

# WHAT it will TAKE:

Investing in Wisconsin's future  
by keeping kids safe today

Background Brief #2

## Best practices in child abuse and neglect prevention

As the research on child maltreatment prevention accumulates, we know more and more about specific programs and approaches that work, and some that don't. Based on rigorous evaluations of many discrete programs and initiatives, researchers have begun to draw conclusions about best practices at the program, organization, and community levels.

In this brief, we highlight best practices at each of these levels and discuss the policy implications of those best practices.

### PROGRAM PRACTICES

It is now possible to select a child maltreatment prevention program from the ever-growing pool of proven, evidence-based programs.<sup>1</sup> It can be tempting to recommend that evidence-based programs be used to the exclusion of unproven programs. However, it is important to remember that unproven programs are not necessarily ineffective, but have simply not been subjected to rigorous evaluation. (Unfortunately, this is the case for the majority of child abuse and neglect prevention programs;<sup>2</sup> there is a stark need for more evaluation of widely-used and promising programs.)

In addition, there may not be an evidence-based program that is appropriate for every situation. For these reasons, agencies often prefer their own "homegrown" programs over programs that have been designed and tested elsewhere.

The extensive research on evidence-based programs provides us with best practice guidelines, which can be used in assessing and strategically improving existing programs, choosing from available program options, and developing new programs when needed.<sup>3</sup> The *What Works, Wisconsin* project at the University of Wisconsin-Madison has identified principles of effective programs based on reviews of the available research.<sup>4</sup> (See page 4 for a summary of these principles.) In addition, the UW-Madison's Institute for Research on Poverty recently released a review of the state of the evidence base for child abuse and neglect prevention, summarizing what is known about the effectiveness of various approaches.<sup>5</sup> A number of recent academic publications have also highlighted characteristics of effective programs; see a listing of several of them in the box on this page.

#### Examples of recent publications on characteristics of effective programs

- Bond, L.A., & Hauf, C.A.M. (2004). Taking stock and putting stock in primary prevention: Characteristics of effective programs. *Journal of Primary Prevention*, 24, 199–221
- Borkowski, J., Akai, C., & Smith, E. (2006). The art and science of prevention research: Principles of effective programs. In J. Borkowski & C. Weaver (Eds.), *Prevention: The science and art of promoting healthy child and adolescent development* (pp. 1–16). Baltimore: Brookes
- Caspe, M., & Lopez, M.E. (2006). *Lessons from family-strengthening interventions: Learning from evidence-based practice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Family Research Project
- Kaminski, J.W., Valle, L.A., Filene, J.H., & Boyle, C.L. (2008). A meta-analytic review of components associated with parent training effectiveness. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 36, 567–589
- Nation, M., Crusto, C., Wandersman, A., Kumpfer, K.L., Seybolt, D., & Morrissey-Kane, E. (2003). What works in prevention: Principles of effective prevention programs. *American Psychologist*, 58, 449–456
- Small, S.A., Cooney, S.M., & O'Connor, C. (2009). Evidence-informed program improvement: Using principles of effectiveness to enhance the quality and impact of family-based prevention programs. *Family Relations*, 58, 1-13

While the specific conclusions of these studies vary in some ways, there is consensus on a number of characteristics that improve effectiveness. Programs are more likely to be effective when they are based on scientific theory; when they are delivered at a high dosage and intensity; when they integrate active learning and skill-building techniques rather than just presentation of information; and when they reach the specific audience for which they were designed (such as parents of children of a certain age, or families from a particular cultural background). In the case of evidence-based programs, they are most likely to have the intended effect when implemented as they were originally designed. Indeed, making significant changes to how such a program is implemented calls into question whether it will have any of the same effects as it had in its original design.<sup>6</sup>

There are important policy implications of these research findings on effective programs.

- **Quality costs time and money.** Effective programs are intensive, keep families involved over many sessions, and often meet the particular needs of a specific group of families. It costs more to offer a variety of programs targeting the needs of particular audiences. In addition, longer programs may require additional staff time and attention to recruit and retain families. However, this approach will be more effective and a better use of time and resources than the brief, “one size fits all” approaches that may cost less or be less time-consuming to administer. Evidence-based programs can also carry substantial start-up costs, such as fees to purchase the curriculum and extensive training for staff, but maintaining such programs over time does not cost as much.
- **The theory behind a program matters.** Good intentions are not enough; agencies should be able to explain the reasons behind what they do and how their programming leads to the prevention of child maltreatment. Quality programs are developed based on scientific theories of human development, learning, or relationships. Programs should also have an internal “program theory” that describes how the program’s activities are related to its intended outcomes. For example, a program may focus on teaching new parents to be more responsive to their infants, which research and

theory tell us will promote healthy attachment and brain development. The program theory would then show that the program activities lead to immediate outcomes that set the stage for more positive parenting throughout the child’s life.

- **Stay true to the program design.** Once the decision has been made to invest in an evidence-based program, it is important to implement the program as it was designed. “Watering down” an evidence-based program by reducing the number of sessions, for example, or using it with families at a different level of risk for maltreatment – may diminish its effectiveness. Because evidence-based programs are often costly, it is essential to use the program in a way that is likely to result in better outcomes for families. Otherwise, investments in staff training and curriculum may be wasted. It may sometimes be necessary to modify a proven program to meet the needs of a given community. In such cases, guidance may be available from the program developer about what types of modifications would have the least impact on the program’s effectiveness. It is essential that such modifications be rigorously evaluated to determine whether effectiveness is sustained.

## ORGANIZATIONAL PRACTICES

In addition to the content of a program, organizational practices also influence the effectiveness of prevention efforts. The *What Works, Wisconsin* project identified aspects of program implementation, assessment, and quality assurance that are associated with more effective interventions. (See a summary of those principles on page 4.)

Prevention programs are more likely to be effective when they are implemented by organizations that take program monitoring and improvement seriously, hire well-qualified staff, and give them appropriate training, supervision, and support.

Policy implications of these organizational practices are listed below.

- **Budget to recruit and support high-quality staff.** Personal characteristics are very important

to how well staff connect with families, but normal education and experience are critical to staff members' ability to respond appropriately to the wide range of family issues they will confront in their jobs. In addition, staff turnover can be detrimental to program effectiveness (because families are less likely to stay involved when their home visitor or parent educator leaves) and can result in additional costs for hiring and training new staff. Better-compensated and supported staff are less likely to burn out and more likely to stay longer in their positions.

- **Look for evidence that programs work.** Only a minority of programs have been rigorously evaluated to demonstrate effects on child maltreatment. However, all programs should be engaged in some form of evaluation. Such evaluations should go beyond participant attendance and satisfaction and include evaluation to improve the program (i.e., formative evaluation), evaluation to ensure the program is being implemented correctly (i.e., implementation evaluation), and evaluation that provides evidence on whether or not the program is effective (i.e., impact or summative evaluation). Agencies not currently engaging in evaluation should be supported with training and technical assistance to begin doing so.
- **Support agencies to engage in evidence-informed program improvement.** Programs or modifications to programs that have not been rigorously evaluated should be documented and compared to the principles of effective programs, following the evidence-informed program improvement process outlined by the *What Works, Wisconsin* project.<sup>7</sup> This process highlights areas for improvement and allows "tweaking" of the program, setting the stage for more rigorous evaluation of the program's effectiveness.

### COMMUNITY PRACTICES

In any given community, many organizations may be engaged in preventing child abuse and neglect. By coordinating efforts, these programs can improve the comprehensiveness of prevention programming available within the community, resulting in greater effectiveness. When families get consistent messages from teachers, child providers, physicians, and parent educators – for example, about child development or positive discipline approaches – they are more likely to

change their behavior accordingly. The importance of comprehensiveness has the following implications for policymakers and others who provide leadership for the prevention of child maltreatment.

- **Redundancy can be a good thing.** Multiple agencies may offer what appear to be very similar programs in a community, which some times inspires policymakers to eliminate duplication of services to save money. While there may be opportunities to reduce administrative costs, it is important to remember that different agencies may serve populations whose distinct needs would not be met as well if the programs were combined. As long as the organizations work collaboratively, the availability of a variety of programs and services can be a sign of comprehensiveness.
- **Encourage coordination among agencies.** Prevention programs that are well coordinated within a community can refer families to the most appropriate service provider; seek savings in administrative costs, for example by sharing space and materials or buying cooperatively; and share responsibility for informing community members about all available prevention programs. Monthly networking meetings, provider listservs, and other inexpensive means of communication can accomplish this goal.
- **Develop and promote shared outcomes for families.** Government and private organizations can work together to develop a shared vision and common outcome goals for families in the community. This promotes each individual agency's ability to evaluate and document its efforts. It also allows for community-level planning and coordination, such as identification of gaps in available services.
- **Enlist other professionals who work with children and families in child maltreatment prevention.** Prevention messages can be delivered in multiple settings and through trusted professionals to help reach all families. For example, physicians or child care providers will be better equipped to make referrals for families who need more intensive support if they are engaged in child maltreatment prevention efforts.

## Principles of effective programs, from the *What Works, Wisconsin* project <sup>8</sup>

### Program design and content

#### *Effective programs:*

- *Are theory-driven.* The components of the program are based on well-established, empirically-supported theory; the program itself has a well thought-out and logical program theory that describes how the program's activities are related to clear, identified, and achievable outcomes.
- *Are of sufficient dosage and intensity.* Participants' exposure must be substantial enough to create changes that will endure over time. Generally, the required dosage and intensity are a reflection of the severity of the problem being addressed or the extent of change desired.
- *Are comprehensive.* Multi-component prevention programs that address a variety of risk and protective factors or assets are usually more effective than single-component programs.
- *Use active learning techniques.* Programs are more effective when they use active and varied teaching methods that engage participants and enable them to learn and practice new skills.

### Program Relevance

#### *Effective programs:*

- *Are developmentally appropriate.* Effective programs respond to the developmental differences that often characterize children and youth of even slightly different ages.
- *Are appropriately timed to reach families when they are most receptive to change.* Reaching out to families as they go through a transition, such as divorce, the birth of a first child, or when a problem first becomes apparent, can help ensure that participants are ready to learn new skills and adjust their behaviors.
- *Are socially and culturally relevant to their participants.* A prevention program is likely to be effective only to the extent that aspects of the program, such as the language and content, are relevant to the participants' lives. When programs reflect their target audiences' cultural experiences, they experience better recruitment and retention.

### Program Implementation

#### *Effective programs:*

- *Are delivered by well-qualified, trained, and supported staff members.* Program effectiveness is related to the staff's experience, confidence, training, and commitment. Additionally, programs have greater impacts and higher retention rates when staff do not turn over regularly and when the same staff members are present for the duration of a program. Effective programs also tend to have staff who share the same vision and receive the support of their administrators.
- *Foster safe, trusting relationships among participants and staff.* Positive behavior change happens most often in the context of supportive relationships. In order for a program to be successful, participants need to feel that they can trust and relate to staff members. Effective group-based programs also pay attention to relationships among participants.

### Program Assessment and Quality Assurance

#### *Effective programs:*

- *Are well-documented.* Effective programs document their specific goals, program components, descriptions of activities and sessions, and directions for implementation.
- *Have staff and administrators who are committed to program monitoring and evaluation.* Evaluation is an essential tool for learning how well a program is being implemented, whether a program has any effects on its participants, and how it produces those effects. Ultimately, in order for a program to be considered evidence-based, it will need to undergo a rigorous impact evaluation. However, before undertaking such an evaluation, it is important that significant time has been spent assessing and improving the program's functioning.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> An evidence-based program is one that has been rigorously evaluated and found to be effective. For more information about how prevention programs are evaluated, see *Child abuse and neglect prevention: What is it and how do we know when it works?* (background brief #1 in this series). For more information about evidence-based programs in general, see *Evidence-based programs: An overview from the What Works, Wisconsin project*, at [http://whatworks.uwex.edu/attachment/whatworks\\_06.pdf](http://whatworks.uwex.edu/attachment/whatworks_06.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Slack, K.S., Maguire-Jack, K., & Gjertson, L.M., Eds. (2009). *Child Maltreatment Prevention: Toward an Evidence-Based Approach*. Madison, WI: Institute for Research on Poverty, University of Wisconsin-Madison. Available at: <http://www.irp.wisc.edu/research/WisconsinPoverty/pdfs/ChildMaltreatment-Final.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Small, S.A., Cooney, S.M., & O'Connor, C. (2009). Evidence-informed program improvement: Using principles of effectiveness to enhance the quality and impact of family-based prevention programs. *Family Relations*, 58, 1-13.

<sup>4</sup> See Small, S.A., Reynolds, A.J., O'Connor, C., & Cooney, S.M. (2005). *What Works, Wisconsin: What science tells us about cost-effective programs for juvenile delinquency prevention*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin-Madison, and other materials available at <http://whatworks.uwex.edu>.

<sup>5</sup> Slack, et al. (2009).

<sup>6</sup> Mihalic, S., Fagan, A., Irwin, K., Ballard, D., & Elliott, D. (2004). *Blueprints for Violence Prevention*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

<sup>7</sup> Small, S.A., O'Connor, C., & Cooney, S.M. (2008). Evidence informed program improvement. *What Works, Wisconsin Program Improvement Manual*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin-Madison/Extension. [http://whatworks.uwex.edu/attachment/whatworks\\_manual.pdf](http://whatworks.uwex.edu/attachment/whatworks_manual.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Adapted from Small, S.A., et al. (2009).

## What it will take: Investing in Wisconsin's Future By Keeping Kids Safe Today

This report is one in a series published by the Children's Trust Fund (CTF), Wisconsin's state agency for the prevention of child maltreatment, and the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families, a private, not-for-profit research and advocacy organization.

The series includes "Child maltreatment prevention: Where we stand and directions for the future" which summarizes research conducted by CTF, the state Department of Children & Families, and the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Social Work and the Institute for Research on Poverty; and five background briefs:

1. Child abuse and neglect prevention: What is it and how do we know when it works?
2. Best practices in child abuse and neglect prevention
3. Current trends in approaches to child abuse and neglect prevention
4. Risk and protective factors related to child abuse and neglect
5. Prevalence of child abuse and neglect in Wisconsin

All materials can be downloaded from [www.wccf.org/what\\_it\\_will\\_take.php](http://www.wccf.org/what_it_will_take.php).

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