



Brief & to the Point

Wisconsin Child Care Research Partnership

Issue Brief No. 17 March 2006

How can we strengthen families through early care and education?

Strengthening families

Families represent the most powerful – and the most cost-effective – method for helping children reach their full potential.¹ When early care and education (ECE) programs work in partnership with families, research shows that:

- Children achieve at higher levels,²
- Parents become more supportive of their children's learning,³ and
- Providers become more sensitive in their interactions with children.⁴

Good ECE programs provide opportunities for children to learn while their parents work; but great ECE programs extend their educational impact by also strengthening families. Such programs have:

- Welcoming environments that respect and reflect families' values,
- Multiple opportunities for families to be drawn into their children's education, and
- Strong communication systems that support relationship-building with families.

Wisconsin's licensing rules require that all ECE programs provide written policies for families, clear procedures for parent notification, open-door policies that allow families to visit, and semi-annual staff-family communication regarding the child's development. Wisconsin's highest quality programs, such as Head Start, nationally-accredited, and Centers for Excellence exceed basic licensing requirements by providing training designed to develop ECE providers' skills in working with families as well as providing the time and resources necessary to encourage family involvement.

This Brief identifies ways in which high quality ECE programs support and strengthen families. It also introduces the Strengthening Families-Wisconsin Initiative, a new effort of the Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) to reduce the incidence of child abuse and neglect through strengthening early care and education statewide.

High quality ECE programs

Head Start. Since 1965, Head Start has recognized the importance of comprehensive services for low-income families. They have served as a model for ECE programs by hiring staff to work solely to support families and by mandating local control by families.^{5,6} Serving approximately 17,000 children in Wisconsin, Head Start programs strongly encourage families to participate in the classroom, in home visits, in educational activities, and in decision-making roles.

National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). Wisconsin's 260 NAEYC-accredited programs, serving 24,000 children, emphasize staff-parent interaction as a key component of high quality ECE. Accreditation standards are intended to ensure that teachers and families work in partnership to create high quality early care and education, and that parents feel supported as observers and as contributors to the program.

Early Childhood Centers for Excellence. From 2000 to 2005, Wisconsin's 24 Centers for Excellence participated in an experiment of Wisconsin state government. They received a public supplement of about 16% to their programs' budgets in exchange for their efforts to raise the quality of early care and education for children from low-income families. These programs invested 10% of their grant award on resources and training to strengthen teachers' communication skills and relationships with families.⁷ This Brief summarizes the success of their efforts as well as their lessons learned about family involvement.

Research Questions:

1. How family-centered are Wisconsin's early care and education programs?
2. How do Head Start and nationally-accredited programs compare with other ECE programs?
3. What lessons can we learn about supporting and strengthening families from Wisconsin's Centers for Excellence?

"Programs cannot adequately meet the needs of children unless they also recognize the importance of the child's family and develop strategies to work effectively with families."

National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2005



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Wisconsin Data

The *Wisconsin Child Care Research Partnership Survey 2004* was mailed to all licensed center-based programs that served children under five years of age (n = 2,046). Questionnaires were completed by program directors at 102 Head Start programs (41% response rate), 156 nationally-accredited programs (70% response rate), and 547 "other" (non-accredited, non-Head Start) programs (27% response rate). This Brief describes the percentage of these 805 programs engaging in family-centered practices, compares different types of programs, shares lessons learned from Wisconsin's 24 Early Childhood Centers for Excellence, and introduces the Strengthening Families-Wisconsin Initiative (see Figure 17.4).

How family-centered are Wisconsin's early care and education programs?

In the statewide 2004 survey, ECE program directors were asked to indicate whether or not they engaged in each of 15 family-centered practices. Compiled from a variety of sources, the list was neither inclusive of all possible family-centered practices nor necessarily representative of the components of all high quality ECE programs. Table 17.1 displays the percentages of programs, ranked from highest to lowest, engaging in each family-centered practice.

Table 17. 1 Family-centered practices, ranked by percentage of centers	
Common Practices (Reported by more than 50% of ECE programs):	Percentage of Centers
1. Provides an information board where families can read and post notices.	95.5
2. Has signs, posters, pictures, and publications that reflect the diversity of families.	93.6
3. Has family conferences at least annually to discuss children's progress.	90.0
4. Regularly distributes a newsletter that spotlights children's accomplishments, features family activities, and describes upcoming events.	86.1
5. Has a written policy emphasizing the importance of family involvement.	83.6
6. Recruits family members as volunteers.	77.1
7. Trains staff to work effectively with families and provides time and resources for staff members to develop rapport with families.	77.1
8. Requests input from families through a suggestion box and/or a formal survey.	74.6
9. Regularly hosts fun social events for the entire family.	72.4
Uncommon Practices (Reported by fewer than 50% of ECE programs):	
10. Recruits/trains family members to serve on decision-making/advisory committees.	45.2
11. Provides a family resource center and free parent resources.	43.9
12. Regularly sponsors educational workshops for families.	28.3
13. Has a staff person that works directly with parents/families.	19.5
14. Provides opportunities for adult education (ESL, GED, and computer classes).	13.7
15. Provides annual home visits with each child.	13.4

How do Head Start and nationally-accredited programs compare with other ECE programs?

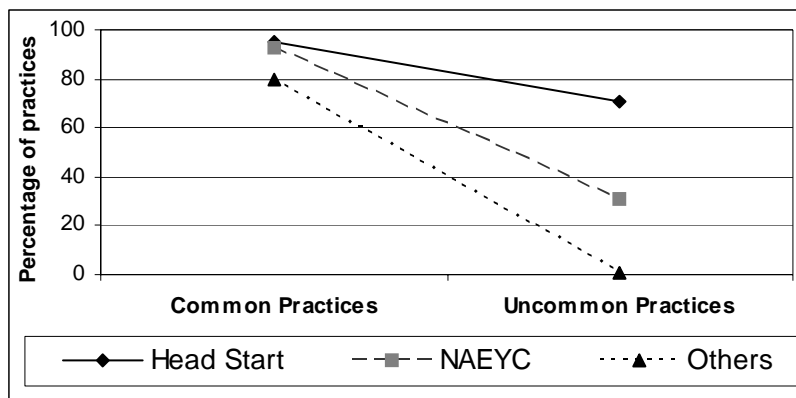
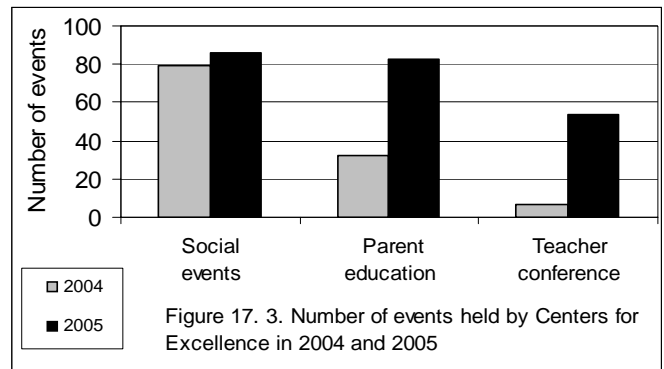
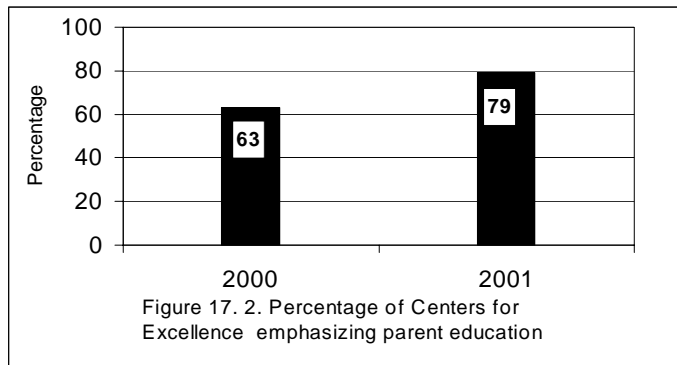


Figure 17.1 Comparison of average percentage of common and uncommon family-centered practices by program type.

- **“Common” practices (items 1-9):** Head Start and nationally-accredited programs averaged 94%, as compared with non-accredited, non-Head Start programs, who averaged 80% on these “common practices.”
- **“Uncommon” practices (items 10-15):** Head Start, with its long history of comprehensive care for low-income families, reported significantly more of the “uncommon practices” than accredited programs, who reported significantly more than other ECE programs.

What lessons can we learn from Wisconsin's Centers for Excellence?

Over a 5-year period, 24 Early Childhood Centers for Excellence were challenged to explore new ways of establishing trusting partnerships with families. Figure 17.2 demonstrates an increase in directors' emphasis on parent education from 2000 to 2001, and Figure 17.3 details specific increases in the number of events offered to families during a 6-month period in 2004 and in 2005, after which all funding for the initiative ended.



- At the outset of the Excellence Initiative in 2000, 63% of directors reported that parent education was a key component of their programs.
- After the first 15 months in the initiative, 79% of directors reported doing a substantial amount of parent education.
- Detailed analyses of semi-annual program reports in 2004 and 2005 revealed a significant increase in the total number of family-centered events.
- There were increases in the number of social events, parent education activities, and attendance at parent teacher conferences.

Policy Implications

1. Early care and education providers often enjoy working with children but lack the skills or confidence to work effectively with adults. Specific training designed to strengthen families through early care and education, as recommended by the Center for the Study of Social Policy, could elevate the role of providers, increase the involvement of families, and enhance developmental outcomes of young children.
2. Inclusion of family involvement as a key component of a statewide quality rating system could provide an incentive for programs to evaluate their own practices and develop new ways of connecting with families.
3. Policymakers generally support family involvement in children's early care and education programs. Programs with the greatest public funding (Head Start) have far more family involvement than other programs. But even the modest (16%) public supplement to Wisconsin's Centers for Excellence produced an immediate and substantial increase in family connections to children's programs. This suggests that the goal of making Wisconsin's early care and education programs more "family friendly" may actually be attainable.

End Note: The next *Issue Brief* will identify quality indicators in ECE programs.

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Issue Brief #17

How can we strengthen families through early care and education?

University of Wisconsin-Extension, Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development (DWD) Child Care Section, and Wisconsin Child Care Resource and Referral (CCR&R) Network joined in partnership in 2000 to assess the quality of child care for low-income children.

Leaders in the Research Partnership include Mary Roach, Diane Adams, Dave Riley, and David Edie (UW-Extension). Data entry and analyses are conducted by Jason Bierbrauer and Yae Bin Kim. "Brief & to the Point" is produced by Deb Zeman.

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Strengthening Families – Wisconsin

Wisconsin recently became one of seven states to receive technical assistance from the Center for the Study of Social Policy for the Strengthening Families-Wisconsin Initiative.* This statewide collaborative effort, led by the Children’s Trust Fund, will:

- Help ECE programs become more family-centered (see Figure 17.4)
- Improve communication between ECE and child welfare agencies
- Strengthen training of professionals who work with families in order to reduce the incidence of child abuse and neglect in Wisconsin.

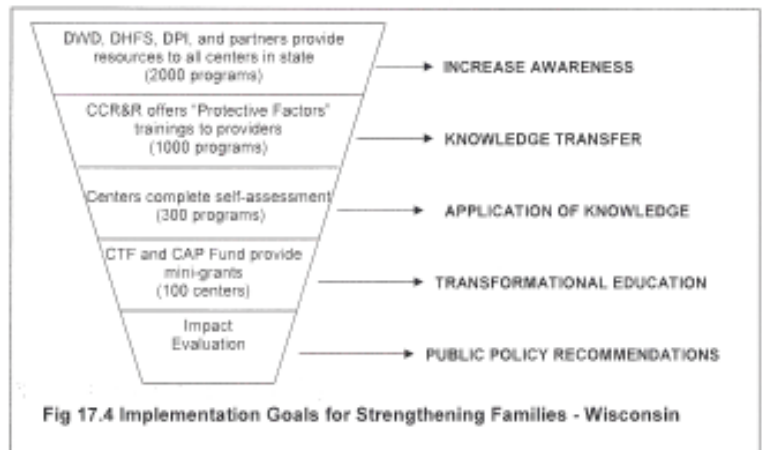


Fig 17.4 Implementation Goals for Strengthening Families - Wisconsin

* Partners include: Children’s Trust Fund (CTF), Department of Workforce Development (DWD), Department of Health and Family Services (DHFS), UW-Extension, Child Care Resource and Referral agencies (CCR&R), Child Abuse Prevention Fund (CAP Fund), Child Care Information Center (CCIC), Department of Public Instruction (DPI), and many others.

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