



FAMILY RESOURCE CENTERS: Diversity of Structure; Shared Purpose

Family Resource Centers (FRCs) are community-based or school-based organizations that serve as welcoming hubs of services and opportunities designed to strengthen families. Their activities and programs are typically provided at no or low cost to participants. They reflect and are responsive to the specific needs, cultures and interests of the communities and populations served.¹

In Wisconsin FRCs vary in size, service area, structure, appearance, type of services and program offerings. Some are small with only minimal staff, serving families in an individual community with one or two types of services. Others may have wide variety of

program options and teams serving an entire region of the state. Services to families might include group, social, and educational events for families; opportunities for parent engagement and contribution; evidence-based and evidence-informed parent education; parent support groups or peer-to-peer programs; play groups for children and their caregivers; family resource navigation; food, infant supplies, and other concrete supports; welcome baby visits at local hospitals; child safety information; toy and resource lending libraries; financial literacy services and supports; home visiting and supervised visitation; and safe exchange programs.

Organizations that function as FRCs go by many names. The offerings they provide are as diverse as the families and communities

¹ National Family Support Network <https://www.nationalfamilysupportnetwork.org/family-support-programs>

they serve. However, they are unified in their shared purpose and goal of strengthening families, promoting child and parent well-being and preventing child maltreatment.

FRCS & FAMILY SUPPORT

In general, FRCs promote an inclusive and holistic definition of family, embracing any adult providing care to a child in their life.

“We’re here for parenting, regardless of what that looks like or how you define it.” Tricia, FRC Leadership

The philosophy that parenting is universally challenging and also rewarding is integral to the approach of FRCs toward families. FRCs seek to highlight the fact every parent or caregiver experiences parenting difficulties and to normalize the need for support seeking for all parents.

What varies between FRCs is the age range of the children or stages of child and family development on which they focus, their menu of programs and services and the community partnerships they establish. An emphasis on early childhood, families with children from birth to five years of age, is common among most FRCs. Some also offer programming for the prenatal period, and others extend efforts into middle and late childhood and beyond, through adolescence.

FRCS & PREVENTION

Promoting child and family well-being while preventing child maltreatment is core to the work of FRCs. Adverse childhood experiences, including child maltreatment, unhealthy environments, poor parenting, and lack of opportunity, have lifelong impacts.



Prevention of child maltreatment requires a tiered approach to services where all families universally receive the types of tailored supports needed to promote the nurturance and development of their children. Some families receive more intensive, specialized supports due to additional needs.

Primary Prevention Services

In Wisconsin FRCs serve a unique role by offering primary prevention services and approaches to families.

“It’s so low key, and it’s for everybody... And so, here at a Family Resource Center, our goal really is primary prevention and really supporting families.” Brenda, FRC Leadership

Primary prevention activities are directed at the general population, regardless of level of child maltreatment risk. The aim is to stop child maltreatment before it occurs and to build protective factors which act as buffers against adversity while also promoting the optimal development of children.

“You [have] the families who are really just seeking that parenting support, maybe have concerns about their child’s development... But then you’ve got those families who parenting isn’t even on their radar because it’s having to navigate employment and childcare and [...] low-income situations and domestic, all those things that come with just living in poverty essentially and being able to provide services that are connecting them to what they need so that they can start to think about, ‘how can I spend more time with my child? Am I connecting?’ Those healthier relationship pieces that they don’t have the opportunity to even consider right now.” Julie, FRC Leadership

Primary prevention strategies are most often offered universally, where all members of the community have access to and benefit from these efforts. Examples include opportunities to build relationships with and between parents through social events, play groups, parent cafes and peer-to-peer programming; knowledge building through parent education



offerings and resource sharing by providing access to baby products, lending of toys or books; open play spaces; or connecting parents to other community resources.

Secondary Prevention Services

FRCs recognize that some families are facing greater challenges and different or more intense supports can be more beneficial. Secondary types of prevention are designed to provide those additional supports to families that are facing more factors that are associated with higher risks for child maltreatment.

“I think that’s where you really do the best work, is in the home and in their [the families’] environment.”
Donna, FRC Leadership

To engage in secondary prevention, FRCs offer more in-depth services to families that meet specific criteria in terms of family characteristics. Examples include evidence-based home visiting, financial literacy and resources, community response programming and ongoing family resource navigation.

Tertiary Prevention

Tertiary prevention is designed for families with high intensity needs, including identifiable signs or instances of child maltreatment.

“I’ve always felt strongly that there needs to be somebody to serve [...] families so they can get their kids back or keep [their parental rights] from being terminated.”
Lisa, FRC Leadership

While their emphasis is on primary and secondary prevention, some FRCs offer

services that focus on the tertiary level of prevention. This may include more intensive parent education designed for families who have court mandates for services or need services for supervised visitation after their children have been removed from their home.

EFFECTIVENESS OF FRCs

Much of the research related to FRCs has focused on individual programs offered by these organizations. Because the study of FRCs as a whole is very complex, the research to date is still limited. Several evaluations have shown a reduction in the number of cases or investigations of child abuse and neglect in neighborhoods with FRCs in comparison to matched neighborhoods without FRCs.² Studies have also demonstrated improvement in Protective Factors, qualities and strengths of families known to reduce the likelihood of child maltreatment, among families using FRC services.³ Lastly, a cost benefit analysis of Alabama’s network of FRCs demonstrated that for every \$1 invested in FRC services, there is a social return on that investment of nearly \$5 for the state.⁴ Although research on FRCs as a whole versus individual programs is limited, the evaluations that have occurred demonstrate promising possibilities. ●



All of the information and quotes in this brief come from extensive interviews of leadership within eight Wisconsin Family Resource Centers. The names attributed to the quotes are pseudonyms of FRC directors and educators.

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2 Casey Family Programs, “Do Place-Based Programs, Such as Family Resource Centers, Reduce Risk of Child Maltreatment and Entry into Foster Care?”

3 Ibid

4 Community Services Analysis LLC. (2014). Social Return on Investment Study