

**American Montessori Society Research Poster Session**  
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**Research Poster Title**

*Strengthening Families: Which program strategies build or are challenges to family strengthening practice integration in Montessori programs?*

**Relevance to Montessori Education**

Strong partnerships between early care and education programs and families are the foundation of the Strengthening Families through Early Care and Education initiative being implemented in over 30 states. The Strengthening Families approach began as a search for a new approach to child abuse and neglect prevention. Research indicates that Strengthening Families influences changes that improved the quality of family partnership practices in early childhood programs (CSSP, 2008).

Due to the increasing number of states that are implementing the Strengthening Families initiative and Montessori programs who have adopted the approach it is critical to examine the facilitators of, and barriers to family strengthening practice integration specifically in Montessori programs.

**Maria Montessori and the Protective Factors Approach**

In the book, *The child in the family* (Montessori, 1956) Maria Montessori outlines the “necessity” to prepare and support parents in their parenting role(s). Specifically, to help parents understand the social and emotional needs of their children. Parents need support in understanding that parenting “goes beyond children’s physical needs but must also look at the spiritual development of children.” If parents don’t understand their child’s development or is not supportive it can and does lead to “infinite numbers of conflicts and poor rapport between the parents and their offspring, and/or between adults and children.”

Conflicts and tensions results in the parent(s) “denying the real needs of children and the “inner necessities” of the child (Montessori, 1956). Knowledge of parenting and child development, children’s social and emotional competence, and parent-child relationships are protective factors that keep families strong and are known to prevent child abuse and neglect (CSSP, 2008). Additional protective factors that have been identified by the Center for the Study of Social Policy are parental resilience, social connections and concrete support in times of need.

## **Protective Factors**

There are four Protective Factors related to families: *Parental Resilience* (parents need to be strong and flexible in order to deal with the stresses of life), *Social Connections* (Parents need friends to help them meet practical and emotional needs), *Knowledge of parenting and child development* (Being a great parent is part natural and part learned) and *Concrete Support in times of need* (Families that get help when they need it can stay strong).

There is one Protective Factor related to the child: *Social and emotional competence of children* (*Parents need to help their children communicate*)

There is one Protective Factor related to the parent-child relationship: *Healthy parent-child relationships* (*It is important that parents give their children the love and respect they need*).

## **Methodology**

The exploratory research study will address the following research question:  
Strengthening Families: Which program strategies build or are challenges to family strengthening practice integration in Montessori programs?

The exploratory study will include the following data collection components: Focus groups, Center for the Study of Social Policy assessment tool (2008), observations and interviews (staff and families). In addition, program documents, management practices, and family support policies and practices will be assessed.

Four program strategies identified by the Center for the Study of Social Policy will be explored in this study—How Montessori programs build protective factors by: (1) strengthening parenting; (2) valuing and supporting parents; (3) facilitating children’s social and emotional development and (4) responding to family crisis. In addition, the exploratory study will examine within Montessori programs the types of activities that build protective factors, the intensity of the efforts and finally the intentionality of efforts on behalf of children and families served.

## **Relevance to future directions in Montessori education and global issues**

Child abuse and neglect represents a major social problem that threatens the basic health and well-being of an estimated 2.8 million children annually.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children’s (NAEYC), “Supporting Teachers, Strengthening Families” is a model child abuse prevention approach. It is through the association’s professional development initiative that efforts were initiated to help early childhood educators understand their role in preventing child abuse and neglect through family strengthening efforts and practices.

In 2001, the Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) began seeking a strategic, feasible approach to child abuse and neglect prevention that was: (1) systematic; (2) national in scope; (3) would reach large numbers of very young children and (4) would have an impact before abuse or neglect occurred. The extent to which child care professionals working in Montessori programs partner with families can play a significant role in child abuse and neglect prevention.

