harsh discipline. When parents understand child development and what are known to be *typical* behaviors, they are more likely to respond in appropriate ways, aligning how they redirect or provide guidance with their child's development. This increased understanding, while bringing attention to the direct connection between the parenting approach and the child's response, contributes to lower rates of child maltreatment. With this premise, many intervention programs strive to address parenting practices by combining stress reduction and social support along with parent education, particularly for new parents (Barth, 2009; Falconer, 2006; Galano *et al*. 2007; Howard & Brooks-Gunn, 2009).

Research related to this protective factor tends to describe programs that strengthen parental social support in a structured and focused group setting, rather than an informal or spontaneous way. Being socially connected is a necessary condition to accessing and experiencing social support within the structured group setting (Gracia & Musitu 2003). Programs are encouraged to organize additional informal opportunities for social connections between participants.

Strengthening parental social support is, however, dependent on the presence and quality of five key elements, which will be discussed later in this report (Antonucci, Fuhrer & Jackson, 1990; Gay, 2005). In some program models, a combination of individual sessions and group meetings is effective, especially in situations where building social connections becomes the first, and most important, element in the parent development or training program, followed by working together as a group on building skills and modeling strategies that are practical for parents to apply outside of the group (FRIENDS, 2009; Horton, 2003).

Building off of a broader-scope 2012 review of literature addressing characteristics of effective, evidence-based programs designed to reduce maltreatment,[1] this report focuses on common elements of effective programs whose purpose is either to increase parental social support or combine social support while increasing parent development. Most of the programs discussed include a group component, simply by nature of the subject matter, though it is possible for social support to be increased indirectly via home-based services as well.

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[1] *Evidence-Based Practices for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect*. (2012). Produced by Hornby Zeller Associates, Inc. under contract with Prevent Child Abuse Iowa. Available at http://www.pcaiowa.org/grantees/icapp/forms/

Programs Proven to Promote Social Support

Home Visiting Programs

Home visiting is becoming one of the most recognized and widely researched type of prevention program. Though the majority of activities are carried out in the home through personal visits, home visiting services that include a group component can help to increase parental social support and reduce feelings of isolation and incompetence (FRIENDS, 2009; Horton, 2003). This type of program is commonly viewed as part of a continuum of services to families with young children, often partnering with or referring to other community programs to help meet the unique needs of families enrolled in home visiting.

Two examples of evidence-based models that include a group component are Early Head Start (EHS) and Parents as Teachers (PAT), though there are many others that can be found through the Administration for Children and Families' Home Visiting Evidence of Effectiveness program; please see http://homvee.acf.hhs.gov/.

The Parents as Teachers National Center and the Early Head Start Performance Standards express the importance of conducting regularly scheduled group meetings that are held at times and places convenient to families. In order to impact social support specifically, group functions must not deviate from their stated purpose or design as articulated in the manuals (or standards).Format modifications can, however, be made without compromising integrity.

In order for home visiting to be effective in increasing protective factors, services must be delivered with fidelity and integrity to the original design, whether the program follows a social service, educational, medical or nursing model. Further, all models must look at the family system and its multiple and competing needs, as few families or individuals have just one isolated issue to address. By considering each family's strengths and interests within the context of its community, a home visiting program can contribute to helping parents develop skills in child rearing, reducing isolation by nurturing personal connections, and building on the family's existing abilities and other protective factors (FRIENDS, 2007; Howard & Brooks-Gunn, 2009; PAT National Center, 2012).

Parent Education and Support: Group-Based Programs

Parent education and support programs concentrate the curricula on enhancing parenting practices and behaviors, such as developing and practicing positive discipline techniques, increasing knowledge of child development and typical milestones, promoting positive play and interaction between parents and children, and locating and accessing community services and supports.[2] These group programs may be programs

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[2] https://www.childwelfare.gov. Accessed June, 2014.

that stand on their own and are implemented in a particular setting, such as a school, community center, or church, or they may be group programs that are part of a larger program, such as parent socialization events that take place within an Early Head Start program.

According to a 2006 meta-analysis of parent training programs—including both those that used a group-based approach and those that worked with parents individually—training programs with a higher number of sessions were more effective in improving parenting practices. This meta-analysis also found that training delivered through a combination of group and individual sessions yielded more positive results in improving child-rearing attitudes than those that used one or the other exclusively (Lundahl, Nimer & Parsons, p.257). Note that these results pertain to the protective factor "knowledge of parenting and child development," which contributes to reduced maltreatment, a factor which sometimes overlaps with social support.

To provide a brief snapshot of the limited current research on programs promoting social support, we can name a few models that have published studies for reference. (Note that not all models are appropriate for universal use; in fact some programs listed here were designed for very specific populations that might not be suitable for Iowa's demographics.) There are three evidence-based or evidence-informed parental support programs that claim an increase in social support for parents: Families and Schools Together (FAST); Schools and Families Educating Children (SAFE); and Triple P-Positive Parenting Program. There is one evidence-supported program that has shown an increase in social support for parents: Parenting Wisely. Finally, there are two programs with promising levels of evidence that claim an increase in social support for parents: Dare To Be You (DTBY) and Creating Lasting Family Connections (FRIENDS, 2009).

It is important to keep in mind that, while parent training programs are commonly used to improve parenting practices and prevent child abuse and neglect, the part of the program that increases social support is the planned group meeting element, which ideally includes essential foundational components, described in greater detail later in this report.

Mutual Self-Help Parent Support Programs

"Mutual support is the psychological process of giving and getting help that fosters a sense of trust, belonging and community… [It] encourages role modeling and teaches by example effective coping strategies" (Levine & Perkins, 1987). Mutual self-help support groups are parent-centered groups designed to help caregivers look to their peers for information, ideas and skills in safe and supportive settings. Such groups are convenient additions to community-based prevention programs (including home visiting) because

they can be combined with other efforts and can be somewhat customized to suit the population or targeted community. Two models in particular have gained national attention for their parent-guided support group formats: Circle of Parents and Parents Anonymous®.

According to the Prevention Brief produced by the Florida Chapter of Prevent Child Abuse, Circle of Parents "provides opportunities for caregivers to exchange ideas, share information, develop and practice new parenting skills and learn about community resources" (p.2). 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. Evaluations of four states' Circle of Parents programs found that the participants improved in multiple areas related to positive parenting practices and social functioning (Falconer *et al.*, 2008; FRIENDS, 2008; Prevent Child Abuse Florida, 2007).

There are very few rigorous studies published that examine the outcomes of mutual self-help parent support groups. Recent ongoing evaluations in Florida, Washington and Minnesota, however, had relevant and notable findings in their Circle of Parents programs. The more meetings that parents attended, the higher the perception of participant's social support system became; likewise, more meetings attended contributed to improved quality of parent-child relationships and improved parenting skills (*Ibid.*).

Similarly, Parents Anonymous® promotes a strengths-based approach to working with parents through a Shared Leadership® model which it developed to frame the weekly parent groups. Parents Anonymous® states that "through group participation, parents build self-confidence in their ability to address personal issues and make long-term changes in their families…They support one another and build on strengths [helping each other in] overcoming various challenges regarding child development" among many other areas (Pion-Berlin, *et al.*, 2011). While Parents Anonymous® services can vary depending on the community need, the primary models for adult groups are always co-facilitated by a parent leader and a trained facilitator.

As one of the oldest child abuse prevention organizations in the United States, Parents Anonymous® has developed a number of alternative formats and structures to accommodate diverse groups of adults and children, including those already involved with Child Protective Services. In general, Parents Anonymous® has been shown to be effective in increasing protective factors, most notably in areas of improved parenting skills, improved relationships between caregiver and child and improved "use of support systems" and acquiring information related to parenting and child development (FRIENDS, 2008; Polinsky & Pion-Berlin, 2010; Parents Anonymous, 2007).

A three-year evaluation of the Parents Anonymous® program funded by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention found participating parents showed improvement on child maltreatment indicators, risk factors and increased protective factors after six months of participation. In the area of social support, the outcomes were specifically: improved emotional support, improved general social support, reduced intimate partner violence and reduced isolation. These factors were most significantly improved for those who had the lowest levels of social support at the start of their involvement with Parents Anonymous® groups (FRIENDS, 2008; Pion-Berlin, *et al.*, 2011).

Common Elements of Effective Programs

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

Regardless of the selected models or curricula, reviews of research consistently show that improved social support and knowledge of parenting result from high levels of fidelity. The further a program drifts from the original design or intent the less-likely positive results will be realized (Blase, 2008; CDC, 2009; Horton, 2003; PAT National Center, 2012).

It is important to consider that specific activities delivered within the context of a group setting will not effectively, consistently or predictably increase parental social support without the presence of five foundational elements discussed below. These elements are necessary in providing the framework for the quality of the group's undertakings (Antonucci, Fuhrer & Jackson, 1990; Beeman, 1997; Gay, 2005). The simple existence of social connections in a person's life does not constitute the presence of social support as a protective factor.

For example, Korbin (1998) conducted an intensive study of nine mothers incarcerated for fatal child abuse and found that all of the mothers in the study had been actively connected to social networks during the period leading up to the child fatality. The social networks they were part of perpetuated the women's abusive behavior and excused the mother's actions as an understandable lapse in what was construed to be otherwise acceptable maternal behavior.

Further, research shows that relational groups of non-neglecting mothers have notable differences when compared to relational groups of neglecting mothers. Specifically, non-neglecting mothers had relationships that contained a balance of independence and mutuality, and had relationships characterized by trust, reciprocity, and flexibility (Horton, 2003). It is the *quality* of the social connections made within group activities that affects the increase in social support for parents; therefore it is imperative to create a

positive and supportive foundation that sets the tone for all other activities that happen within the group setting.

All of the evidence-based, evidence-supported or evidence-informed models discussed in earlier sections of this report have incorporated a few distinct elements into their group work. Programs attempting to increase parental social support should incorporate these five elements into the core functions of the group itself:

1. Reciprocity, Mutual Support and Exchange

The concept of reciprocity in social relationships has been studied for a few decades. Research shows that the norm of reciprocity is strong and individual perceptions of the presence of equal exchanges or mutual benefit are necessary for social support to be strengthened (Antonucci, Fuhrer, & Jackson, 1990). It is necessary to provide activities and opportunities within the group setting, where mutual support and exchange are the norm, and where group members do not end the experience feeling they over-benefitted or under-benefitted from the exchange, which lessens the feelings of indebtedness and promotes a feeling of self-worth. For example, if one receives more than one provides, one feels they have over-benefitted; on the other hand, if one provides more than one receives, one then feels they have under-benefitted. Either position is seen by exchange theorists as unsettling or uncomfortable (Antonucci, Fuhrer, & Jackson, 1990). As such, providing opportunities within the group setting for mutual sharing and support, as well as providing leadership of the group to be shared among the parents, allows for a diversity of situations where reciprocity is the norm and mutual exchange of roles, information, and experiences can occur naturally, without perceived obligation.

2. Genuine Acceptance and Trust

Creating opportunities for parents to build and strengthen long-term, positive social connections is necessary, but on its own is not enough. It is possible to feel isolated even in a group setting if the relationships or connections are deficient in emotional depth or sincere trust and acceptance. In order to strengthen parental social support, opportunities should be provided where parents can make positive social connections with at least one other person within a group setting that fosters the context of mutual trust and respect (Center for the Study of Social Policy).

3. Emotional Nourishment

Providing an environment that promotes feelings of empathy, connectedness through shared life experiences and circumstances, and enhanced parental self-confidence is necessary for parent social support groups. Parents can connect with other parents with common shared experiences, as well as gain a sense of belonging and relief from

learning that their family dynamics and child's behavior are often more common than they realize (Gay, 2005).

4. Skill Building and Acquisition

The evidence-based, supported and informed models have one or more specific focuses to their group activities, whether it is teaching parenting skills, typical child development and behaviors, appropriate communication skills, stress management, or conflict resolution. Regardless of the model, the opportunity to practice these skills with their own children in a safe, supportive environment provided by the group is essential in helping parents incorporate what is learned into their regular, everyday life.

Techniques and parenting approaches can also be practiced in between meeting times, with time built in during the group to report how they are progressing and discuss what has been challenging and what has been successful. The shift from just learning about parenting and child development toward actually using the techniques and strategies outside of the group session in the family's home environment is an important element in skills acquisition (CDC, 2009).

5. Social Monitoring and Social Control

Social monitoring or control is the establishment and development of a group's norms and values. Groups develop their own set of rules defining acceptable behavior and encourage members to monitor the behaviors by pointing out those behaviors that are not aligned with the established rules. The important condition is that this is an encouraging experience for members, without judgment, anger or fear of rejection (Gay, 2005).

Parents in social support group settings must develop a sense of community with their own group norms and values. Laying the groundwork for the foundation of these groups with the four previous elements provides the necessary means to influence the social monitoring and social control that naturally occur in group settings. In gaining a sense of community with its own healthier social norms, parents sustain what is being learned in the group program and maintain their new skills, while not falling back into old parenting patterns. The group should be encouraged to develop rules that reflect nonviolence, personal accountability and genuine acceptance (Gay, 2005).

Encouraging or Incentivizing Attendance to Groups

Free Childcare or Child-Focused Groups that Occur Alongside Parent Social Support Groups

It is important to make attending group activities as easy as possible for parents in order to promote participation and encourage practice of the skills they are learning within a supportive environment. If parents can attend more sessions and make participation a priority, they are more likely to develop long-term connections that contribute to an increase in their feelings of positive social support. The programs discussed earlier in this report have a children's group component that occurs alongside the parent group component, though free child care is just as effective in decreasing barriers to regular attendance. Having predictable and reliable child care options also contributes to the parents' sense of having a community that is supportive and caring, thereby reducing emotional fatigue and stress.

Incentivizing Attendance to Groups

Incentive programs do not increase social or emotional support on their own. Rather, they can be used as a mechanism to encourage attendance to appointments or continued involvement with classes and groups. An example of programs that incorporate an incentive to participation is the Stork's Nest, which "awards points for healthy behaviors based on predetermined guidelines. Participants redeem their points at a Stork's Nest store for necessary supplies for mother and baby" (Viegas & Betterly, 1998).

Conclusion

Programs and services that intend to reduce the incidence of child abuse and neglect do so by addressing the protective factors known to offset the conditions that put families at risk. Many child abuse and neglect prevention models claim to increase one or many protective factors, and, with the complexity of multiple and clustering risks, programs have the option to focus on reducing maltreatment at the child, family or community levels, or a combination of the three. This versatility is, on one hand, beneficial in that communities and organizations can customize their approach to suit the target population and, on the other hand, challenging in that the variety of approaches makes it difficult to evaluate the effects of individual components. This variety also challenges programs looking to replicate what has been done to benefit a different community or group.

Regardless of program or model the foundational aspects must be in place in order to truly impact parental social support. The foundational elements to include in planning and facilitating group events or activities are:

- Reciprocity, Mutual Support and Exchange
- Genuine Acceptance and Trust
- Emotional Nourishment
- Skill Building and Acquisition
- Social Monitoring

These are the minimum elements necessary for welcoming and encouraging families to continue participation in group activities and to positively impact social support for parents. As described above, these groups may incorporate incentives that give participants an external reward for attending or they may include additional informal connections (such as through celebrations or excursions), though these motivators have not yet been found to be connected to improved parenting or increased social support. Parent groups can also be part of a larger curriculum or program, but, if they are to effectively reduce child maltreatment, they must be intentional about increasing social support through positive and enriching experiences. [3]

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[3] This report described three types of child abuse and neglect prevention program models that show evidence of increasing parental social and emotional support: Home Visiting; Parent Education and Support Groups; and Mutual Self-Help Support Groups. Beyond this report, there may be other programs either currently in development or that have been studied but not yet published that can be considered as well. A list of relevant references is included here for more in-depth review of particular models or curricula.

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