

**A**s the nation's largest organization of early childhood professionals and others dedicated to improving the quality of early childhood programs, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) is committed to safeguarding the well-being of all children. NAEYC recognizes that early childhood professionals and programs play an important role in preventing—not just reporting—child abuse and neglect.

NAEYC's position statements "Prevention of Child Abuse in Early Childhood Programs and the Responsibilities of Early Childhood Professionals to Prevent Child Abuse" (1996) and "Code of Ethical Conduct and Statement of Commitment" (2005) and other NAEYC publications clearly outline that early childhood programs and professionals should:

1. Adopt policies and practices that promote close partnerships with families.
  2. Promote standards of excellence for early childhood programs.
  3. Provide families a variety of supportive services.
  4. Advocate for children, families, and teachers in community and society.
  5. Collaborate with other professionals in the community.
  6. Understand their legal and ethical obligation to recognize and report suspicions of abuse.
- 1. Adopt policies and practices that promote close partnerships with families.** Close partnerships with families can reduce the potential for child abuse by family members. Early childhood programs can provide information and support to families regarding child development and effective strategies for responding to children's challenging behavior (NAEYC 1996; Olson & Hyson 2003). Communicating with

families, especially about difficult topics, is crucial if educators are to provide support to families. This kind of communication is much easier when a supportive, reciprocal relationship already exists. Early childhood professionals should also:

- acknowledge and build upon family strengths and competencies;
- respect the dignity of each family and its culture, language, customs, and beliefs;
- help families understand and appreciate each child's progress within a developmental perspective;
- help family members enhance their parenting skills; and
- build support networks for families by providing opportunities for interaction with program staff, other families, community resources, and professional services (NAEYC 2005).

### Scope of the Problem

- In 2007, almost 800,000 children were victims of *maltreatment*—various forms of abuse and neglect. Maltreatment causes stress that can disrupt early brain development.
- Children who have been abused are at higher risk for health problems as adults, including depression, eating disorders, alcoholism, and certain chronic diseases.
- Children of all races and ethnicities experience child abuse.
- Children of all ages experience abuse, but children under 4 are at greatest risk for severe injury and death from abuse.
- Most abuse happens within families, especially families in which there is a great deal of stress.

(CDC 2009)

**2. Promote standards of excellence for early childhood programs.** High-quality care and education helps to strengthen families and promote healthy social and emotional development, as well as preparing children for later school success. Programs should use developmentally appropriate practices and pursue NAEYC Accreditation, which requires a rigorous self-study process and an independent external assessment to determine whether high standards are met. Early childhood professionals should also inform the public about the need for and benefits of high-quality early childhood programs (NAEYC 1996).

**3. Provide a variety of supportive services to families.** In addition to knowing the signs of abuse and neglect, early childhood professionals should be able to recognize situations that may place children at risk. When working with families who are in those situations, professionals should provide appropriate information and referrals to community services and follow up to ensure that services have been provided (NAEYC 1996, 2005). Families' access to health care, housing, income support, and other social services may help protect children from abuse and neglect.

**4. Advocate for children, families, and teachers in community and society.** Early childhood educators, as individuals and as a profession, should participate in the policy-making process by:

- advocating for well-designed, sufficiently funded, and effectively implemented public regulations, programs, and community support services that meet the individual needs of children and families and promote their well-being;
- cooperating with other individuals and groups in advocacy efforts; and
- opposing policies that impair child and family well-being (NAEYC 2005).

**5. Collaborate with other professionals in the community.** The early childhood community should work with other professionals concerned with the welfare of young children and families (NAEYC 2005). Collaboration with other agencies and disciplines promotes understanding of child development, supports and empowers families, and strengthens advocacy efforts (NAEYC 1996).

## Families, Early Childhood Programs, and Child Abuse Prevention

Early childhood programs are in an excellent position to connect families of young children with supports that can prevent abuse and promote positive interactions. *Supporting Teachers, Strengthening Families*, an NAEYC child abuse prevention initiative, received generous support from 2002–2008 from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation. Project resources may be downloaded at [www.naeyc.org/ecp/trainings/stfs](http://www.naeyc.org/ecp/trainings/stfs).

Another initiative with a similar focus is the Center for the Study of Social Policy's *Strengthening Families Through Early Care and Education*, emphasizing how early childhood programs can build "protective factors" to prevent maltreatment, online at [www.strengtheningfamilies.net/self\\_assessment](http://www.strengtheningfamilies.net/self_assessment).

**6. Understand their legal and ethical obligation to recognize and report suspicions of abuse.** Early childhood professionals should:

- be familiar with the symptoms of child abuse and neglect, including physical, sexual, verbal, and emotional abuse;
- know and follow state laws and community procedures that protect children against abuse and neglect; and
- report suspected child abuse or neglect to the appropriate community agency and follow up to ensure that appropriate action has been taken. When appropriate, educators should inform parents or guardians that a referral has been made (NAEYC 2005).

## References

- CDC (Centers for Disease Control). 2009. *Understanding child maltreatment: Factsheet*. Online: [www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/CM-FactSheet-a.pdf](http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/CM-FactSheet-a.pdf).
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