The Role of Child Day Care in Strengthening and Supporting Vulnerable and At-Risk Families and Children

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Conditions for children and families in America continue to deteriorate. Escalating family poverty, unemployment, homelessness, isolation and despair, together with growing substance abuse and community and domestic violence, have greatly contributed to the dramatic increase in child abuse and neglect occurring over the past decade. In 1992 alone, nearly three million children were reported abused or neglected—an increase of approximating 150 per cent in ten years—leading to more and more children being separated from their families. By mid-1991, an estimated 600,000 children were living apart from their families in foster homes, juvenile detention centers, or mental health facilities. While out-of-home care is necessary and beneficial for some children and families, much more needs to be done at the community and practice level to prevent abuse and neglect and help families adequately care for their children.

Comprehensive child day care, incorporating child development, nutrition, health, and family services, can play a significant role in strengthening and supporting families. It strengthens and preserves families by addressing issues that place a family at risk, provides support for the child and family in time of crisis, and eases the transition of a child back to his or her family. Child day care promotes and supports family resources by enhancing, not replacing, family responsibilities.

Child day care may serve as a preventive service that can help reduce or eliminate social, emotional, or health problems that affect children and parents. It can assist parents with problems of child-rearing and family stress. Parents may participate in structured and unstructured activities designed to strengthen their parenting. The relationships that parents develop with staff members and other parents are important psychological and social supports. By actively promoting and encouraging the involvement of families and serving as an extended support system, child day care can make a significant contribution to the prevention of child abuse and neglect.

When developed as a preventive family resource and support service, child day care focuses on:

- developing positive relationships with parents;
- alerting parents to signs of stress in their own behavior;
- providing parents with opportunities to identify and address issues such as alcohol or drug involvement;
- providing parents with an understanding of child development;
- providing opportunities for parents to become involved in the care of their children and in
activities that maximize their children's development;

- providing parents with opportunities to enhance their parenting skills;
- communicating regularly with parents concerning the status of their children;
- providing parent education;
- modeling and teaching developmentally appropriate parenting practices;
- providing information about community resources.

At a more protective level, child day care can function as a safety net for a child when addressing issues and behaviors of parents that place children at risk of abuse or neglect. Child day care provides an opportunity for early identification and intervention that can result in better outcomes for children and families and avert crises that could threaten family stability. Child day care providers are in a unique position to identify and respond early to disabilities, developmental delays, and signs of abuse and neglect.

Child day care as an element of family-centered casework services can build on parents' strengths by facilitating participation in classes and workshops that improve both parenting skills and parents' ability to respond to stresses that heighten the risk of child abuse and neglect. Staff can link families to other community resources and help parents marshall their own resources to access services and support. Child day care can provide a central location where parents can network with each other and offer mutual social and emotional support. Such support can diminish the sense of isolation many parents, especially young parents, encounter, and can be an effective buffer against stress, reducing a child's risk of maltreatment. For many families who are experiencing stress, quality child day care may be the most critical of all services. Few supplemental services may be required if quality child day care is readily available.

Part of the success of intensive family preservation services may be attributed to the ability of the caseworker to help family members access the resources and services they need. Particular attention must be paid to child day care and its relationship to these services because most families will require some level of additional support when the intensive intervention is complete. It is necessary to explore and develop strategies and collaborative models that combine short-term, intensive intervention and long-term access to quality child day care, ongoing support for the family, and support and assistance for the child day care program staff.

Early research has indicated that child day care, as a partner service to intensive family preservation services, can improve the physical, emotional, and developmental well-being of children and provide social and economic benefits for families at risk of disruption because of abuse and neglect. Current research findings suggest the need for child day care services should be assessed in every intensive family preservation referral that includes young children.2

Research further indicates that child day care outside of the home can be extremely helpful to children who have been physically or sexually abused. Child day care provides a safe and caring place for the child as parents learn how to cope with problems and alter their child-rearing behaviors.
Child day care furnishes abused and neglected children with structured assistance to maximize their development and ability to engage constructively with caregivers and peers. Such experiences are particularly important because the aggressive and/or withdrawn behaviors associated with abuse and neglect may impair children's efforts to develop positive relationships and learn from stimulating environments.

In conjunction with intensive family preservation services, child day care can:

- provide an untapped information and assistance resource as well as an often overlooked but vitally needed "wellness" perspective on the family.
- offer, particularly in the form of therapeutic child day care, emotional support and therapy for a child who has already been seriously affected by family problems while the child remains in the family.
- improve the developmental outcome for many drug- or alcohol-exposed children and provide an essential support to families coping with alcohol and drug problems or involved in treatment or recovery programs. Specialized child development services can reduce the developmental risks to these children.
- through crisis nursery and respite care programs, give parents the opportunity to sort out problems while temporarily relieved of the care for children. Respite care can provide parents with opportunities to restore their physical and mental well-being so they can later meet the needs of their children successfully.

Endnotes:
