



Family Support

ISSUE BRIEF 4

This issue brief is the fourth in a series developed by Early Childhood Iowa – Quality Services and Programs Component Group. The issue brief is developed to inform policy makers about the importance of family support.

Family Support through Home Visiting

Families, in all the diverse patterns, sizes, creeds, and colors they come in; are the heart and soul of our society. The condition of children’s lives largely reflects the well-being of their families. Parents have the greatest impact on their child’s development and success, but many need support in learning how to nurture and teach their child. Every day children learn about life and who they are through interactions with and observations of their parents and other primary caregivers. Effective home visiting offers family support that recognizes and respects the special role that parents play in shaping the lives of their children.

Family Support through Home Visiting: What is it?

Family support is an array of community-based services designed to enable and empower families by building on individual and family capabilities that support and strengthen parenting capabilities and overall family functioning. Home visiting is a strategy for delivering family support services. Different programs that use home visiting as a delivery method can have very different goals e.g., preventing child abuse, school readiness, parent involvement, and advocacy. Iowa currently has a patchwork of family support programs operating at various levels of effectiveness that vary in goals, program models they follow, funding levels, and training and support for staff.

What Makes an Effective Family Support Program?

Family support programs are defined as community-based services to promote the well-being of children and families.

Family support programs have the following characteristics:

- Family driven, meaning there is a true partnership with families
- Comprehensive, flexible, and individualized to each family based on their culture, needs, values, and preferences
- Builds on strengths to increase the stability of family members and the family unit
- Utilizes informal and formal family supports

Why is Family Support Important?

Effective family support programs delivered through home visits play a critical part in helping prepare children for school and for life. Home visiting programs can assist parents early on in developing knowledge and skills critical to helping their children succeed in school and in life. For at-risk children, family support is especially important as they often begin preschool or kindergarten playing “catch-up.” Family support programs coupled with and embedded in quality child care, preschool and kindergarten will help children get the best start in life.

Quality Services & Programs Workgroup Members

AEA 9

Joyce Leavell

AEA 13

Connie Gronstal

CCR&R

Cathy Wheatcraft

Child Health Specialty Clinics

Erin Kongshaug

Brenda Moore

Child & Family Policy Center

Carrie Fitzgerald

Community Empowerment

Deb Schrader (Warren & Adair)

Department of Education

Dee Gethmann

Judy Knox

Department of Public Health

Sally Clausen

Gretchen Hageman

Jenny Hodges

Heather Miller

Jan Steffen

Jane Stockton

Sonni Vierling

Des Moines Public Schools

Sylvia Becerra

Drake University Head Start

Georgia Sherif

Iowa Chapter of Academy of Pediatrics

Becky White

Iowa State University Extension

Kim Greder

Sharon Mays

Peggy Miller

Iowa State University

Sue Hegland

Lutheran Services of Iowa

Mary Odell

MATURA Action Corporation

PJ West

Mid-Iowa Community Action

Ruth Krueger

Parent

Kathy Grossman

Prevent Child Abuse Iowa

Christy Thies

Prevention Concepts

Jovanka Westbrook

Office of Empowerment

Janet Gartin

South Iowa Economic Development Agency

Pat McReynolds

State Library

Mary Cameron

Young Parents Network

Danielle Leeser

What are Iowa's key challenges in developing a Family Support System?

In order to make a difference in the support we give to children and their families, two key strategies must be

1. **Maximize resources** to better **align with the families' needs** to the programs primary purpose.
2. Assure **fidelity** to the family support program model. Evidence-based program models have been thoroughly researched and evaluated and have produced positive results for children and families. When programs drift from the model we don't get the same results.

Family Support System Building Recommendations

Recommendations

In order to fully develop a comprehensive family support system to meet the needs of families the following strategies are recommended:

1. Develop a set of basic standards for family support programs. The standards would be the first step towards improving the effectiveness of family support programs. Standards should address four critical components:
 - a. Solid program adherence and organizational capacity to provide the program.
 - b. Family engagement by forming an established relationship for a sufficient period of time to accomplish meaningful change in parent knowledge and skills.
 - c. Competencies for home visitor including cultural competence between the family and provider.
 - d. Rigorous supervision at the local level.
2. Develop and implement a comprehensive training system for early care, health, and education providers.
 - a. Continuing education and training strategies are needed for family support providers.
 - b. Training strategies are also needed for family support supervisors. Research emphasizes the importance of having a highly qualified, trained supervisor promoting the program fidelity.
3. Continue support for the state level Family Support Coordinator providing a mechanism to provide technical assistance and training to family support programs. Technical assistance moves the programs toward evidence-based models.

Summary

Iowa is poised to infuse statewide evidence-based home visiting methods that can be incorporated into existing family support programs and tailor made to fit individual program goals. Therefore, Iowa needs to continue to direct resources toward the enhancement of effective family support services through the home visiting method. Research clearly states that the key to effective family support programming lies in the quality of the services. Fidelity to a program model can significantly increase the effectiveness of the service. Only the effective family support programs delivered through home visiting will have the ability to benefit Iowa children and their families!

Resources:

Bilukha, O., Hahn, R., Crosby, A., Fullilove, M., Liberman, A., Moscicki, E., Snyder, S., Tuma, F., Corso, F., Schofield, A., Briss, P., (2005). The effectiveness of early childhood visitation in preventing violence. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 28, 11-39.

Rapoport, Dana and O'Brien-Strain, Margaret. (September 2004). In Home Visitation Programs and A Review of the Literature. *Sphere Institute Report* (pp. 51 –52) Sept 24, 2001

Gombey, Deanna (2005). Home Visitation in 2005: Outcome for Children and Parents.

Hebbler, Kathleen, Gerlach-Downies, Suzanne (2002) Inside the black box of home visiting: a qualitative analysis of why intended outcomes were achieved. *Early Childhood Quarterly*.