



Within Our Reach

In October 2019, the U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office for Victims of Crime launched [Child Safety Forward \(CSF\)](#), a three-year demonstration initiative to develop multidisciplinary strategies and responses to address serious or near-death injuries resulting from child abuse or neglect and to reduce the number of child fatalities.<sup>1</sup> The efforts were intended to produce models and practices that are responsive to a 21st-Century Child Welfare System as envisioned by the federal [Commission to Eliminate Child Abuse and Neglect Fatalities](#).

Five demonstration sites participated in CSF, with technical assistance led by Social Current. The five participation sites in this initiative are:

- St. Francis Hospital in Hartford, Connecticut
- Cook County Health in Illinois
- Indiana Department of Health
- Michigan Department of Health and Human Services
- California's Child Abuse Prevention Council of Sacramento County

As part of the final implementation study, each site identified a practice or policy change advanced through their work with CSF for a dialogue on how to impact systems change. The dialogue was facilitated by a team of two to three external evaluators with approximately five to seven local partners involved in the implementation of the policy or practice. This brief delves into the design of the site's policy or practice and suggests recommendations for similar initiatives based on the site's [experiences and lessons learned](#).

## Parents as Partners in Keeping Kids Safe

### Background

Between FY2015 and FY2019, the Illinois Department of Children & Family Services (DCFS) received an average of [10,000 reports](#) annually for deaths or serious injuries due to suspected child abuse or neglect. To better understand this problem, Cook County Health, one of the five CSF sites, led Project CHILD and conducted a needs assessment with key actors in the child welfare system in Cook, Peoria, and Vermilion counties. This needs assessment highlighted a finding that new parents often are not provided with child safety education or resources until they enter the system and are marked as "at risk." Parents are also heavily influenced by their individual upbringings, which could include practices that are now recognized as unsafe, leading to increased risk for child injuries and fatality.

Among the many strategic efforts aimed at influencing systems that surround child safety, Project CHILD also identified parent education as a necessary pathway to keeping kids safe at home. Although parent engagement was not in the original Project CHILD plan, it became clear to Project

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<sup>1</sup> Four of the five Child Safety Forward demonstration sites applied for and received a no-cost extension for the initiative into a fourth year.

CHILD partners that if they wanted a parent education curriculum to be used and sustainable, they would need to create this curriculum through the lens of parents.

## Practice Change Solution

The [Safety for Children curriculum](#) is the result of Project CHILD's efforts to co-create and implement a self-paced child safety curriculum to promote child and family safety and well-being by supporting parents and caregivers for children ages birth to 5. The curriculum provides the fundamentals about child safety and uniquely integrates the [Strengthening Families Protective Factors](#) framework and the Be Strong Families [Vitality Domains](#) into its learning initiative. The Strengthening Families Protective Factors framework defines five conditions that promote positive outcomes for children, families, and communities, including the prevention of child abuse and neglect. The Be Strong Families Vitality Domain framework specifically focuses on six areas of holistic self-care for parents, with the notion that parents are best able to take care of their families when they take care of themselves.

Safety for Children messaging is delivered through TikTok videos featuring short, quick, and easy-to-access safety tips for new, young parents.<sup>2</sup>

## Supportive Practices

At the onset of this project, Cook County Health invited [Be Strong Families](#) to partner in this work. Be Strong Families is a network of parent leaders, social justice advocates, child welfare experts, early childhood development professionals, and community organizers who partner to create transformative change by developing and sustaining conversations that nurture the spirit of family, promote well-being, and prevent violence.

**Parents as Partners and Experts.** As firm believers that their central role is to “make sure nothing is done for parents without parents,” Be Strong Families called out early in the process that the parent curriculum had no parents at the table directly informing and engaging in the work as partners and content experts. This was a critical step in accountability for changing the dynamics between systems and parents. The Education subcommittee responsible for the curriculum compensated parents for their contributions.

Be Strong Families connected Project CHILD to its training pool of the National Parent Café Leadership Team to help facilitate parent involvement in the curriculum design and development. Parent Cafés are a research-informed practice that aims to build the Strengthening Families protective factors families need.

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*[Parent Cafés are about] connecting, teaching, strengthening... there's no judgment... they create a neutral playing ground, a safe space for people to be vulnerable.*

*– Project CHILD Parent Leader*

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**Focus on Protective Factors.** Safety curriculums often focus on what not to do. Project CHILD chose to apply the Strengthening Families protective factors framework and the vitality domains, which is what much of what Be Strong Families' work is predicated on. Project CHILD emphasized three of the

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<sup>2</sup> The TikTok videos can be accessed through the Cook County Health Final Evaluation Report (p. 36) and on the “Ask the Nanny” @atnanny TikTok account.

five protective factors: Parental resilience, knowledge of parenting and child development, and concrete support in times of need. The content and resources were framed around these three areas.

The curriculum also focuses on self-care—a topic rarely discussed in the same context as educating parents on child safety. By focusing on self-care, the curriculum acknowledges that child safety is predicated on parents having the tools and supports they need to better care for themselves and their children. Seeing parents as people who love their children and want them to be safe is a significant shift in a child safety mindset. The topic of self-care in the current curriculum goes beyond sleep and exercise, the things parents need to be healthy and responsive to their children, but also include how finances and social environments impact overall well-being.

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*We want people to be aware of how protective factors can help keep kids safe. I also want parents to think about taking care of themselves. – Be Strong Families*

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**Holistically Define Child Safety.** While the initial focus for the curriculum was safe sleep, by bringing in the framework of protective factors, Project CHILD could integrate education around safety concerns parents had for their child beyond safe sleep including water safety, fire safety, sexual abuse, car seat safety, burn safety, and more. Offering parents one way to keep their kids safe did not give parents the tools that addressed their safety priorities. Project CHILD stayed flexible and responsible. Rather than pushing a curriculum on safe sleep to meet their priority goals, they chose to take the time to develop a fuller curriculum that parents would use.

**Be Creative. Step outside the Box.** Child safety content is heavy. Project CHILD wanted to appeal to parents who were younger and to meet parents where they are. In using technology and online resources and platforms such as YouTube and TikTok, parents could access content they needed created by parents like themselves and in a format that was quick and relatable so they can focus on the most important safety messages.

**Engage Multi-Sector Partners.** To support an expanded definition of family and child safety, Project CHILD needed to bring additional partners with different perspectives and resources and try new ways of delivering the content.

They engaged multi-sector partners they wouldn't normally engage in parental education. The curriculum was co-designed with a retired Chicago Police Department Commander of Youth Investigations and EverThrive, an organization that champions health equity. Both brought new tools and insights to the curriculum.

They also leveraged their partnership resources to bring technology to the table to expand their reach. Their tech-savvy partner was familiar with the language for this initiative and made recommendations that added resources to the curriculum. For example, the learning management system they used featured knowledge checks to test knowledge retention. Parents were given real-life scenarios that required them to use critical thinking skills and then apply what they had learned.

## Sustainable Implementation and Impact

The long-term impact goals of Project CHILD, in which the safety curriculum is one component, aims to reduce reports of child abuse and neglect. Development of curricula alone will not influence or sustain those outcomes. However, the approach Project CHILD took to develop and implement its curriculum supports wider use and sustainability.

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*Let us not forget that addressing community needs by giving families support prevents traumatic events from happening, has much more impact, and costs much less, than removing children from families and/or attempting to address the consequences of adversity after a child has grown up. We all have a stake in our kids' future, and shifting our focus from child welfare to child and family well-being will help us create a future where every child can thrive and reach their full potential. – Project CHILD Partner*

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Be Strong Families, as co-owner of this project, will continue to host the child safety curriculum and manage the Parent Cafés, which naturally falls under their portfolio of work and supports their overall mission. Also, as a national organization, they are engaging in ongoing conversations to share this curriculum beyond Cook County, including with other agencies in hopes of engaging more parents in the course.

Project CHILD also helped legitimize the work by taking on leadership roles, such as working with the Illinois Safe Sleep Support cross-agency campaign to message child safety through the lens of protective factors.

## Recommendations

The following are recommendations for practitioners across a range of systems looking to engage parents, partners, and experts in keeping kids safe:

- Engage parents from the onset as equal partners, centering their voice and experience, and sharing roles, responsibilities, and decision-making power.
- Empower parents and other community members with the knowledge and tools they need to engage in and implement the project effectively.
- Consider the Strengthening Families Protective Factors framework and vitality domains, or other evidence-based frameworks and models as a foundation to build from and support the outcomes you hope to achieve.
- Map out your network of partners across agencies and sectors, including at multiple levels of government, including those that share your core values and can help advance your goal, and leverage those relationships accordingly.
- Make learning user-friendly by focusing on what is most important and through features that make the format accessible and usable.

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