

# NEW DIRECTIONS: WHAT WE'VE LEARNED ABOUT STRATEGIES AND INTERVENTIONS FOR CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT

*New Directions in Child Abuse and Neglect Research*, a report from the Institute of Medicine (IOM) and National Research Council (NRC), regards child abuse and neglect as serious public health issues involving 6 million children in the United States every year. Building on research findings gleaned during the past 20 years, the report highlights the significant progress that has been achieved in developing and testing strategies and interventions to reduce child abuse and neglect, ameliorate its consequences, and improve parental capacity.

The potential public health benefits of these strategies and interventions will be severely limited or unrealized if they are not implemented and sustained effectively in usual-care-practice settings. Currently, a wide gap exists between available strategies and interventions and effective methods for their dissemination, implementation, and sustainability. The availability of model programs is uneven across communities and populations, leaving many of the most vulnerable children and families without adequate services. Improving outcomes for a greater proportion of victims and those at risk of child abuse and neglect will require a greater focus on issues such as cultural relevance, replication fidelity, and how proven models can be taken to scale in the complex environments and systems within which children and families receive care.

## APPROACHES, PRACTICES, AND STRATEGIES WITH EVIDENCE FOR EFFECTIVENESS

Interventions, regardless of their target populations or primary outcomes, appear to benefit from a set of “core ingredients.” These generally include:

- BUILDING ON A STRONG THEORETICAL FOUNDATION THAT LINKS INTENDED OUTCOMES TO A CLEARLY ARTICULATED THEORY OF CHANGE
- OFFERING THE PROGRAM AT A SUFFICIENT DOSAGE AND DURATION TO MAKE IT POSSIBLE TO ACHIEVE THE INTENDED OUTCOMES
- STAFFING THE PROGRAM WITH INDIVIDUALS WHO HAVE THE KNOWLEDGE AND COMPETENCIES TO WORK WITH PARTICIPANTS TO ACHIEVE THE DESIRED OUTCOMES
- OPERATING WITHIN A SYSTEM OF QUALITY ASSURANCE TO ENSURE THAT THE PROGRAM IS DELIVERED PROPERLY AND THE DESIRED OUTCOMES ARE ACHIEVED

The IOM/NRC report describes the current evidence base for many widely used and evaluated programs. It is important to note that none of the approaches has been evaluated across all communities or populations, and approaches often do not reach, engage, or retain their full target population. However, the report finds the progress in child abuse and neglect interventions to be impressive. Strategies and interventions discussed in the report include the following.



### DIFFERENTIAL RESPONSE

Differential response systems offer multiple pathways for addressing the needs of children and families referred to child welfare services. These strategies have been shown to be effective with a range of outcomes, including improvements in child safety, fewer removals from home, increased access to services, and higher levels of family satisfaction.



### FAMILY AND PARENT ENGAGEMENT

Child welfare systems have expanded their efforts to engage families, especially parents, more fully as part of the service planning and intervention process. Evidence suggests that family and parent engagement models contribute to reductions in child abuse and neglect.



## HOME VISITING

Providing home-based services to pregnant women and caretakers of young children is one of the most widely disseminated child abuse and neglect prevention strategies. Evidence of the effectiveness of early home-visiting programs demonstrates initial and long-term improvements in parent-child attachment, access to preventive medical care, healthy child development, and parental capacity. These strategies also show consistent reductions in parental stress, depressive symptoms in children, and child abuse and neglect reports.



## PARENTING PROGRAMS

Parent education programs have increasingly been applied to children and families who are at risk for or experience child abuse and neglect. These programs have demonstrated effectiveness in improving the capacity of parents and caretakers to cease certain harmful behaviors and to adopt behaviors commonly associated with healthy child development.

In addition to improved child welfare outcomes, evidence demonstrates that behavior problems in children are addressed most effectively through interventions that target parents as the primary change agents. Parent education programs, therefore, are used to treat behavioral problems in child victims and to reduce the risk for subsequent child abuse and neglect.



## TRAUMA-FOCUSED THERAPIES

Significant advances have been made in the development of therapies that specifically target the impact of trauma or abuse on children. Evidence for effectiveness of these approaches exists for reductions of posttraumatic stress, depression, and anxiety in children who have experienced child abuse and neglect.



## PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE REFORMS

Increased consideration is being given to how best to use existing service delivery systems that regularly interact with families to mitigate the potential for abuse and neglect. For example, placement of child development specialists in pediatric practices has demonstrated impacts on child health, child development, school readiness, and positive parenting practices. In addition, training programs for health professionals have demonstrated improvements in pediatricians' levels of comfort and perceived competence in screening for and addressing child abuse and neglect.

## LAYING THE GROUNDWORK FOR IMPLEMENTATION

Many factors should be considered to ensure that strategies and interventions are replicated in ways that are faithful to both the structure and intent of the original model. These factors include:

- IMPLEMENTING WITH THE POPULATION THE INTERVENTION WAS DESIGNED TO HELP
- STAFF SKILLS AND TRAINING
- SUPERVISION
- CASELOADS
- CURRICULUM
- SERVICE DOSAGE AND DURATION
- HOW SERVICES ARE PROVIDED
- HOW PARTICIPANTS ARE ENGAGED IN THE SERVICE DELIVERY PROCESS



Consideration of organizational culture and climate is also critical to quality service delivery and to the implementation of evidence-based programs. Attention to these factors is necessary both in the initial planning process and throughout implementation.

Additional information and resources, including the Report, Questions to Guide Research, Video, and Infographic are available at:

[WWW.IOM.EDU/CHILDMALTREATMENT](http://WWW.IOM.EDU/CHILDMALTREATMENT)