

# Starting Early for a Lifetime of Success

**Innovations in Child Welfare and  
Early Childhood Education**

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## Starting Early for a Lifetime of Success: Innovations in Child Welfare and Early Childhood Education

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Research in education and trauma has made the importance of the early years irrefutable. It is now widely acknowledged that no child can really be ready to enter first grade without preschool and Kindergarten, and that kids who start behind are likely to stay behind. And we know that programs and resources aimed at preventing child abuse and neglect must start early, for research shows that trauma during these years affects long-term outcomes by impacting brain development, cognitive functioning, physical regulation, and the ability to form successful relationships.

For most of its history, the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services—like most child welfare systems—has seen its domain as ensuring child safety. Recently, in the course of adopting a lifetime approach (see sidebar), we have broadened our view: IDCFS is a parent to every child in our care, for as long as the child is in our care. We must fulfill that role, because every child needs a parent. As that parent, we must provide for the well-being of every ward, and ensuring safety is a means toward that end. That philosophical shift has key implications for the way we serve young children. Nearly half (40%) of our kids are under age 5, a percentage typical of child welfare departments. Like the older children and youths in the system’s care, they depend on the state of Illinois to provide for their well-being. For IDCFS and for any child

welfare system, the chief responsibility in being the parent of young children is to provide developmentally and clinically appropriate services that respond to the consequences of trauma and promote physical and emotional development. That includes:

- Taking responsibility for children’s need for school readiness
- Researching and developing best practices for working with children ages 0 to 3 and 3 to 5
- Instituting trauma-informed practice and taking responsibility for reducing trauma caused by children’s involvement with the child welfare system
- Applying a lifetime approach to all of our work and embracing our role as a parent to thousands of children

### The Lifetime Approach

The lifetime approach calls for us to view each child entering the system as potentially being in the state’s care throughout his or her lifetime and therefore nurturing each child’s development from the moment he or she enters the system.

The goals of the lifetime approach are:

- Re-affirm the child welfare agency’s role as surrogate parent
- Identify and treat trauma early
- Anticipate child development needs
- Recognize the child’s emotional attachment to his or her biological family
- Focus on well-being outcomes
- Establish the foundation for healthy adulthood
- Build bridges to the community

keeping that child safe and that family strong. IDCFS’s role puts it in the unprecedented position of being able to help everyone working with vulnerable children to embrace family strengthening and child protection as priorities. And by supporting these systems in doing so, we can expect to see more enthusiasm for quality child welfare practice efforts among all partners.

## A Quantum Leap for Child Welfare

Through Strengthening Families Illinois and the Illinois School Readiness Initiative, a broad range of partners convened by IDCFS are working to prevent child abuse and neglect and making sure kids who have entered the system don’t lose ground during the years that are so crucial to their development. Perhaps most important, IDCFS and its partners are linking early childhood education and child welfare throughout Illinois.

As we work to fulfill our responsibilities as the parent to young children in our care, the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services is forging a new path that no child welfare system has taken before. That path presents many challenges. We must achieve profound changes in the skills and competencies of parents, foster parents, and others caring for children ages 0 to 5. Caseworkers and others who work with young children in the system must learn to think of this population in a new way. In addition, we face practical challenges, from funding the required programs to securing care for children who are only in quality preschool for part of the day.

But as the parent to more than 6,000 children ages 0 to 5, IDCFS is obligated to make sure that those children are cared for and educated.

And because we know that quality early care and education programs prevent abuse and neglect and keep kids out of the system, it makes good sense to expand the availability of those programs. If we continue to meet the needs of children and their families during the early years, we are bound to see marked improvements in well-being across the life span for people who are or have been in the care of the child welfare system. It is my hope that our experiences at the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services will help child welfare systems across the country start early for a lifetime of success.

materials to reflect the importance of strong parent-child communication and bonding. As a result, the federal government included this factor in the Community-Based Child Abuse Prevention legislation, and CSSP is reconvening Strengthening Families Initiative partners to add the sixth protective factor to the initiative on the national level.

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**By using the protective factors to develop quality practice across systems, we are ensuring that our kids get the benefit of our best combined resources in the early years, when preventing trauma is crucial.**

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Within IDCFS, we are integrating the six protective factors in many facets of our work, including:

- Integrating them into assessment of children entering the system
- Incorporating them into training for caseworkers
- Developing tools and resources for intact families to prevent repeat maltreatment
- Developing on-line training for early childhood centers
- Disseminating information on the protective factors to early childhood centers via licensing staff

The protective factors are going to form the foundation for ongoing training for all child welfare caseworkers and foster parents, and for the licensing of staff. This licensing process will equip and prepare child welfare staff to help early childhood centers develop quality practice. And IDCFS, in its capacity as the licensing agency for childcare centers statewide, will be

training staff of all early childhood centers using a Strengthening Families Illinois curriculum that rests on the protective factors.

By using these factors to develop quality practice across systems, departments, agencies, and centers, we are focusing our energies, gathering momentum, and creating synergy so that our kids get the benefit of our best combined resources in their early years, when preventing trauma is crucial.

#### **The Role of IDCFS**

IDCFS is convening Strengthening Families Illinois because the collaborations engendered through this initiative will result in outcomes that are at the core of our work:

- Fewer children in the system
- Higher-quality programs to support the social and emotional development of both children and their families
- Better outcomes for wards and other young children who have experienced trauma

Strengthening Families Illinois is a low-cost, high impact opportunity to engage the early childhood community in addressing the needs of children in the child welfare system. The ideals and practices of the initiative provide a well-researched foundation upon which all prevention strategies can be built across state agencies. As the initiative continues, we will see increased involvement and collaboration among even more partners, making the work IDCFS has always done to keep kids safe all the more effective.

As a convener and partner of this initiative, IDCFS is promoting the understanding that every system with which a young child and his or her family has contact is a crucial partner in

## **Importance of Early Childhood Centers**

Our best research points toward early childhood centers as an opportunity of tremendous significance to child welfare systems: Enrolling children in quality early childhood centers supports cognitive and social-emotional development and provides experiences that help kids get ready for school. Centers that intentionally engage with families as a recognized aspect of quality early care and education do an even better job of meeting these needs. Most significantly, these centers strengthen the family in ways that prevent abuse and neglect, and they provide therapies and extra supports to help children who have faced trauma. These programs are critical for children in the child welfare system, who need extra help getting ready for school due to the trauma and stigma they face. And by providing the support parents and children need, these programs prevent children from entering the system in the first place.

Nothing speaks more powerfully to the importance of early childhood education for our kids than the words of a former foster child who was not enrolled in preschool: "I can still remember in first grade, kids calling me stupid and saying things like, 'We learned that in preschool!' I had never been to preschool, and it showed all over my face," remembers Denishia Yearby. Denishia was lucky; she received intensive academic attention in first grade and eventually caught up, even earning an IDCFS scholarship to attend college. But the vast majority of kids who start behind simply stay behind. And most of the children in the child welfare system start behind.

In short, quality early childhood centers are the most powerful resource for improving our kids' chances of success because:

- They strengthen children's cognitive and social-emotional development, preparing them for success in school (which prepares them for success in life).
- Going to the same preschool every day or every other day provides a measure of stability in the life of a child whose home and family may be in turmoil.
- Many quality centers provide a range of services that support foster families and children with special needs.
- Early childhood education staff working in partnership with child welfare staff exponentially increase the power of services and programs for these kids.

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Early childhood centers play a special role for families at risk of abuse and neglect. Research by the Center for the Study of Social Policy shows that high-quality early childhood centers:

- Support families by providing timely advice, support, and education to help them help their children
- Go the extra mile to help families work with children who may be "challenging"
- Provide an effective early warning system for many kinds of problems young children and their families are facing

In addition, devoting more energy to early childhood education is necessary in order for IDCFS to fulfill its responsibility—as the department charged with licensing these centers—for ensuring that every child in Illinois receives quality childcare and education during the 0-to-5 years.

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### **Child welfare workers are now required to make education part of the service plan for every child 3 and older who is in the child welfare system.**

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It is in response to these facts that IDCFS has embarked on two ground-breaking early childhood initiatives: the School Readiness Initiative and Strengthening Families through Early Care and Education Illinois.

### **School Readiness Initiative**

For several reasons, enrollment in quality preschool is especially important for children in the child welfare system. Special attention must be paid in order to ensure that these children's social, emotional, and cognitive developmental needs are met, in light of the long-term impact of developmental setbacks often associated with trauma. In Illinois, we are also enrolling wards in quality preschool as a way of preventing the poor educational and other outcomes we've identified among the state's older wards and those who have aged out of the system. The timing of the initiative is such that it has coincided with the state's Preschool for All program, which since 2005 has required that all of the state's 3- and 4-year-olds be enrolled in preschool.

The first goal of the Illinois School Readiness Initiative is to achieve 100-percent enrollment of

wards in Head Start, state-funded pre-Kindergarten, or—when one of these options is not available—an accredited early care and education program, for at least part of the day. (As of 2004, approximately half of 3-to-5-year-old wards in Illinois were enrolled in a quality preschool program.) The second goal of the initiative is to keep those educational placements as stable as possible for as long as possible, even as children change foster care placements and achieve permanency. Third, if children must move, caseworkers and teachers are helping them say goodbye, making sure they take along artwork, and taking other steps to assist them with the transition. In addition to these goals, the School Readiness Initiative is planning for the future by articulating best practices in child welfare for children 0 to 3.

### **Core Policy Changes**

The Illinois School Readiness Initiative is built around a set of core policy changes. Changes in Education Policy 314 are in progress and would require child welfare workers to make education part of the service plan for every child 3 years of age and older who is in the child welfare system (although compulsory education still starts at age 6 by law in Illinois). Caseworkers may no longer write "DNA" ["does not apply"] in the education section of these children's service plans. Previously, the mandate began at age 6, with first grade, although children involved in early intervention services could be required to be in preschool. And to make sure everyone working with the child understands and carries out the plan, each child entering the system now has an "educational passport"—a database record used by the child's case worker, teachers, and other preschool staff and service providers.

- Children in informal care of grandparents
- Children with mentally ill parents
- Children in homes with domestic violence
- The families of these children

While these populations comprise the majority of families in child welfare workers' caseloads, caseworkers have little opportunity to partner with the staff of these centers. Without the kinds of changes put in place through Strengthening Families Illinois, at best, some caseworkers try to keep children in a stable childcare placement through family disruptions, and child welfare agencies may provide childcare subsidies targeted to certain outcomes.

Beyond the practice level, Strengthening Families Illinois is forging change in policies and systems by embedding protective factors into child welfare services and early childhood systems. SFI's thorough evaluation mechanisms currently are tracking the changes occurring at pilot sites as a result of the initiative's activities and training. We are studying and learning from those findings in order to take the initiative to scale, and what we are learning has implications for all efforts to effect change in child welfare and early childhood policies, practices, and outcomes.

### **Parent Leadership and Involvement**

Promoting strong families through early childhood centers means working not only with children and staff but—even more important—with parents. Parent leadership and parent-to-parent support and communication are central to Strengthening Families Illinois. Parents are active leaders in the statewide Leadership Teams that drive programmatic decisions and in the local teams that oversee pilot sites.

In winter 2006–2007, the initiative will begin a public awareness campaign that empowers parents with the information they need to take responsibility for nurturing their children. Parents will give presentations at early childhood centers, often on "parent nights," that frame the protective factors in language that is relevant and interesting to them. The presentations start with the theme "Love Isn't Enough ... to Raise a Family" and go on to explain how parents can access and mobilize resources that build the six protective factors. Through this campaign and all of SFI's center-based activities, the initiative is putting the power of the protective factors directly in the hands of parents, in common language. This strengths-based approach builds on the fact that parents love their children, have good intentions, and can access resources in order to keep their families strong.

### **The Power of the Protective Factors**

In Illinois, the six research-based protective factors are making an important contribution to our understanding of how to keep children safe—and are providing the basis for acting on that understanding. By bringing together more than 40 partners who have agreed to focus on the factors as a way of preventing child abuse and neglect, we have marshaled our forces to make the early years safe for children statewide.

Having begun work to embed the original five factors articulated by the national Strengthening Families Initiative into early childhood education, Strengthening Families Illinois found that these factors overlooked a key factor in keeping families strong: parent-child relationships. SFI's Building Resiliency Work Group initiated a literature review on the subject, and SFI revised its

The training and professional development provided by SFI play a large role in enabling staff to strengthen families. Developed by the Midwest Learning Center for Family Support, Family Focus, Inc.—a key partner in the initiative—these training programs translate the groundbreaking research behind the protective factors into a form that is readily comprehensible and actionable to center staff.

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In the first year of the initiative, staff have participated in the following training sessions:

- Orientation—SFI: A Paradigm Shift from Child-Centered to Family-Centered Child Care (90–120 minutes)
- Six Protective Factors that Keep Families Strong (half-day): This session soon will include training on the program self-assessment, at the request of pilot sites.
- Stronger Together—Family Support and Early Childhood (six days, adaptable): This nationally evaluated curriculum grounds centers in developing strong relationships with families. Recognized as a pre-eminent curriculum for infusing family support into early childhood programs, it was developed by Parent Services Project in California based on 25 years' experience.

Centers entering their second year of participation access more advanced training, including:

- Recognizing and Responding to Signs of Family Stress / Advanced Communication Skills with Families (full day)
- Collaborating with Child Welfare Agencies (half-day)
- Social and Emotional Development (four days, adaptable): Provided by the Center on Social Emotional Foundations for Early Learning
- Helping Young Children Heal from Trauma (two days)

As the initiative begins its third year, it is considering developing and providing training in areas such as Reflective Practice and Supervision, Parallel Process with Early Childhood Staff, Sensory Processing, and Making Effective Use of Mental Health Consultation.

In addition to training, staff at participating centers take part in monthly Peer Support/Learning Meetings where staff of different centers gather, maximizing the impact of all training and solidifying centers' commitment to networking and continual learning. They also receive specialized technical assistance through their learning networks, which can mobilize resources and request assistance in areas related to implementation that do not require full training days.

The logic behind making early childhood centers the primary frontier for preventing child abuse and neglect is clear: These centers already serve large numbers of people whom the child welfare system is working to protect and strengthen:

- Children in foster care
- Children with open cases
- Children of parents in drug treatment
- Children with multiple reports
- Children who are marginally homeless

In addition, on the agency level, our innovative performance-based contracts with child welfare agencies provide for full compensation only when the agencies include education in each service plan.

These policy changes have been implemented over a period of more than a year and have been achieved through careful communication, training and support, and change—both from the bottom up and the top down. These steps are crucial in implementing preschool policy changes, as evidenced by the Illinois School Readiness Initiative's success relative to attempts by other child welfare systems.

### Communicating Change

Changing the perception of the purpose of preschool programs has been a critical component of the initiative. In the past, many have viewed these programs as a means of providing child-care so that parents can work. The School Readiness Initiative frames early care and education programs as an educational entitlement, stressing the role of quality preschool in getting children ready for school and life. With its partners, IDCFs created a logic model defining school readiness as comprehensive child development, which includes physical, social, emotional, and cognitive well-being. We cited research from the Center for the Study of Social Policy (see Strengthening Families Illinois, below) showing that these measures of school readiness are strengthened by quality preschool.

To communicate these new messages about early care and education to all of its partners in the School Readiness Initiative, IDCFs started with the general message that school starts at age 3. As stakeholders have become more

experienced with early care and education, we have increased the amount of detail communicated to them regarding the specific benefits of quality preschool and how they can maximize children's access to those benefits.

To reach those working in the child welfare system, we launched an internal awareness campaign tailored to workers and foster parents. That campaign has been carried out in numerous ways, including:

- Posting a Director's message on the Web page visited every day by all IDCFs workers
- Providing educational consultation to case workers, during which consultants spread the message that education starts at age 3
- Widely circulating a brochure built around the message, "Our Kids Deserve a Fair Start: Enroll Them in a Quality Preschool Today"
- Training all caseworkers, introducing them to all of the policy and practice changes
- Embedding the new policies into performance contracts for contract child welfare agencies
- Enlisting the team that monitors and ensures contract compliance in disseminating information to those agencies and monitoring them
- Engaging educational advisors and liaisons who work with child welfare in the initiative
- Assisting with educational issues for foster children in helping to place kids in early childhood education programs
- Communicating with child development specialists who track children ages 0 to 3 and helping to ensure they get services for identified special needs
- Informing these specialists about the preschool effort so that they can troubleshoot

issues related to getting and keeping kids in early childhood programs

- Funding two enhanced-referral specialists at Illinois Action for Children, the state’s largest childcare resource and referral agency, who help caseworkers in Cook County find appropriate early learning placements

**Training and Support**

It takes much more than policy mandates to really change how we care for our young children. Through the Illinois School Readiness Initiative, we are providing all staff who have contact with children ages 3 to 5 in the child welfare system with thorough guidelines, training, and technical assistance. To begin with, we convened a work group from the state’s childcare, Head Start, and education departments to draft guidelines for caseworkers in placing children. We conducted a needs assessment to determine what frontline caseworkers need in order to place children in quality preschool. And we have enlisted our training office to develop desk aids and an implementation manual, which are used in the training required for caseworkers.

IDCFS staff other than caseworkers have also played a role in planning for our young children’s success. Educational advisors, who previously provided educational support for foster parents starting with Kindergarten, now help families locate quality preschools. Early childhood services coordinators are trouble-shooting special cases. Licensing staff are including quality early childhood education practice in the training and licensing of daycare / preschool providers. And contract monitors are ensuring that contracted child welfare agencies are creat-

ing and following through on educational plans for all wards.

Perhaps most important, in order to successfully enroll wards in quality preschool, we worked to:

- Ensure that those who would be implementing the plan to enroll young children in quality preschool participate in constructing that plan (i.e., work from the “bottom up”)
- Communicate our commitment to quality preschool enrollment by issuing a mandate from the child welfare agency’s top leadership (i.e., work from the “top down”)

**Working from the Bottom Up**

A hallmark of IDCFS’s School Readiness Initiative—and a strategy that has been absent from other initiatives seeking to enroll wards in preschool—has been the convening of a group of stakeholders from the very beginning in order to build support and buy-in. Before any policy changes were implemented, IDCFS met with stakeholders to inform them of the changes, discuss their roles and their concerns, and—in the case of partners outside the child welfare system—forge collaborative agreements. By the time the policy mandates took effect, stakeholders had already modified their practices and did not feel that they were being asked to make drastic changes without sufficient preparation. In addition, all stakeholders and policy-setters had worked out the “kinks” in the policies so that they could be implemented realistically.

To build collaborations with the early childhood community, IDCFS began by working with the state’s network of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies to set up meetings with early childhood education advocates and organiza-

trainers in 12 states to incorporate family partnerships in professional development activities. The federal Office on Child Abuse and Neglect has incorporated the protective factors into its framework for promoting, funding, and evaluating child abuse prevention efforts. The nationally acknowledged leader in implementing Strengthening Families at all levels is Illinois, especially with regard to developing strong early childhood–child welfare linkages.

**How the Initiative Works**

Strengthening Families Illinois (SFI) is replicating the national model by embedding the protective factors in six pilot communities. The initiative is working to change practices in early childhood centers by: (1) working with center leaders to commit to embed the Strengthening Families approach, (2) providing training to enhance skills and knowledge, and (3) facilitating technical assistance and support through peer-to-peer learning networks.

To begin to embed the Strengthening Families approach, each center completes a self-assessment developed by CSSP, documenting the presence of program strategies that build the protective factors. Each center also develops an action plan and timeline for addressing areas of challenge in the center. For support in implementing their plans, center staff receive training—but also, more significantly, staff from different centers meet and provide each other with technical assistance on a peer basis to carry out their plans.

The success of SFI is measured by change both in early childhood centers and in the child welfare system. Statewide, through the Initiative, we expect 80 percent of licensed childcare centers in Illinois to:

- Become aware of the connection between building protective factors and preventing child abuse and neglect
- Recognize family support as a key part of quality childcare
- Know where to go to get the training they need

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**Strengthening Families Illinois may be the most comprehensive initiative to address child abuse and neglect to date.**

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For child welfare agency staff, the goals are to:

- Include early childhood education placements in service planning
- Keep educational placements stable
- Become aware of the effect that building protective factors can have on preventing abuse and neglect
- Gain a greater understanding of the important role early childhood education has in child development

Most important, SFI brings the child welfare system and providers of early childhood education together to strengthen families. While the success of the initiative can be measured by the achievement of the above goals, the collaboration between these two sets of partners itself is an achievement and is positively affecting the ways in which staff, policies, and practices in both environments work together to keep families strong. In communities across Illinois, child welfare staff and early childhood educators who are working with the same families are collaborating to enroll children in preschool, create service plans, keep educational placements stable, and address challenging behaviors.

- Build the capacity of early childhood centers to recognize early warning signs of child abuse and neglect and other trauma, deal effectively with these issues, and build factors that protect children
- Strengthen relationships between child welfare case workers and childcare staff
- Strengthen relationships between early childhood programs and parents in particular ways

Strengthening Families Illinois may be the most comprehensive initiative to address child abuse and neglect to date. We have involved representatives from virtually all stakeholders in early childhood systems and services: state agencies with responsibility for services, education, human services for children in this age group and their families, advocacy and policy organizations, providers, parent leaders, and others. Since its inception in 2005, the group has grown to include more than 40 partners (see sidebar). Many of them have memoranda of understanding with Strengthening Families Illinois that outline a scope of collaborative work. As an example of the degree to which this work is embedded in the work of statewide agencies, the Illinois State Board of Education listed Strengthening Families Illinois as a supplemental program in its Prevention Initiative.

Illinois' partnership between child welfare and early care and education is backed up by sound research. In 2002, the national Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) sought a strategic, feasible approach to preventing child abuse and neglect that was systematic, was national in scope, reached large numbers of very young children, and would have an impact long before abuse or neglect occurred. Their research showed that (1) by building six protective fac-

tors, we can produce a noticeable reduction in abuse and neglect; and (2) not only are early childhood programs the perfect setting for promoting these factors, but many are already doing so.

The six protective factors are:

For adults:

- Parental resilience
- An array of social connections
- Adequate knowledge of parenting and child development
- Concrete support in times of need
- Healthy parent/child relationships

For children:

- Healthy social and emotional development

With the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services as its lead agency, Illinois was chosen, with six other states, to take part in the nationwide Strengthening Families Initiative through a highly competitive RFP process. That national initiative and the research behind it were originated by CSSP with support from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation. The initiative has grown significantly since it began in 2004: Including the seven pilot states, there are leadership teams and statewide implementation plans in at least 21 states. The National Alliance of Children's Trust Funds has given seed grants of \$50,000 to implement the Strengthening Families approach in nine states and will be supporting additional states in a national learning network. The National Association for the Education of Young Children has appointed Strengthening Families fellows in 36 states and changed its national accreditation standards to include the family and community components identified by CSSP. Zero to Three has trained multiple teams of

tions. At these meetings, IDCFS apprised these advocates and organizations of the initiative and the anticipated changes in IDCFS policy and practice. Initial challenges included promoting acceptance of IDCFS's role as a parent to all wards and developing a willingness to distinguish between programs that provide quality early care and education ("quality preschools") and those that do not ("daycare" or "childcare" programs). But the fruits of these partnerships have been considerable: IDCFS now has collaborative agreements with local Head Start programs across the state that result in record numbers of wards ages 0 to 3 being enrolled in these programs—rather than in programs that do not emphasize education. The groundwork for the agreements was set when the state's regional Head Start offices initiated a statewide memorandum of understanding, which was signed by the Illinois Head Start Association, IDCFS, and the Illinois Department of Human Services Collaboration Unit (Region V).

As the initiative has been implemented, communication and collaboration between the child welfare system and early childhood education providers has been crucial. This enables providers and child welfare staff to work together to carry out service plans for wards. Providers need to get information from child welfare staff on wards (both in general and in specific cases) so that they can work to keep them safe. And the child welfare system needs to know the capacity of specific programs to care for wards.

Foster parents have been equally important as partners in the School Readiness Initiative. Securing foster parents' participation in the initiative has involved changing perceptions of

who is responsible for placing children. When childcare was the only required placement for children 0 to 3, foster parents were the decision makers and had complete responsibility for making childcare arrangements. Now that qual-

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### Communication and collaboration between the child welfare system and early childhood education providers has been crucial.

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ity preschool is a requirement, the responsibility for implementing that policy has shifted to caseworkers, and the process of explaining and negotiating this shift to foster parents has required a good deal of diplomacy. To aid in the transition, IDCFS has:

- Presented the School Readiness Initiative to the Foster Parents Advisory Council
- Developed and sent a brochure to foster parents with payments
- Worked with caseworkers to clarify the role of foster parents
- Provided incentives for taking part in the new process
- Negotiated issues such as transportation of wards, part-day schedules, etc.

#### Working from the Top Down

Executive mandates have been crucial in the implementation of the School Readiness Initiative. The initiative was introduced with an announcement—from my office—of the School Readiness Initiative's goal of 100-percent enrollment in one year. We are backing up this declaration with executive-level guidance and oversight and have convened a work group to over-

see the initiative across the agency's service area. IDCFS's six Regional Administrators (RAs), who oversee all child welfare staff statewide, are members of the group; they assigned their staff and contractual agencies the responsibility of gathering the needed data on early education placements. We have also assembled a work group to develop a school readiness plan on the local level. This group includes RAs, quality

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assurance staff in charge of relationships with contract child welfare agencies (where 80% of children are served), staff in charge of licensing and educational services, and administrators in the Director's office. That work group is staffed by a consultant with executive-level experience in early childhood programming.

#### **The Next Step: 0 to 3**

The next step for ensuring the well-being of young children in the system is developing and instituting best practices for children 0 to 3. Research documents the foundational nature of growth and development with the first three years of life, including the importance of developing attachment abilities. A large portion of children's core development activity at this time consists of forming attachment to a parent or parent figure. But in the past, IDCFS, like most child welfare systems, has not provided specialized care and services for infants and young children who have experienced complex and chronic trauma—nor has it worked with families of this age group to address developmental attachment needs.

IDCFS has begun to articulate what such care would look like. In short, (1) a family support approach must be taken so that children are treated in the context of their relationships with parents and parent figures and their ability to form attachment is nurtured; (2) existing policies and practices need to be revised and so that they are "trauma-informed," demonstrating an understanding of how trauma in the first three years affects children; and (3) new policies and practices must be added to meet needs that are currently unmet. In order to accomplish these changes, we are engaging stakeholders both within and outside of IDCFS to implement systems change at the Department. A work group consisting of early childhood experts and IDCFS senior-level managers have proposed the following policies and practices:

- Adapt the Integrated Assessment used upon first contact with the system so that it provides for a state-of-the-art, in-depth analysis of the development needs of children 0 to 3. Use the findings of these assessments to inform placement, early childhood programming, intervention services, and training needs.
- Work with the families of all children ages 0 to 3. One of the most important abilities children develop during this time is attachment. This can only be developed by working with families, not through child-centered services.
- Develop a uniform service plan for the very young that ensures collaboration among all services and systems providing care. Expand and develop services to meet identified needs of infants, toddlers, and their families.
- Place priority on sustaining children's significant attachments through:
  - ◆ Child-centered transition protocols and visitation schedules

- ◆ Intensive, innovative relationship-based therapies for parents and children
- ◆ Early childhood and social service programs that enhance family well-being
- Collaborate and coordinate efforts among all early childhood systems and providers serving the 0 to 3 population.
- Develop and provide training for child welfare caseworkers, supervisors, and caregivers to raise awareness of and build skills in meeting the needs of very young children—especially those who have been impacted by trauma.
- Monitor across systems to determine the functional and cost outcomes of the above policies and practices.

By putting this system in place, Illinois will be among the first states in the country to ensure that all children 0 to 3 who are involved in the child welfare system are prepared for preschool and life success. As state agencies and early childhood advocates and providers work together to implement these changes, the result will be improved services for all young children in this age group and their families across the state.

### **Strengthening Families Illinois**

Given our emphasis on enrolling all children involved in the child welfare system in quality preschool, IDCFS must make sure that preschools across Illinois are ready to meet the special needs of these children. Strengthening Families Through Early Care and Education Illinois (referred to as Strengthening Families Illinois) is enhancing preschools so that they promote the factors that protect kids from child abuse and neglect. Through the initiative, more than 40 partners are working together to:

#### **Strengthening Families Illinois Partners**

The list of partners is growing constantly and includes:

- Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (Convener)
- Action for Children
- Caregiver Connections
- Carole Robertson Center for Learning
- Chapin Hall Center for Children, University of Chicago
- Chicago Children's Museum
- Chicago Department of Children and Youth Services
- Chicago Safe Start/Department of Public Health
- Chicago Metro Association for the Education of Young Children
- Chicago Metropolis 2020
- Chicago Public Schools
- Childcare Network of Evanston
- Child Care Resource & Referral Agency at John A. Logan Community College
- Children's Home and Aid Society of Illinois
- Crittenton Centers
- Community Mennonite Early Learning Center
- El Valor
- Erikson Institute
- Illinois Center for Violence Prevention
- Illinois Children's Mental Health Partnership
- Illinois Department of Human Services
- Illinois Family Partnership Network
- Illinois Federation for Families
- Illinois Head Start Association
- Illinois Network of Child Care Resource & Referral Agencies
- Illinois State Board of Education
- Illinois Violence Prevention Authority
- John J. Egan Urban Center, DePaul University
- McCormick Tribune Foundation
- McHenry County Youth Service Bureau
- Metropolitan Chicago Information Center
- Midwest Learning Center for Family Support, Family Focus, Inc.
- Ounce of Prevention Fund
- Partnership for Quality Child Care
- Prevent Child Abuse America
- Prevent Child Abuse Illinois
- Rockford Public Schools
- Tom Thumb Community Child Care Center
- University of Illinois Extension
- Voices for Illinois Children