

**U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES**

Office of Human Development Services  
Administration for Children, Youth and Families  
Children's Bureau  
National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect



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# Perspectives on Child Maltreatment in the Mid '80s

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# The Family Support Center: Early Intervention for High-Risk Parents and Children

by Yvonne L. Fraley

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**D**epressed, apathetic, isolated parents overwhelmed by stresses and low self-esteem are often distrustful or fearful of the very programs designed to help them. They may well avoid Head Start, for example, anticipating rejection and criticism of themselves and their children, or being too apathetic or disorganized to get their 3-year-old ready for school five days a week.

By age three, however, the children have missed crucial developmental experiences. They are often developmentally delayed, particularly in communication, problem-solving, relationship and coping skills and/or the eye-hand coordination skills basic to reading and writing. In addition, they may have acquired the same self-defeating attitudes of their parents, particularly low self-esteem.

If these characteristics lead to early school failure, delinquency or adolescent pregnancy, a new cycle of poverty and impoverishment is begun.

The staff of the Family Support Center (FSC) in Yeadon, Pennsylvania, believes that abusive and abuse-prone parents need concrete help in reducing the stresses which overwhelm them. They need to experience helping professionals whom they can come to like, trust and accept as role models. They need to learn through practice new child-rearing behaviors. In order to do so, they need a loving, nurturing environment because they have usually experienced a lifetime of rejection, threats, criticism and other abuse.

In the meantime, as their parents slowly begin to change their behavior, the children need help from others in overcoming their developmental delays. A loving, nurturing first school experience can shape children's future attitudes toward school, teachers and themselves as learners.

The Family Support Center has developed a multi-phase, multidisciplinary approach to intervene directly with parents and their high risk preschool children. Through home visits and a unique Family School, FSC has attempted since 1976 to change parents' patterns of child-rearing and remedy children's developmental delays. FSC has served approximately 250 families and 400 children.

## Family Selection

Given limited resources, an abuse prevention program must target families who can be identified as at "high risk" of abuse, and who can be recruited to participate.

Certain personality factors and traits have been identified as common among abusive and neglectful parents. These include a special form of immaturity and associated dependency; extremely low self-esteem and a sense of incompetence; difficulty in seeking pleasure and finding satisfaction in the adult world; social isolation and reluctance to seek help; significant misconceptions about children and fear of spoiling them; a strong belief in the value of punishment; and serious lack of ability to be empathically aware of a child's condition and needs.

These characteristics have provided the basis for identifying families for FSC services. The explanation to potential referring sources includes description of these characteristics. For the media and potential participants, eligible families are described as those "under several severe stresses which can interfere with good parenting."

According to a stress sheet developed by the FSC research coordinator, families served have averaged seven stresses. Common stresses have included: parent abused as child; a mental health problem—for example, depression, suicidal behavior or poor coping ability—on the part of a parent; serious or untreated medical problem of parent or child; divorce or separation; inadequate

income; isolation from friends and relatives; change in living conditions within the last three months; single parent status; and a developmentally delayed or chronically ill child.

About one-third of the families served have been clients of community mental health services.

### **Criteria For Eligibility**

A family with a child four years old or younger is considered "at risk" and eligible for FSC services because of the presence or history of a combination of stress factors, plus one or more of the following factors:

- Actual verified abuse or a suspicion of abuse on the part of a professional for which "hard" evidence is lacking.
- A parent reports regular use of physical punishment as the most frequent means of discipline or expresses fear of losing control and harming a child.
- A pattern of family violence is evident.

About one-third of the families served are referred by Children and Youth Service, the public child welfare agency. Only a few families have been mandated to participate, but many have been offered services as an alternative to or as part of a treatment plan including other protective services.

About one-third of the families are referred by other community social service agencies, hospitals, clinics and pediatricians and one-third are considered self-referred—that is, they contact FSC after reading about it in the local papers or hearing of it from program participants.

Most community referrals begin with an exploratory telephone call to FSC to determine whether the client is eligible. The referral source then approaches the parent and recommends the services. A community nurse or protective service worker may take the initiative to arrange for a joint home visit. However, most families are able to telephone to request the service themselves. This telephone call is usually followed by one or two home visits. Every effort is made to interview and involve both parents. If the parents decide against participating, they are referred elsewhere if possible and/or the referral source is advised.

### **Phase I: Counseling Services**

Since most of the new families are not sufficiently organized or motivated to sustain office visiting, counselors go to their homes.

Following intake, families are assigned a casework or pediatric nurse counselor who visits weekly (or more frequently) to help the family set goals, reduce the stresses interfering with childrearing and prepare family

members for FSC's Family School. This first phase may last from one to six months.

A goal achievement instrument is used to record the goals which the counselor and parent(s) agree to address—for example, improving the family's housing, using the court to obtain child support payments, improving the mother's health and reducing her isolation, bringing the children's inoculations up to date and gaining a better understanding of a child's health problem.

The parents' goals tend to be quite concrete and focused on their own problems. The counselor's efforts begin there. As the relationship develops, parents become more open to discussing their childrearing practices. Many parents are frustrated with a 2- or 3-year-old child who won't mind, or is not toilet trained, or bites and kicks. Focusing their attention on the unmet needs of younger children is more difficult.

Counselors bring 7-minute filmstrips on topics related to children's development and try to elicit some discussion around them.

The week before families are scheduled to enter Family School, parents and children visit the school for an hour, by appointment. The child is observed by the teacher and speech and occupational therapists. The mother or father is interviewed about the child's development and speech or motor evaluation is conducted when a child's development seems delayed. All of this information provides the basis for the child's Individual Educational Plan during Family School.

This visit also familiarizes parents and children with the school and staff members.

The entire staff of Family School meets three times during each cycle of Family School to assess the needs of each participating family member and to develop and coordinate educational plans: the week before Family School opens, in order to share the parent's needs and learning goals and the child's educational plan; at mid-term, to assess the degree of success or improvement and whether changes are needed in the goals or in staff members' efforts with parent or child; and the week after graduation, to assess changes and recommend follow-up treatment, counseling or education.

Each parent or parent couple meets with one or two staff members for a parent-teacher conference twice during Family School, once at mid-term and again the week before graduation.

## Phase II: Family School

The most innovative service of the FSC is the Family School. One or both parents and all preschool children attend together for 13 weeks, two days a week from 9:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.—a total of 130 hours of parent and early childhood education. The program is held in a community church, Trinity United Presbyterian Church in Clifton Heights, Pa.

Parents with cars drive. Other parents pay part of the cost of van service purchased by the agency.

During Phase II; counselors continue to work with parents in their homes to assist families in resolving or mitigating stress factors. The counselors also participate in Family School staff meetings concerning each parent and child to help set realistic goals, keep Family School staff members informed of significant changes in the home situation and keep abreast of progress being made by parent(s) and children.

After the first week, parents spend the first 10 to 15 minutes of each morning in their children's classroom helping them make the transition and sharing with the teacher any significant change in the child. From arrival time until 10:00 a.m. is free time for parents and "free play" for children. Parents spend about 20 minutes unwinding from the morning pressures, talking informally with each other and enjoying a light, nutritious breakfast served buffet-style in the dining room.

## The Curriculum

The school uses a structured, educationally oriented parent curriculum developed by staff and tested with over 200 parents (see accompanying box). The goals of the parent education component are:

- To provide a supportive environment and teach parents how to create and maintain their own support systems.
- To enhance parents' self-esteem through social encounters, sharing of responsibilities, nurturance and experiential learning.
- To help parents form more realistic expectations regarding the development of their children.
- To teach several basic parenting skills—providing children with emotional support, setting limits, reinforcing positive behavior and stimulating children through play.

During "Breakfast Forum," from 10:00 to 10:30 a.m., parents listen to a staff member or community speaker and then discuss a childrearing topic, such as reading with children, helping children learn through play and keeping children well.

"Parent Child Interaction Time" follows the Breakfast Forum. This 45-minute period provides parents with opportunities to practice what they are learning

while staff members observe unobtrusively, model appropriate behavior and compliment parents for their efforts and their developing skills.

Parents are carefully prepared for these experiences by an early childhood educator, who describes what they will do and what children can learn from the activities.

The 45 minutes is divided into three segments; "Circle Time," which includes typical nursery school activities except that each parent holds his child, helps the child to follow directions and learn the songs and games; "Planned Group Activities," including arts and craft projects, food experiences and water or sand play; and a 10- to 15-minute period in which each parent and child team engages in an activity suggested by the child's Individual Education Plan or the parent participates in the child's speech or occupational therapy.

During the half-hour following "Parent-Child Interaction Time," parents talk about their experiences with the parent educator.

The 20-minute preparation before "interaction time" and the half-hour follow-up discussion are very important.

## Nutrition Education

A major part of the Family School program is nutrition education. Many families enter the program using food that is expensive and prepackaged—but low in nutrition. Each day parents and children receive a nutritious breakfast, lunch and afternoon snack. Emphasis is placed on introducing and demonstrating the use of fresh fruits, vegetables and whole grain foods. Children, parents, volunteers and staff eat lunch together; sharing recipes and eating together creates another level of ambience and peer support.

After lunch, half of the parents and staff clean up together, family style. Most parents are quite willing to help and seem to want to contribute something to the program.

From 1:15 to 2:15, parents engage in a group discussion led by the parent educator. The topics selected are integrated with the "Breakfast Forum" and "Parent Child-Interaction Time." Discussion is stimulated by roleplay, guided fantasy and discussion-provoking questions from the parent educator.

A graduation ceremony is held for parents. This is usually a very emotional time, with parents affirming their growth and their affection for each other and for the staff members and volunteers. Parents receive a certificate, a paperback book on childrearing, recipes from the cook and fresh flowers.

### Phase III: Counseling and Peer Support Services

Phase III includes follow-up counseling for about three months after Family School is completed. FSC staff members help parents enroll children in Head Start or nursery school and parents who need ongoing counseling are referred to Family Service or a mental health agency.

Each class of Family School graduates has elected to form a peer support group and to continue meeting monthly with a staff member or volunteer as a resource person. Most groups have met for six months or longer. But friendships among graduates have lasted longer, achieving one of the FSC goals: to help families reduce isolation.

### Funding

The Family Support Center originally received a 3-year grant (1976-79) from the Pennsylvania Department of Health to develop a child abuse treatment program. This was followed by a 3-year demonstration grant from the U.S. Bureau of Education for the Handicapped, supplemented by two 1-year grants from the Pennsylvania Department of Health, to develop a program for handicapped children. In addition, between 1978 and 1981, FSC received a Child Abuse Prevention Grant from the Office of Human Development Services, DHHS.

Since the last of these grants expired in October 1981, the Family Support Center has continued its child abuse prevention and handicapped children's programs with corporate and foundation grants and private contributions, but at a reduced level.

### Conclusion

According to a 3-year evaluation, the Family Support Center's intervention strategy can help stressed, dependent, isolated parents considered to be at high risk of abuse and neglect improve childrearing practices and learn to provide their children with the experiences and

skills necessary for school success and eventual self-support.\* The study found that the program can reduce abuse and neglect, substantially reduce the need for costly out-of-home care and help to maintain and strengthen family life. It is also cost-effective.

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\*Family Support Center, *A Demonstration of An Abuse and Dependency Prevention Program for Infants and Preschoolers*, Yeadon, Pa., Family Support Center, 1981, and K.A. Armstrong, "A Treatment and Education Program For Parents and Children Who Are At-Risk of Abuse and Neglect," *Child Abuse and Neglect*, Vol. 5, 1981.

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### Family School Curriculum

The *Parent Education Curriculum of Family School*, published by the Family Support Center, contains 78 hours of instruction designed to strengthen parent involvement in the education of their preschool children.

Divided into three subsections, the curriculum includes 22 half-hour presentations on such topics as health, nutrition and children's feelings; 25 one-hour sessions of experiential exercises and discussions; and nine sessions to prepare parents to teach their children, through play, in the classroom.

Copies of the curriculum are \$10.00 each, plus \$2.00 postage and handling for the first copy and \$1.50 for each additional copy. The curriculum may be ordered from the Family Support Center, 2 Bailey Rd., Yeadon, Pa. 19050.

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