NCIOM

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CHAPTER TWO
Social Norms

26 **RECOMMENDATION 1**
Promote the incorporation of positive childhood experiences (PCEs) throughout state and local initiatives, maximize the impact of existing supports, and identify additional resources needed.

30 **RECOMMENDATION 2**
Identify methods to collect and share data on social norms related to economic supports for families and prioritize targeted data collection that can inform strategies to enhance financial stability and economic mobility.

34 **RECOMMENDATION 3**
Continue the development and expansion of public awareness campaigns that focus on the role of economic supports.

Social norms, in the context of children and the prevention of adverse childhood experiences, refer to the shared beliefs, values, and expectations within a community. These norms influence behaviors, attitudes, and interactions related to child care, protection, and upbringing.[1] These norms play a significant role in shaping how children are treated and what is considered acceptable or unacceptable behavior toward children and families. Essentials for Childhood aims to understand the ways that social norms do or do not serve to prioritize the well-being of children and families and to encourage practices that prevent child maltreatment. This can be done in part through promoting positive community norms around parenting programs and acceptable parenting behaviors and implementing evidence-based programs for parents and caregivers.[2]

KEY ASPECTS OF SOCIAL NORMS IN PREVENTING ACES

Positive Social Norms:

- Encouraging nonviolent discipline and positive parenting techniques[3]
- Valuing children's well-being as a community responsibility[1]
- Fostering safe and supportive environments

Harmful Social Norms:

- Accepting physical punishment or harsh discipline as appropriate parenting methods
- Viewing child maltreatment as a private family matter rather than a community or societal concern
- Normalizing behaviors or practices that neglect children's rights or needs

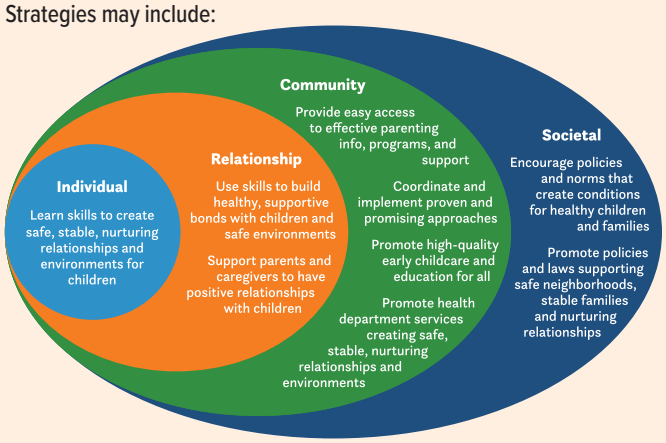
HOW SOCIAL NORMS INFLUENCE ACES PREVENTION:

1. **Behavioral Influence:**
   - Social norms shape parenting practices, caregiving behaviors, and how adults interact with children. For example, if a community encourages nonviolent discipline and promotes nurturing practices, the likelihood of abuse is reduced
   - Norms that reduce the stigma of seeking mental health or substance use treatment help parents address challenges that might otherwise contribute to neglect or abuse
2. **Reporting and Intervention:**
   - Norms affect whether bystanders, such as neighbors or teachers, feel empowered to report suspected maltreatment or intervene when they witness harmful behavior
   - Social norms shape whether community members, such as teachers, neighbors, or faith leaders, support families and make referrals to community-based resources such as housing assistance, food security programs, parenting education, and mental health services prior to reporting to child welfare services, reducing unnecessary system involvement
3. **Policy and Program Acceptance:**
   - Programs aimed at preventing child maltreatment (e.g., parenting classes, public awareness campaigns) are more successful when they align with or aim to shift existing social norms.
4. **Community Responsibility:**
   - Social norms determine whether child protection is seen as an individual responsibility or a collective societal duty, influencing the availability of and support for child welfare systems.

CHANGING SOCIAL NORMS TO PREVENT ACES:

1. **Public Awareness Campaigns:**
   - Educating communities about the harms of corporal punishment and the benefits of nurturing parenting styles.
2. **Community Engagement:**
   - Engaging local leaders, schools, employers, and faith-based organizations to promote shared responsibility for child safety and well-being.
3. **Policy Advocacy:**
   - Enacting and enforcing laws that reflect positive social norms, such as banning corporal punishment in schools or mandating reporting of child abuse.
   - Enacting policies that support caregiving for children, such as Paid Family and Medical Leave, child care subsidies, food assistance, and tax credits like the Child Tax Credit and Earned Income Tax Credit.
4. **Modeling Positive Behaviors:**
   - Training parents and caregivers on alternative discipline methods and providing resources for stress management and parenting skills.
   - Educating community members about the importance of connections between parents and children, with extended networks of friends and family, and with community-based resources and supports.

Figure 1.
Prevent child abuse and neglect through changes at all levels
Strategies may include:



Learn more about child maltreatment prevention from CDC: http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/childmaltreatment/prevention.html

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) focuses largely on creating a community-oriented approach that empowers parents and caregivers with supportive norms that reduce stressors and increase resources for healthy parenting.[4] These norms aim to reduce ACEs and foster environments where children can thrive. Defining positive norms and setting clear expectations helps create a foundation for cultivating health attitudes, supportive behaviors, effective programs, and policies that promote well-being. Healthy social norms around parenting foster a supportive environment for both parents and children, encouraging growth, connection, and mutual respect.

Some strategies include:

- Public education campaigns to help reframe how people think and talk about ACEs and who is responsible for preventing them.
- Legislative approaches to reducing corporal punishment can establish norms for safer discipline, reducing harms from physical punishment.
- Bystander approaches: teaching skills to intervene safely and reinforce norms that reduce the risk of future harm.
- Mobilizing men as allies to help foster healthy norms around gender, masculinity, and violence.[5]

As the recommendations commence, the following structure will appear:

- ***Recommendation:*** The overarching, high-level proposal that outlines the key action needed to address the issue. It sets the overall desired outcome.
- ***Strategy:*** A more specific step that implements the recommendation. It breaks down the broader recommendation into concrete actions, outlining how it can be achieved and who should be involved.
- ***Context:*** Provides the background information that explains how the strategy fits within existing challenges, policies, and data, grounding the recommendation in evidence-based needs.
- ***Motivation:*** Explains why the recommendation is necessary and provides the reasoning for policymakers, funders, and other decision-makers to understand the broader implications.
- ***Desired Result:*** What the strategy hopes to accomplish.
- ***Alignment:*** Lists other organizations working on similar outcomes and strategies.

RECOMMENDATION #1

A working group should be established by NCDHHS to promote the incorporation of positive childhood experiences (PCEs) throughout state and local initiatives and identify gaps requiring additional investment. Strategies should maximize the impact of existing supports and identify additional resources needed to implement and raise awareness of existing infrastructure for PCEs. Strategies should include a focus on various audiences, including families, health care and service providers, local and state policymakers, faith communities, employers, schools, and others.

See Recommendation 3.2 in the Appendix for the original 2015 recommendation.

Strategy 1

The working group should assess existing organizations that promote PCEs. The assessment should include identifying current programs and services, including the communities they serve, their current capacity, funding sources, and sustainability. As part of this effort, the working group should also identify gaps where trauma-informed practices are underutilized and where additional state, local, and philanthropic investment is needed to fully integrate these practices at a community and organizational level.

CONTEXT

Positive childhood experiences (PCEs) and trauma-informed practices play a crucial role in fostering resilience, mitigating the impacts of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), and promoting long-term well-being for children and families. Trauma-informed practice refers to an approach to care, service delivery, or policymaking that recognizes the widespread impact of trauma, understands its signs and symptoms, and responds by prioritizing safety, empowerment, and healing. It emphasizes creating environments that reduce re-traumatization and promote resilience and recovery. *See chapter 5 for more information about trauma-informed practices.*

Integrating these practices at a community level is essential; it creates a supportive, inclusive environment that acknowledges and addresses the impact of trauma and promotes healing across populations. It also strengthens the connections between community resources, ensuring that individuals and families can access consistent, coordinated support systems tailored to their needs.[6]

WHY DOES THE UPDATE COMMITTEE RECOMMEND THIS STRATEGY?

This strategy will identify strengths and address critical gaps in the implementation and integration of trauma-informed practices across organizations and communities, which are essential for promoting PCEs. Trauma-informed practices are proven to mitigate the long-term impacts of ACEs by fostering environments that promote resilience and well-being. Identifying where these practices are underutilized ensures that all children and families, particularly those in high-need areas, have access to care and support that is responsive to their experiences.

DESIRED RESULT

To create a comprehensive, trauma-informed system of supports that effectively promote PCEs across communities and organizations. By assessing existing efforts, addressing gaps in trauma-informed practices, and guiding targeted investments, the goal is to ensure equitable access to responsive care and enhance resilience in children and families.

ALIGNMENT ACROSS NC

- **Positive Childhood Alliance North Carolina (PCANC)**, the state chapter of Prevent Child Abuse America and the National Family Support Network, is 1 organization that promotes PCEs and advances policies, programs, and practices that support the well-being of all children and families in North Carolina. PCANC's strategic plan focuses on building and sustaining protective factors in communities across the state.[7] Through their Positive Childhood Alliance, PCANC is equipping agencies and professionals across the state to promote positive experiences and protective factors through training, technical assistance, and public awareness campaigns.
- **The North Carolina Partnership for Children/Smart Start (NCPC)**, which leads the statewide Smart Start network, serves as the backbone of the NC Healthy and Resilient Communities Initiative and aims in part to increase PCEs for children.[8]
- **The NC Resilience & Learning Project** implements trauma-informed practices in schools to support students who have ACEs.[9]
- **North Carolina PACEs Connection** provides a forum to inform and connect individuals and communities working to help prevent and mitigate ACEs.[10]
- **The Trauma & Resilience Design Group** consists of cross-sector system and community partners that were convened for a series of exploratory co-design conversations focused on strengthening trauma-informed systems and community resiliency-building efforts across North Carolina.

Strategy 2

The North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services Division of Public Health (DPH), Division of Child and Family Well-Being (DCFW), Division of Social Services (DSS), and Positive Childhood Alliance NC (PCANC) should prioritize the promotion of positive childhood experiences in current initiatives, ensuring that multiple sectors (such as private sector and community voices) are involved in determining implementation strategies and addressing barriers to coordination.

CONTEXT

The Division of Child and Family Well-Being (DCFW) enhances coordination between NCDHHS food and nutrition, social, and mental health services to support North Carolina's children and to ensure they are growing up in safe, healthy, nurturing, and resilient families and communities. DCFW also coordinates increased investments to improve child health and well-being, maximizing the opportunities for positive childhood experiences (PCEs).

The Division of Social Services plays a critical role in supporting families and children, particularly those at risk of adverse experiences. DSS is responsible for overseeing child welfare programs, including child protective services (CPS), foster care, and adoption services. These systems directly impact children and families at risk of ACEs, making DSS integral to promoting PCEs.

Both positive and adverse childhood experiences shape health and development across the lifespan.[11] PCEs are foundational interactions and environments during childhood that foster safety, stability, and nurturing relationships. These experiences support a child's sense of belonging, strengthen connectedness, and enhance resilience.[12]

Ensuring community representation means that disparities are identified and addressed, amplifying the voice of historically underrepresented groups. Community participation also fosters ownership and commitment, increasing the likelihood that PCE initiatives are sustained over time. Community representation ensures that initiatives are community-relevant, reflecting their needs and preferences, thus likely increasing uptake and sustained use of offerings.

Barriers to coordination may include fragmented systems; different sectors, such as public health and community groups, may operate in silos, making it difficult to share information, align goals, and coordinate efforts effectively. Also, rural and underserved communities may lack the infrastructure or capacity to participate fully in PCE initiatives.

WHY DOES THE UPDATE COMMITTEE RECOMMEND THIS STRATEGY?

Prioritizing PCEs leads to better health, social, and academic outcomes for children, reducing the need for costly interventions later in life.[13] Addressing critical gaps in collaboration and resource alignment can reduce the barriers to effective promotion of PCEs.

Engaging multiple sectors helps address systemic barriers, such as resource gaps or fragmentation between services, that can hinder the effectiveness of PCE-focused initiatives. Coordinating across multiple sectors ensures that efforts to promote PCEs are not fragmented but instead build on each other, creating a stronger and more cohesive system.

DESIRED RESULT

The integration of positive childhood experiences (PCEs) into current initiatives ensures that programs across health, education, and social services will work to build resilience in children and families, reduce child welfare system involvement, and improve long-term health and social outcomes.

ALIGNMENT ACROSS NC

- **Positive Childhood Alliance NC** promotes evidence-based programs geared towards increasing positive childhood experiences and raising awareness on the importance of PCEs in buffering against adversity.
- **North Carolina Early Childhood Foundation** promotes PCEs by advancing policies and practices that ensure all children are healthy, ready to learn, and supported in nurturing environments through programs like Family Forward NC.
- **The North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services** has programs and strategic priorities such as the Early Childhood Action Plan and Healthy North Carolina 2030 that aim to reduce ACEs while increasing PCEs through systemic strategies.
- **NCPC/Smart Start** promotes PCEs by supporting early childhood development, parent education, and access to quality early care and education programs.
- **NCDHHS Division of Social Services** has adopted a State Prevention Framework which provides a "roadmap for the state, regional and local organizations and communities to support, empower, protect and strengthen families."[14] The Prevention Framework and Principles focus on primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention efforts, services, and interventions to prevent child maltreatment and enhance the well-being of children and families.
- **NC Department of Public Instruction** supports Specialized Instructional Support Personnel (school nurses, social workers, counselors, and psychologists) statewide through technical assistance and professional development; provides trauma-informed approaches to school staff; and engages in response to natural disasters (e.g., Hurricane Helene) their immediate impacts, and the long-term implications.

Strategy 3

The organizations named above should identify appropriate metrics for evaluating initiatives' impact on positive childhood experiences.

CONTEXT

Positive childhood experiences (PCEs) can significantly impact children's health and well-being.[15] Choosing metrics aligned with PCEs, such as parental support, safe environments, or access to community resources, helps determine whether the initiatives are achieving their goals. Additionally, using data-driven metrics ensures accountability, provides insights into areas for improvement, and supports the scalability of successful initiatives, ultimately fostering resilience and long-term benefits for children and families. Appropriate resources may include rates of early developmental screenings, reduction on child maltreatment reports and foster care placements, enrollment rates in home visiting programs, or policy changes to expand financial supports to families.

WHY DOES THE UPDATE COMMITTEE RECOMMEND THIS STRATEGY?

Using the correct metrics to evaluate the initiatives is essential to providing a clear framework for measuring progress, assessing effectiveness, and ensuring that resources are used effectively. Appropriate metrics help to determine whether an initiative is achieving its intended outcomes, such as promoting PCEs; they also allow organizations to quantify achievements and showcase results to stakeholders, funders, and the community. Tracking metrics also keeps organizations and systems focused on desired results while tracking trends and concerning spikes so that data can be used to guide and support action.

DESIRED RESULT

The inclusion of appropriate metrics to evaluate effectiveness, identify gaps, and refine programs to better support children and families will ensure that initiatives are equitable and impactful, fostering more resilient communities and better childhood outcomes.

ALIGNMENT ACROSS NC

- **Positive Childhood Alliance NC** promotes evidence-based programs to increase positive childhood experiences and raises awareness on the importance of PCEs in buffering against adversity.
- **North Carolina Early Childhood Foundation** promotes PCEs by advancing policies and practices that ensure all children are healthy, ready to learn, and supported in nurturing environments through programs like Family Forward NC.
- **The North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services** has programs and strategic priorities, such as the Early Childhood Action Plan, that aim to reduce ACEs while increasing PCEs through systemic approaches.
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- **NCDHHS Division of Social Services** has adopted a State Prevention Framework which provides a "roadmap for the state, regional and local organizations and communities to support, empower, protect and strengthen families."[14] The Prevention Framework and Principles focus on primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention efforts, services, and interventions to prevent child maltreatment and enhance the well-being of children and families.
- **NC Department of Public Instruction** supports Specialized Instructional Support Personnel (school nurses, social workers, counselors, and psychologists) statewide through technical assistance and professional development; provides trauma-informed approaches to school staff; and engages in response to natural disasters (e.g., Hurricane Helene) their immediate impacts, and the long-term implications.

Strategy 4

The work group should identify methods for philanthropic support. Philanthropy should provide for expanded parenting programs to help parents and caregivers develop positive skills, increase opportunities for PCEs, and foster healthy child development.

CONTEXT

Parenting programs equip caregivers with skills to manage stress, foster emotional connections, and promote positive discipline, all of which help to enhance child well-being.

One example in North Carolina is the Positive Parenting Program (Triple P), which helps provide interventions for parents who need assistance with behavior and development.[16] This evidence-based program is designed to help parents learn how to manage their children's behavior, build strong relationships, help children learn to solve problems on their own, and maintain positive self-esteem. There are 17 parenting strategies taught in 4 core areas, such as developing positive relationships and teaching new skills.[17] Other program examples include Circle of Parents, Incredible Years, Circle of Security, and Nurturing Parents.

For similar programs, philanthropy can provide flexible funding to scale successful programs and expand their reach. Philanthropy can also foster relationships between public agencies, nonprofits, and private sectors to maximize impact and align resources. While government programs provide baseline funding, they often fall short of meeting demand or addressing underserved populations. With the help of sustainable, long-term public funding, philanthropy can fill these gaps and target specific needs.

WHY DOES THE UPDATE COMMITTEE RECOMMEND THIS STRATEGY?

Philanthropic investment is critical to fostering innovative approaches, addressing funding shortfalls, and supporting initiatives that benefit families and children. This is particularly important for parenting programs, which provide parents with the tools and education necessary to enhance their ability to foster PCEs and support healthy child development.

DESIRED RESULT

To reduce the number of children experiencing ACEs through the increase of positive childhood experiences.

ALIGNMENT ACROSS NC

- **The North Carolina Early Childhood Foundation** promotes programs that highlight the importance of early childhood investments and advocates for philanthropic investments to expand parenting support programs.
- **Early Years** partners with philanthropic organizations to fund initiatives that strengthen parenting and caregiver support in child care settings.
- **NCPC/Smart Start** collaborates with philanthropy to expand family support initiatives and foster community-based solutions.
- **Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust** provides funding for parenting programs that promote resilience and reduce childhood adversity.
- **Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation** funds innovative parenting programs and advocates for increased PCE opportunities across the state.
- **The Duke Endowment** provides funding for early childhood, health, and family strengthening programs and expands evidence-based parenting programs.

RECOMMENDATION #2

If adequate capacity and resources are available, the UNC School of Social Work will identify specific methods and measures to collect and share data on social norms related to economic supports for families. The approach should prioritize targeted data collection that can inform strategies to enhance financial stability and economic mobility in North Carolina communities.

See Recommendation 4.2 in the Appendix for the original 2015 recommendation.

Strategy 1

If adequate capacity and resources are available, robust data will be collected by the UNC School of Social Work on social norms related to economic supports, and an evaluation will be conducted of programs and policies that provide economic supports to families.

CONTEXT

The social safety net consists of a variety of economic support systems such as food assistance, income support, health insurance coverage, and housing assistance. These supports are typically dependent on income, with more benefits available for lower-income families. Economic assistance to families can reduce involvement with the child welfare system and reduce the number of children entering the foster system.[18] Income support for families is positively associated with cognitive development and social and behavioral skills in children. Yet, the stigmatizing nature of economic assistance has been shown to sometimes deter eligible applicants from participating in assistance programs.[19]

OTHER BARRIERS INCLUDE:

- **Administrative burden:** Navigating applications for support may deter families from seeking assistance. These applications may also require extensive paperwork, eligibility determinations, and/or frequent reapplication periods, which may discourage participation.[20]
- **Structural barriers:** Historical and structural inequities disproportionately affect families of color, limiting their access to economic opportunities and support systems. Also, families in rural or underserved areas may have limited access to support services due to geographic isolation and lack of infrastructure.[21]
- **Language and literacy barriers:** Non-English-speaking families or those with limited literacy may struggle to understand and complete applications without adequate support. In addition, families with members who are undocumented may hesitate to seek economic assistance for fear of risk of deportation.[22]
- **Digital divide:** Limited access to technology and the internet can hinder families from applying for benefits, especially as programs increasingly move online.
- **Funding barriers:** Programs providing financial support, such as child care subsidies and housing assistance, are not funded to meet demand.

In North Carolina, more than **69%** of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) participants are families with children.[23]

In 2023, there was an average of **8647** families receiving temporary assistance for needy families (TANF) in North Carolina.[24]

Families receiving child care subsidies: **24,300***[25]

Number of children enrolled in Medicaid and CHIP: **1,437,572**[25]

*However, only about 15% of families who are eligible for subsidies are participating in the program. (Kella Hatcher, JD, email communication, February 2025)

WHY DOES THE UPDATE COMMITTEE RECOMMEND THIS STRATEGY?

Understanding and addressing perceptions of financial assistance is critical for improving program participation and ensuring families have access to the support they need. Collecting data on these perceptions helps identify specific concerns, enabling targeted efforts to reduce stigma and foster trust in financial assistance programs. By understanding these perceptions, agencies can identify and address both actual and perceived barriers, making programs more accessible. Increased utilization may lead to greater financial security, which helps to reduce stress, improve family stability, and create better opportunities for children to thrive in safe and nurturing environments.

DESIRED RESULT

To improve parent engagement with economic assistance programs by addressing negative perceptions and barriers, ultimately increasing financial stability for families.

ALIGNMENT ACROSS NC

- **The NC Healthy & Resilient Communities Initiative** supports local multi-sector coalitions addressing adversity and trauma at multiple levels. It aims to build resilient communities by preventing ACEs, increasing protective factors and PCEs, and promoting systems change.[26]
- **The EarlyWell Initiative**, co-led by NC Child and the North Carolina Early Childhood Foundation, aims to ensure that children prenatal through age 8 and their caregivers thrive in healthy relationships without barriers to care.[27]
- **Family Resource Center (FRC) Networks** provide increased connectedness, coordination, cooperation, and collaboration among members, training and technical assistance, advocacy, policy, and legislation, and maintain a shared data tracking system. The North Carolina Family Resource Center Network seeks to connect Family Resource Centers from across North Carolina to both increase investments and promote best practice in family support services through advocacy and collaboration.
- **The NCDHHS Division of Social Services** oversees the financial support programs delivered through County DSS agencies, including SNAP, Work First (TANF) assistance, Medicaid, child care subsidies, and emergency assistance.
- **The NCDHHS Division of Public Health** oversees the programs delivered through local public health departments, including WIC.

Strategy 2

The data should then be disseminated to help programs across the state reduce barriers and improve program participation.

CONTEXT

Currently, many economic support programs face challenges with low utilization rates and under-participation, often due to societal stigma, misinformation, limited awareness, or procedural barriers.[28,29] Disseminating data collected by the UNC School of Social Work can help demonstrate that stigma associated with these supports is misplaced, highlighting instead that families typically use funds in appropriate and beneficial ways.[30] Additionally, disseminating data about program effectiveness—including insights on what works well and what does not—can help improve outreach, simplify processes, and increase trust among potential participants. Sharing data with parent advisory groups and engaging families directly in interpreting and acting on these findings can further reduce barriers, build community buy-in, and inform funding decisions. Increased program participation will enable families to become more financially stable, reducing their likelihood of involvement with the child welfare system[18] and improving outcomes for children by proactively addressing needs before families experience crisis situations, diminishing stigma associated with accessing economic supports.

> *"Research suggests that changing norms to focus on reducing stigma around help seeking, promoting supportive and positive parenting, and enhancing connectedness to family and community can protect against violence and adversity."*[29]

WHY DOES THE UPDATE COMMITTEE RECOMMEND THIS STRATEGY?

By collecting targeted data on social norms related to these supports, the UNC School of Social Work can provide critical insights into community attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions influencing participation. Disseminating these insights statewide equips programs and policymakers with actionable information to reduce stigma, clarify misconceptions, simplify processes, and tailor outreach to better meet community needs. Ultimately, this will improve equitable access, participation, and overall effectiveness of economic support programs, fostering enhanced economic mobility and stability for North Carolina families.

DESIRED RESULT

Increased participation and equitable access to economic support programs, leading to improved financial stability and economic mobility for North Carolina families.

ALIGNMENT ACROSS NC

- **North Carolina Early Childhood Foundation (NCECF)** advocates for policy and practice improvements to strengthen economic and social supports for families, aligning closely with efforts to enhance program participation.
- **Positive Childhood Alliance North Carolina (PCANC)** supports strategies that strengthen families economically to prevent child maltreatment, aligning with reducing stigma and proactively meeting families' needs.
- **NCPC/Smart Start** funds and coordinates early childhood programs statewide that prioritize economic supports and community-based solutions to strengthen family resilience.
- **North Carolina Early Childhood Action Plan (ECAP)** sets statewide goals for improving economic stability and family well-being, directly aligning with efforts to reduce stigma and increase program participation.
- **Healthy Opportunities Pilots (HOP)** tests innovative strategies for addressing economic instability and social drivers of health, creating alignment in reducing barriers to program access.

Strategy 3

Considering other priorities, philanthropy and other relevant funders will be solicited to provide the necessary funding to initiate these activities.

CONTEXT

Philanthropic funders typically have more flexibility in how funds are allocated and used; for example, they can support innovative evaluation methods without the constraints of government oversight. Public funders often operate within strict regulatory frameworks, requiring specific standards tied to federal or state funding requirements. Philanthropic funders may also respond more quickly to emerging needs.

Philanthropic funders complement public funders by offering flexibility, independence, and a focus on equity and long-term capacity building. Their ability to fund innovative and community-centered evaluation strategies provides a critical advantage, ensuring that programs are not only compliant but also effective, inclusive, and sustainable.

WHY DOES THE UPDATE COMMITTEE RECOMMEND THIS STRATEGY?

The UNC School of Social Work is recognized for its research on social drivers of health, economic mobility, and family resilience. Its focus on applied research means it works closely with North Carolina communities, particularly underserved areas, to address systemic challenges like poverty and access to resources. Also, for more than 30 years, the School of Social Work has led the Family and Children's Resource Program, which works with organizations that serve the families and communities of North Carolina. This program develops customized training and coaching programs and evaluates program effectiveness, among other services.[31,32]

Philanthropic support for community-based organizations can provide resources such as training tools and systems for the infrastructure, staff, and experience needed for high-quality evaluation. Philanthropic assistance can also support the development of equitable evaluation frameworks that prioritize the inclusion and representation of underserved populations, ensuring their voices are heard and their needs are addressed.

DESIRED RESULT

To enhance the UNC School of Social Work's ability to conduct effective, equitable, and data-driven evaluations, ensuring the evaluation achieves meaningful outcomes for children and families while informing future improvements and investments.

ALIGNMENT ACROSS NC

- **Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust** funds initiatives addressing poverty, housing instability, and food insecurity. It also supports programs that reduce stigma by integrating economic assistance into broader community health efforts.
- **Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation** supports advocacy and community-based programs that address economic inequities and reduce barriers to accessing assistance.
- **BlueCross BlueShield Foundation of North Carolina** invests in programs that reduce stigma and improve access to economic assistance.
- **The Duke Endowment** funds programs that address child poverty and expand access to family supports. It also invests in research and initiatives to reduce stigma and increase the utilization of available resources.
- **United Way of North Carolina** operates initiatives like NC 211, which confidentially connects families to accessible health and human services in their area, helping to reduce stigma.

RECOMMENDATION #3

North Carolina Early Childhood Foundation, Positive Childhood Alliance NC, MomsRising NC, and NC Child should continue the development and expansion of public awareness campaigns that focus on the role of economic supports in promoting positive childhood experience (PCEs), preventing adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), and fostering financial stability.

See Recommendation 5.1 in the Appendix for the original recommendation.

Strategy 1

The expanded campaign should highlight the direct impact of financial stability on child and family well-being, with a clear call for actionable policy solutions that strengthen financial resources and economic supports for families.

CONTEXT

New and expanded public awareness campaigns should increase understanding of how financial supports, such as child care subsidies, food assistance, and housing vouchers and assistance, directly impact family well-being and child development. Awareness campaigns can also inform families about how economic stability can reduce stress, improve parenting capacity, and enhance children's opportunities for growth. By guiding families toward concrete supports that stabilize their finances, their basic needs can be met, allowing them to invest in long-term well-being.

North Carolina Early Childhood Foundation's First 2,000 Days initiative emphasizes the critical importance of a child's early years—from birth to kindergarten, approximately 2,000 days—in shaping their future health, learning, and behavior. This campaign highlights how early experiences impact all North Carolinians, fostering widespread community engagement. It also provides open-source educational materials and toolkits, available in both English and Spanish, to assist communities across North Carolina in initiating their own advocacy efforts. These resources include presentations, brochures, and engagement tools tailored for outreach to various sectors, such as faith communities and businesses.[33]

As the campaigns are being developed and implemented, organizations should prioritize the continued and meaningful inclusion of parent and family perspectives. These policy changes can create systemic pathways to economic stability, reducing barriers for families and directly supporting positive childhood experiences. By integrating data and stories gathered through the campaigns, these organizations can amplify the evidence-based case for legislative and budgetary actions that address disparities and foster equitable access to economic supports. Collaboration with policymakers and advocacy groups ensures that the campaign leads to tangible improvements in family well-being through lasting structural change.

One example of such a campaign is the national organization Prevent Child Abuse. Their 2022 policy toolkit emphasizes the critical role of economic policies in preventing child abuse and neglect. Developed in collaboration with the organization's Policy Affinity Group, the toolkit examines 3 primary economic support strategies: state tax credits, livable wages, and paid family and medical leave. In addition to policy analyses, the toolkit offers resources such as social media images and talking points to assist in effectively communicating the importance of financial supports to prevent child maltreatment.[34]

WHY DOES THE UPDATE COMMITTEE RECOMMEND THIS STRATEGY?

Nearly 85% of families investigated by Child Protective Services across the United States have incomes below 200% of the federal poverty line; low-income families who experience financial hardship are 3 times more likely to be involved in a child neglect investigation.[35]

Financially stable families are more likely to be able to provide safe and nurturing environments, which are key to creating PCEs. By linking financial stability to outcomes, the campaigns can highlight the need for comprehensive, actionable policy solutions to address gaps in existing supports. Public campaigns that normalize the use of financial support help to reduce stigma and encourage eligible families to seek help, increasing program participation.

DESIRED RESULT

To increase public awareness and policy actions that strengthen financial resources and financial supports for families, fostering stability and improved well-being for children and caregivers.

ALIGNMENT ACROSS NC

- **The Early Childhood Action Plan (ECAP)** provides a framework for coordinated action across public and private sectors throughout North Carolina. One of its goals is to expand the reach of nutrition benefit programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) by identifying people who are eligible and encouraging them to apply for the programs, as well as others they may qualify for, such as the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC).[36]
- **NC Tax Credit Coalition** is working to expand availability and access to tax credits that support families, including the federal Earned Income Tax Credit and Child Tax Credit and the creation of a refundable state EITC and Child Tax Credit.
- **The Wicked Problems in Child Welfare Coalition** is working across organizations to increase family financial stability to prevent child welfare system involvement, particularly for neglect cases that are rooted in poverty.
- **The Think Babies NC Alliance** has a policy agenda with a strong focus on family financial stability, economic mobility, and other supports for families.
- **The State Health Improvement Plan (NC SHIP)** aligns with a public awareness campaign focused on promoting economic supports, PCEs, and preventing ACEs by prioritizing social drivers of health, equity, and early childhood well-being.

Strategy 2

Philanthropy should coordinate with state agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to communicate the importance of financial supports and incorporate or expand the importance of financial supports into their existing programs.

CONTEXT

Many families eligible for programs such as child care subsidies, food assistance, and housing support either lack awareness of these resources or face barriers to enrollment and retention. By coordinating with state agencies and NGOs, philanthropy can help bridge these gaps by funding outreach efforts, benefit navigators, and research on best practices to improve access and utilization. Additionally, integrating financial supports into health, education, and early childhood initiatives can promote a more comprehensive approach to family well-being, ensuring that parents and caregivers have the stability needed to foster PCEs.

Economic hardship is a key driver of stress, neglect, and other risk factors for ACEs.[37] Families with limited financial resources often struggle to meet basic needs such as housing, food, and child care, which undermines financial and overall stability and well-being. They also rarely have access to tax credits like the Earned Income Tax Credit and Child Tax Credit, which could increase take-home pay and make it easier to make ends meet.

WHY DOES THE UPDATE COMMITTEE RECOMMEND THIS STRATEGY?

Coordinating economic supports with existing programs avoids duplication of efforts, ensures resources are used effectively, and enhances the impact of interventions by aligning goals, addressing gaps in service delivery, and fostering collaboration across sectors to better meet the needs of families and children.

The Family First Prevention Services Act, enacted in 2018, is federal legislation that aims to shift the focus of child welfare systems to proactive prevention efforts that help families address challenges such as mental health and substance use.[38] Recent Family First guidance now allows administrative claims to be made for costs of child care, transportation, peer navigation and other concrete supports as a part of case management to improve a family's access to an approved service under the state's Family First Prevention Plan. In North Carolina, philanthropy can play a critical role by providing resources to expand and enhance these financial supports within existing programs, such as child care subsidies or peer navigation initiatives.

Philanthropic support can also be instrumental in funding benefit navigators, who help families access, understand, and maximize available economic supports such as SNAP, WIC, Medicaid, child care subsidies, and housing assistance. These navigators serve as trusted community resources, ensuring that families can overcome bureaucratic barriers, reduce administrative burdens, and receive timely assistance. By investing in benefit navigators, philanthropy can help bridge gaps in service delivery, increase program participation, and ultimately strengthen family financial stability and child well-being in North Carolina.

DESIRED RESULT

To leverage philanthropic support to enhance and expand child-focused family financial stability policies implemented by the state of North Carolina.

ALIGNMENT ACROSS NC

- **The Duke Endowment** supports child and family well-being by funding statewide intermediary organizations that unite partner agencies around shared community needs.
- **Invest Early NC** is a collaborative of early childhood funders focused on outcomes for children and families prenatal to age 8, ensuring they are healthy, safe, nurtured, learning, and ready to succeed by the end of third grade.
- **Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust** funds ACEs and resilience work.
- **Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation** funds economic security initiatives.
- **MomsRising NC** champions state and federal policies that expand access to child care subsidies, paid family and medical leave, and food security programs through tools such as storytelling to amplify the real-life impact of financial instability on families.
- **The NC Justice Center** works to reduce poverty and promote economic mobility through policy analysis. Their research helps inform state agencies, NGOs, and philanthropy on best practices for integrating financial supports into child- and family-serving programs across North Carolina.

THE ROLE OF FAMILY ENGAGEMENT IN PROMOTING POSITIVE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES

Family engagement is an active and collaborative partnership between families and the systems, institutions, and communities that impact their lives. In the context of child health and development, family engagement involves fostering meaningful participation of parents, caregivers, and extended family members to create an environment where children can thrive.[39] Family engagement is integral to promoting positive childhood experiences (PCEs) by shaping children's values, behaviors, and emotional well-being through supportive, nurturing, and interactive relationships.

Parents and family members play an essential role in shaping the social norms, attitudes, and behaviors of children. This influence extends beyond the home, affecting how children perceive and interact with the broader world. Systemic changes—such as family-friendly workplace policies that support work-life balance, access to quality child care, and inclusive community programs—are essential for enabling meaningful engagement at the family and individual levels.[40] These systemic supports allow families to better model positive behavior, provide emotional and social support, set expectations and boundaries, and engage in educational and community activities.

What Does Engagement Look Like?

1. **Modeling Behavior:** Children often learn by observing the actions of those around them. When parents and other caregivers model healthy relationships, emotional regulation, and effective communication, children develop essential social and emotional skills.
2. **Emotional and Social Support:** Family members who provide consistent emotional and social support foster resilience, self-esteem, and a sense of security in children. This foundation enables children to develop healthy coping mechanisms and build strong relationships with others.
3. **Setting Expectations and Boundaries:** Families help shape children's understanding of acceptable behavior by setting clear expectations and boundaries. This guidance provides children with structure, promotes self-discipline, and supports their overall development.
4. **Engagement in Education:** Parents who actively participate in their children's education—through attending school events, helping with homework, or maintaining communication with teachers—positively influence academic outcomes. Studies show that parental involvement is associated with improved grades, better attendance, and higher levels of motivation among students.[41,42]
5. **Impact on Community Norms:** Family engagement also contributes to shaping community norms. When families actively participate in community activities and advocate for policies that benefit children, they create environments that prioritize child health and well-being.

THE ROLE OF FATHERS AND CO-PARENTS

While family engagement often focuses on maternal involvement, research underscores the importance of father and co-parent engagement in child health and development.[43] Strengthening father[a] and co-parent involvement is critical to fostering positive childhood experiences. Fathers who are actively engaged in their children's lives contribute to better emotional, cognitive, and social outcomes for their children. They provide unique perspectives, additional sources of support, and shared responsibilities that enrich the caregiving experience. The North Carolina Perinatal Health Strategic Plan underscores the importance of strengthening father and co-parent involvement to improve family dynamics and child health outcomes.

Connecting Systemic and Individual-Level Changes

Effective family engagement requires systemic supports that enable families to participate fully in their children's lives. Policies that provide paid family leave, access to affordable, high-quality child care, and parent education programs empower families to balance work and caregiving responsibilities. These systemic changes create conditions where families can focus on fostering positive experiences and shaping the future of their children.

Family engagement is a cornerstone of healthy childhood development and positive health outcomes. By fostering strong relationships, modeling positive behavior, and advocating for systemic changes, families and communities can work together to create environments where children thrive. Strengthening father and co-parent involvement, alongside broader support for family engagement, ensures that all children have the opportunity to grow up in nurturing and supportive environments that promote their well-being and success.

a While this point refers specifically to fathers because of continued efforts to achieve greater involvement of men in reproductive health care and child care, outreach efforts should be inclusive of co-parents and caregivers regardless of gender identity.

THE ROLE OF INFANT AND EARLY CHILDHOOD HOME VISITING PROGRAMS IN PROMOTING CHILD HEALTH AND FAMILY WELL-BEING

What is Home Visiting?

Home visiting programs are evidence-based programs where trained professionals visit families in their homes to provide support, education, and resources to promote child health, development, and overall family well-being. These programs are particularly beneficial for families facing socioeconomic challenges, new parenthood, or other circumstances that may impact child-rearing. Home visiting serves as an accessible, personalized intervention that meets families where they are—both physically and in their caregiving journey.[44]

Screening and Early Intervention

One of the key strengths of home visiting programs is the ability to identify and address risk factors early on. Home visitors are trained to screen for issues such as intimate partner violence, mental health conditions, and substance use. Early detection of these challenges enables timely intervention, preventing negative outcomes for children and families.[45] For example, connecting parents with mental health services or substance use treatment can mitigate the risk of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), which have long-term impacts on child health and development.

Shifting Social Norms and Promoting Evidence-Based Practices

Home visiting programs also play a crucial role in shifting social norms around parenting and child development. By promoting evidence-based practices, home visitors help families adopt strategies that are proven to benefit children's health and well-being. These practices include:

- **Positive Discipline Techniques:** Encouraging parents to use constructive approaches to discipline, such as setting boundaries and using reinforcement rather than punitive measures.
- **Early Literacy Activities:** Supporting activities like reading aloud to children, which enhances language development and literacy skills.
- **Breastfeeding Support:** Providing guidance and resources to support breastfeeding, which improves maternal and child health outcomes.[46]

By educating families on these practices, home visiting programs foster environments where children can thrive both emotionally and developmentally.

Reducing Parental Stress and Preventing Child Abuse and Neglect

Parental stress is a significant risk factor for child abuse and neglect. Home visiting programs provide both practical and emotional support to parents, helping to alleviate this stress. Through regular visits, home visitors build trusting relationships with families, offering guidance on child-rearing, problem-solving strategies, and access to community resources.[47] This support strengthens parental confidence and competence, ultimately creating safer and more nurturing home environments.

Additionally, home visiting programs help families build protective factors that reduce the likelihood of abuse and neglect. These protective factors include:

- **Parental Resilience:** Strengthening the ability to cope with challenges.
- **Social Connections:** Encouraging networks of support from friends, family, and community members.
- **Concrete Supports in Times of Need:** Linking families to essential resources like food, housing, and health care.
- **Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development:** Enhancing understanding of children's needs and behaviors.

Creating a Trauma-Informed Home Visiting Program

Home visiting programs frequently serve families with the greatest needs; for example, an estimated 70% of women surveyed in 1 home visiting program had experienced at least some form of violent trauma. Home visiting can play an important role in mitigating the transmission of intergenerational trauma by helping parents and caregivers of children build positive attachments with their children.[48] Integrating a trauma-informed perspective into a home visiting program involves:

- Screening for trauma exposure and related symptoms.
- Using culturally appropriate, evidence-based treatment for trauma stress.
- Making resources about trauma exposure and its impact available.
- Engaging in efforts to strengthen protective factors of children and children.

For more information on trauma-informed practices, visit chapter 5 of this report.

Supporting Statewide Efforts and Recommendations

The importance of home visiting is underscored by statewide initiatives such as North Carolina's Perinatal Health Strategic Plan. The plan recommends strengthening the home visiting system to improve maternal and child health outcomes.[49] This recommendation aligns with broader goals to support families during critical periods of child development and to reduce health disparities.

For example, programs highlighted by the Positive Childhood Alliance of North Carolina showcase how home visiting has successfully supported families by providing essential resources and guidance.[44] These stories of success emphasize the tangible benefits of home visiting programs in improving family well-being and child health outcomes.

Home visiting programs are a vital component of child health and family support systems. By offering early intervention, promoting evidence-based parenting practices, and reducing parental stress, these programs help build resilient families and healthy communities. As North Carolina continues to strengthen its home visiting infrastructure, the potential to improve child health outcomes and prevent adverse experiences grows, ensuring more children experience the supportive and nurturing environments they need to thrive.

BREAKING THE CYCLE:
Understanding the Impact of Incarceration and ACEs in North Carolina

The relationship between incarceration and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) is twofold: parental incarceration serves as a deeply impactful ACE for children, while children and youth who experience multiple ACEs are at a significantly higher risk of incarceration later in life, perpetuating cycles of trauma and inequality. Parental incarceration is a significant ACE that can profoundly shape a child's life, often leading to long-term emotional, behavioral, and socioeconomic challenges. In North Carolina, thousands of children are impacted by the incarceration of a parent each year, facing disruptions in family stability, financial security, and access to supportive relationships. At the same time, children and youth who experience multiple ACEs are disproportionately represented in the criminal justice system, perpetuating a cycle of trauma and systemic inequity.

Childhood trauma has been linked to an increased risk of contact with the justice system, particularly among adolescents. Many studies have shown that an estimated 25%–30% of incarcerated youth met the criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder,[50] demonstrating the burden of adversity many experienced before entering the justice system.

A child with an ACE score of 4 or higher is **70%** more likely to be an offender or a victim of a violent crime.[51]

90% of juvenile offenders in the United States have experienced trauma in childhood, and up to **30%** of justice-involved children met the criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder due to experienced trauma.[52]

A January 2024 analysis by the North Carolina Department of Adult Corrections found that approximately one-third of the state's overall prison population are parents of children younger than 18 years old.[53] Nearly 21,000 children across North Carolina have a parent who is imprisoned. This figure does not include parents incarcerated in county-run jails, where short-term sentences or pretrial detentions often add to the instability and trauma experienced by children.[53] Incarceration can destabilize family structures and may lead to health disparities in substance use, mental illness, and chronic disease[50] among the children of incarcerated adults.

More than **8% of children** in North Carolina **have experienced parental incarceration**.

https://ncsecondchance.org/about/#:~:text=8%20percent%20of%20the%20children,1%20in%2057%20White%20children.

Nationwide, many incarcerated parents themselves grew up in households facing challenges, which illustrates the intergenerational nature of the effects of trauma and adversity:

- 17% spent time in foster care.
- 43% came from families that received public assistance before they turned 18.
- 19% lived in public housing before they turned 18.
- 11% were homeless at some point before age 18.
- 32% had (or currently have) an incarcerated parent of their own.[54]

Parental incarceration creates significant burdens on families. Contact with the justice system often increases family instability, unemployment, and socioeconomic disadvantage.[55] Children also face an increased risk of emotional and mental health challenges, such as antisocial behavior, psychological strain, and suspension or expulsion from school.[56] Addressing these interlinked issues requires a comprehensive focus on prevention, intervention, and systemic solutions that support families. This includes providing additional resources for children in the home, assisting with post-incarceration re-entry, reducing the stigma associated with accessing support services and treatment, and breaking the cycle of adversity and incarceration in North Carolina.

One systemic solution example includes the North Carolina ACEs-Informed Courts Project, which is an initiative designed to integrate knowledge of ACEs into the judicial system to improve outcomes for children and families involved in the court system. This project aimed to educate and equip judges, attorneys, court staff, and other justice system stakeholders with the tools to recognize and address the impact of ACEs in legal proceedings, particularly those involving child welfare, juvenile justice, and family law. This project emphasized how trauma-informed practices can reduce re-traumatization and improve decision-making in court cases[52] and improve outcomes for children and families.

Among the accomplishments of the project was the creation of an ACEs-informed bench card, which was distributed to North Carolina prosecutors and judges. The bench card contains a compilation of ACEs information for officials and staff to use in their interactions with court visitors and participants of the court. It includes keys to a trauma-informed courtroom, suggested courtroom procedures to avoid furthering trauma, and practices to acknowledge trauma.[57] A 2021 pilot trauma education course for a small group of North Carolina district court judges found that judges wanted content that was practical, incorporated research, and included broad messaging about what it means to be a judge.[58]

Initiatives like the ACEs-Informed Courts Project demonstrate the power of integrating trauma-informed practices into institutional systems, offering a pathway to mitigate the long-term impacts of ACEs and improve outcomes for children and families. By investing in policies and programs that support families, address root causes of adversity, and reduce barriers to accessing support, North Carolina can lead the way in fostering resilience, promoting equity, and building a future where children and families thrive beyond the shadow of incarceration.

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