



# Schools: Educating, Preventing and Promoting

## Why Strengthening Families is Important

Educators and other school professionals, care about the well-being of the families in and around their schools. Parents who are under stress may have a harder time connecting with what is happening in the classroom, creating a learning environment in the home or even attending to their child's basic needs. Stress in the home or a breakdown in the parent/child relationship can negatively impact a child's ability to focus in school. It can also lead to challenging behavior in the classroom: acting out, tuning out or children's loss of confidence in their own work. New research on child development says that when stress becomes toxic (repeated and severe) it can impact the physical architecture of the brain, potentially impairing children's long-term development.<sup>1</sup> Additional studies confirm that childhood stressors can compound to produce serious emotional and physical illnesses in adulthood, impacting outcomes as diverse as risk of diabetes, likelihood of alcohol or substance abuse, likeliness of mental illness, suicide risk etc.<sup>2</sup>

## An Educator's Role

School professionals have an important role to play in reaching families who need support. Their daily contact with children can provide a window into what is going on in families and how it might be impacting the child. Moreover, parents look to educators as an authority not just on their child but on children in general, and what it takes to succeed in a school. Educators can help parents understand why their parenting and the home environment they create is important to fostering their child's growth and development. Educators can also steer families to resources and supports. Finally, they are educating the parents of tomorrow. The message they send children about taking care of themselves, the importance of parenting and about the supports we all need for a strong foundation will greatly benefit them when they move toward becoming parents themselves.

## Action steps to take

- Build community among the parents of the children in your school/classroom:
  - Encourage interaction and network building between families through phone trees and informal time for parents to mingle into school events.
  - Help connect parents with common issues (through back to school nights and special assemblies).
  - Provide support/opportunities for parents to self-organize around school-related issues (like charity events or school team-building).

## About Strengthening Families

Strengthening Families was developed by the Center for the Study of Social Policy to help people and organizations take action to support families and reduce child abuse and neglect. The approach focuses on five protective factors associated in research literature with lower rates of child abuse and neglect:

- **Parental Resilience:** The ability of parents to form nurturing relationships and respond to stressful situations in productive ways.
- **Knowledge of parenting and child development:** a parent's understanding of how children develop and the role families play in fostering development.
- **Social Connections:** The many positive relationships families need for emotional and concrete support.
- **Concrete Supports in Times of Need:** A family's ability to access help and resources when they need them.
- **Social Emotional Competence of Children:** Children's ability to express and control their emotions in a developmentally appropriate way

More than 30 states have active Strengthening Families initiatives that include funding, support and training to help build protective factors in families with young children. Your state may have tools, training and other resources you can access. To find out if your state is participating and find materials and tools from the national Strengthening Families work go to:

[www.strengtheningfamilies.net](http://www.strengtheningfamilies.net)

<sup>1</sup> [http://developingchild.harvard.edu/topics/science\\_of\\_early\\_childhood/toxic\\_stress\\_response/](http://developingchild.harvard.edu/topics/science_of_early_childhood/toxic_stress_response/)

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.acestudy.org/files/Review\\_of\\_ACE\\_Study\\_with\\_references\\_summary\\_table\\_2\\_.pdf](http://www.acestudy.org/files/Review_of_ACE_Study_with_references_summary_table_2_.pdf)



# Schools: Educating, Preventing and Promoting

- Take a strengths-based approach.
  - Identify one strength in every child in your classroom and share it with that child's parents.
  - Review the materials that go home to parents and infuse simple messages about the importance of the parent's role.
  - Believe every parent cares and wants to be involved.
- Connect families to resources and supports.
  - Build relationships with local programs that can support families.
  - Have information about these programs available for families or encourage these providers to come into your school/classroom to talk with families about the services they provide. For example, create a resource book of local service providers that parents can easily access.
- Intervene proactively when family issues are impeding a child's success in school.
  - Focus the conversation not just on the child's progress but on what is happening at home and how it may be connecting to the child's issues in the classroom.
  - Remind parents that the stress they experience has an impact on their parenting and their children. Encourage them to develop healthy ways to prevent and/or deal with stress.
  - Share information about child development and parenting as part of your conversation with parents.
  - Provide concrete tips for how parents can change simple at-home behavior and the role it can play in helping their child learn.

## Network For Action

This fact sheet was developed as part of the Network for Action. Network for Action is a group of federal partners, national organizations and state and local leaders concerned about child abuse and neglect prevention. Through this network, a number of strategic projects are being developed to enhance collaborative work that will move a broader vision of child abuse and neglect prevention.

Network for Action is sponsored by the Office on Child Abuse and Neglect (OCAN), at the Children's Bureau, Administration on Children, Youth and Families (ACYF), Administration for Children and Families (ACF), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), in collaboration with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Division of Violence Prevention's Knowledge to Action Child Maltreatment Prevention Consortium Leadership Group (K2A) and other national organizations and networks that support prevention efforts.