

# What Parents Say About...

## Keeping Families Together and Strong Through Prevention and Early Intervention Strategies

**The National Alliance of Children's Trust and Prevention Funds (Alliance)** joined with a group of birth parents to produce this issue brief that includes the perspectives of parents with life experiences related to the child welfare system and prevention resources. The Alliance facilitated structured conversations and conducted surveys with diverse parents from the Birth Parent National Network (BPNN, [bpnn.ctfalliance.org](http://bpnn.ctfalliance.org)) to gather their perspectives on how to keep families strong through prevention and early intervention strategies. This is the first in a series of issue briefs on prevention. The goal of this issue brief is to provide parents with a tool to help them share

their knowledge with policymakers, child welfare leaders and other stakeholders to:

- 1 Prioritize prevention and early intervention strategies to help more children remain at home with their families.
- 2 Improve policies and practices that affect children and families.
- 3 Address strategies to safely reduce the number of children in foster care.
- 4 Support earlier reunification of children with their families into safe and stable homes.

### What Are Prevention and Early Intervention Strategies?

Prevention and early intervention strategies provide parents with resources and programs that strengthen and support families and prevent child abuse and neglect. Strategies may be implemented by community-based organizations in partnership with parents through programs and strategies such as family resources centers, home visiting, mutual support groups and others.

Typically a child welfare system is viewed as a place for intervention strategies – assisting families after problems have begun to help them avoid future incidences. Community-based supports may be more preventative – to prevent maltreatment before it occurs or before it becomes frequent. Because there is often overlap in these services, the birth parents who created this document chose to address key elements that apply to both prevention and early intervention strategies.

### Parents shared their expertise on:

- 1 Helpful prevention and early intervention resources for families.
- 2 What was important to them in participating in a prevention and early intervention program.
- 3 Strategies needing to be expanded to reach more families.
- 4 Challenges for families in accessing prevention and early intervention resources.
- 5 How policies can best support quality prevention and early intervention strategies.



### Key themes shared by parents

#### about prevention and early intervention strategies included:

- Parents know what's best for their children and families but sometimes need help.
- Prevention and early intervention strategies should:
  - Help families remain together.
  - Help families build their protective factors.
  - Include programs and resources that are racially and culturally respectful of families and their needs.
  - Be located conveniently near the family.
- More parent voices are essential to help shape future prevention programs and strategies.
- Parents and service providers, community leaders and policymakers need to work in partnership in developing, implementing and evaluating prevention policies.
- Expanded strategies are needed in areas such as:
  - Affordable child care and Early Head Start programs.
  - More peer-to-peer resources.
  - More community resource centers.

### The five protective factors are...

#### Parental Resilience

The ability to recover from difficult life experiences and often to be strengthened by and even transformed by those experiences.

#### Social Connections

Positive relationships that provide emotional, informational, instrumental and spiritual support.

#### Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development

Understanding child development and parenting strategies that support physical, cognitive, language, social and emotional development.

#### Concrete Support in Times of Need

Access to concrete support and services that address a family's needs and help minimize stress caused by challenges.

#### Social and Emotional Competence of Children

Family and child interactions that help children develop the ability to communicate clearly, recognize and regulate their emotions and establish and maintain relationships.

*"Programs such as Head Start are important prevention resources to help parents attend school, keep a job and ensure that their child is being well cared for."*

Sandra, Birth Parent, New York

## 1 Helpful prevention and early intervention resources for families.

Parents identified a number of key resources and explained why they thought these are particularly helpful for families.

### A. Help in building protective factors

A protective factor is a characteristic that makes a parent, child or family more likely to thrive and less likely to experience a negative outcome (Alliance's *Bringing the Protective Factors to Life in Your Work* curriculum). For more information on protective factors, visit the Alliance website at <http://www.ctfalliance.org/onlinetraining.htm>

Help parents become aware of their strengths and expand their protective factors by:

- Helping them build positive social connections with other parents and other important adults such as their child's teacher.
- Linking families to concrete resources in times of need such as food, clothing, housing and financial support.
- Assisting parents in gaining an understanding of child development and how to nurture their child(ren).
- Supporting families to become more resilient during tough times.
- Helping parents promote the social and emotional competence of their children.

### B. Early childhood development and child care programs

Quality early childhood development and child care programs are important resources for families when they:

- Provide safe and nurturing care for young children and enable parents to attend school and keep a job.
- Help parents with needs such as housing, mental health services, substance abuse treatment, and enrollment in higher education.
- Offer a holistic approach by helping both the child and the family.
- Help parents to become self-sufficient and less at risk.

### C. In-home family support programs

Home visiting programs and other in-home strategies can be most helpful when they:

- Build strong relationships with parents.
- Help address issues for the whole family (e.g., mental health or substance abuse issues).
- Help parents think about what goals they want to accomplish for themselves and how to achieve them.
- Provide supports to parents very early.

## D. Parent partners (mentors)

Parent partners who serve as systems navigators and other supports to parents can help families achieve positive results when they:

- Help parents view themselves as capable and effective.
- Help parents engage in services and cope with challenges.
- Help parents engage as fully as possible with staff working with them.
- Offer parents non-judgmental acceptance.
- Help alleviate fear and frustrations.
- Talk with parents about their needs and goals.
- Connect parents to community-based agencies such as recovery and cultural resources.
- Support parents in gaining skills and education.

## E. Community Cafés

- Provide a non-threatening way to engage parents in discussions about specific issues affecting children and families in their own communities.
- Help create change in many communities.
- Embrace the protective factors framework, leadership development and parent partnerships.
- Are helpful for dads who may wish to discuss various topics with other dads.
- Can be used to improve policies affecting children and families in a community.

## ② What was important to parents in participating in a prevention or early intervention program.

Parents shared their perspectives about scientific evidence showing program effectiveness and how it may or may not have affected their willingness to engage in a specific prevention or early intervention strategy. Parent participants shared that they often learned about prevention and early intervention strategies through community-based organizations, self-initiated research and home visitors. Some comments from parents that showed the diversity of thinking included:

- I prefer promising practices because sometimes evidence-based practices are too formulaic and structured.
- I did not think about the program as being evidence-based or a promising practice.
- My friends said it was good and I'd go and get involved.

### The Iowa Parent Partner Approach: An Example of a Successful Parent Partner Strategy

In the Iowa Parent Partner approach, parent partners, also known as parent mentors, are parents who have previous involvement/life experience with the Department of Human Services' Child Protective Services, including the removal of their child(ren) from their home. A parent partner who works with families involved in the child welfare system is a key strategy to improving practice with families, but it cannot stand alone. For more information, visit: <http://dhs.iowa.gov/parent-partners>

### Start the Conversation at a Community Café

Community Cafés are gatherings that are held in diverse locations and invite participants with multiple perspectives to engage in conversations using the World Café technology. Café hosts prepare questions for participants to discuss. These questions plant seeds for insight and learning together. The group then “harvests” a greater collective knowledge and wisdom. ([www.theworldcafe.org](http://www.theworldcafe.org)). Community Café conversations plant seeds about leadership and community building so families are ensured the five essential protective factors they need to thrive. (National Alliance of Children's Trust and Prevention Funds, [http://ctfalliance.org/initiative\\_parents-2.htm](http://ctfalliance.org/initiative_parents-2.htm))

### ③ Strategies needing to be expanded to reach more families.

Parents described the need for better access to multiple strategies, such as:

- Opportunities to learn more about building protective factors in their families.
- Substance abuse treatment information and resources.
- Affordable child care and Early Head Start programs.
- Parent-to-parent supports such as mentoring programs and mutual support groups.
- Behavioral or mental health services (e.g., counseling and therapy).
- Funding to supplement economic hardships for food, rent, transportation, etc.
- Family resource centers for community-based programs.

*“Before the resource center was around in my community, we had more removals of children. After the resource center was developed, we had less removals. So it is definitely a prevention strategy for the entire community.”*

Corey, Birth Parent, Florida

### ④ Challenges in accessing prevention and early intervention resources.

Parents discussed that their role is a 24-hour a day job and that all parents at some time face challenges in raising their children. Some of these challenges include the lack of:

- Opportunities to talk with other parents about how they handle difficult parenting challenges.
- Support for addressing the effects of trauma on the whole family.
- Support systems for the family.
- Hesitation to ask for help when you need it, fears of judgment or worry about the loss of children.
- Awareness of existing resources or a lack of resources, particularly those that are developmentally and culturally appropriate.

#### **Family Resource Centers: A Powerful Home for Community-Based Programs**

Most family resource centers provide all or many of the following prevention and early intervention strategies:

- Provide a place in the community to build positive social connections.
- Give hope to families.
- Are open to all members of the community.
- Offer space for kids to be safe and play freely.
- Teach life-skills programs.
- Provide Information and support on child development.
- Link parents to other resources and tools to help strengthen their families.
- Help parents meet together to discuss similar challenges.

## 5 How policies can best support quality prevention and early intervention strategies.

Parents shared what they would say to policymakers to help increase their understanding about the importance of prevention and early intervention strategies to strengthen and support families and reduce the need for child welfare intervention and foster care services.

- Access to prevention and early intervention strategies for families is important throughout all developmental stages of their children's growth.
- It is important to have prevention and early intervention programs that are ongoing, available and accessible resources for families.
- Families need formal and informal supports.
- Families, not systems, are designed to raise children.
- Families are unique and diverse and benefit from flexible approaches.
- Evaluation is important for ensuring quality.
- A comprehensive view of families and their needs is essential as policymakers work in partnership with parents to develop new policy proposals and make changes to existing programs and policies.
- Parent mentors support parents as they engage in services.

*"If policymakers want to know what prevention strategies work for families, then they must talk with parents who are willing to share their life experiences and involvement with prevention resources."*

Jeremiah, Birth Parent, Washington

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### About the Birth Parent National Network (BPNN)

The **Birth Parent National Network (BPNN)**, is a platform for birth parents to work in partnership with organizations and policymakers to share their life experiences and make recommendations to improve policies and practices that impact children and families. The goal of the BPNN is to strengthen and support families and improve outcomes for families at risk or involved with the child welfare system. Our network currently includes about 170 parent and organizational members and we are continuing to grow. If you wish

to make a difference locally, in your state or at the national level, join the BPNN. To learn more about this dynamic national network visit the BPNN website:

**[bpnn.ctfalliance.org](http://bpnn.ctfalliance.org)**

To join the BPNN, submit your membership application to:  
**[bpnn.ctfalliance.org/applications](http://bpnn.ctfalliance.org/applications)**

For questions, please email us at [info@ctfalliance.org](mailto:info@ctfalliance.org)

