

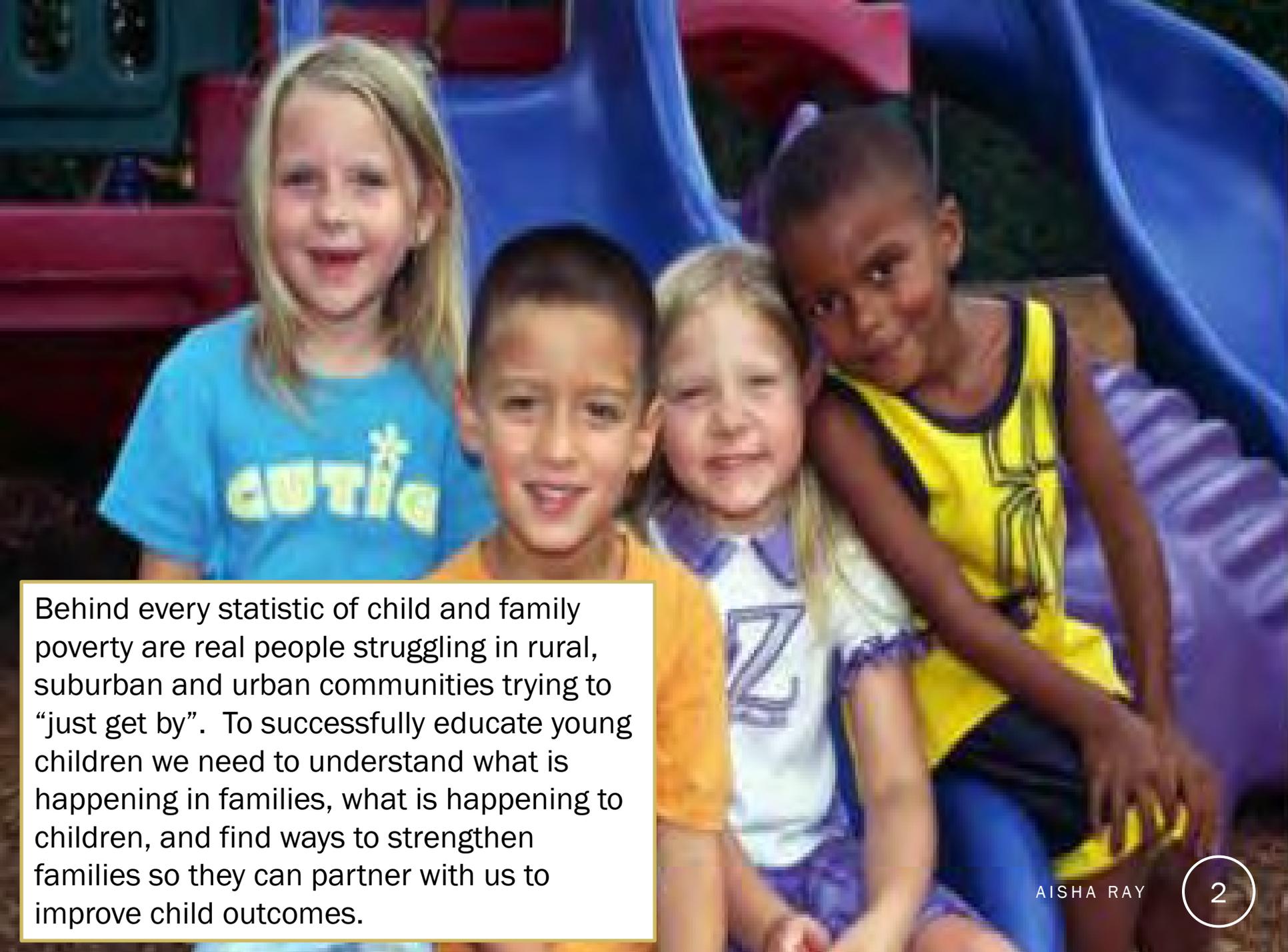
# **“WE CAN’T DO IT WITHOUT THEM”: FAMILIES MUST BE AT THE CENTER OF EFFECTIVE EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION**

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Behind every statistic of child and family poverty are real people struggling in rural, suburban and urban communities trying to “just get by”. To successfully educate young children we need to understand what is happening in families, what is happening to children, and find ways to strengthen families so they can partner with us to improve child outcomes.

# CHILDREN

- ❑ Four year old Malik lives in a tough suburban neighborhood in down-state Illinois. On Saturday his cousin was shot and killed, Malik saw this happen. His preschool teacher learned this from a child in her classroom. In class Malik is quite and withdrawn. *What should the program do?*
  
- ❑ Four year old Mary lives in a rural community in western Illinois. Several weeks ago her single mother and her two brothers were evicted from their home for failure to pay rent. This is their third eviction. Mary has not been back to her preschool classroom. *What should the program do?*
  
- ❑ Jose is 4½. His father was picked up by immigration and is in a detention center in Chicago. Jose comes to preschool but is distracted and cannot stop bothering his neighbors. *What should the program do?*
  
- ❑ Evie is 4 years old and lives in a Peoria. Her mother, a refugee from the Liberian Civil War lost her family during the war and appears to be very sad. She is not always able to get Evie to school on time or at all. Evie's absences are influencing her learning. *What should the program do?*

# PRESSURES AND STRESSORS ON FAMILIES AND CHILDREN

Poverty and concentrated poverty—families of color, especially Black and Native American, are more likely to be poor longer and live in deeper poverty than are White families  
*(Annie E. Casey, 2015)*

Joblessness and low wage work

Violence – domestic and community

Mental health and health issues

Food deserts and poor nutrition

Under resourced neighborhoods

Poor quality preschools and elementary schools; and apartheid schools (80% or more – children of color and in poverty)

Dangerous neighborhoods – families of color and economically marginalized families are more likely to live in neighborhoods they perceive to be dangerous; children exposed to factors that contribute to trauma

Housing – evictions, cost, quality. For very poor families, often single parent families housing may eat up 50% to 80% of monthly income *(Desmond, 2016)*.

Scrutiny by agencies of the state: DCFS, police, courts, prisons *(Alexander, 2010; Roberts, 2001)*.

# RACE AND CHILD POVERTY

## NATIONAL

**1 in 5 children in the US live in poverty**

**Race matters in child poverty:**

- Black = 39%
- Native American = 37%
- Latino = 33%
- Pacific Islanders and Asian = 14%
- White = 14%
- (Source – <http://www.acef.org/resources/the-2015-kids-count>)

## ILLINOIS

**1 in 4 Illinois children (birth to age 5) live in poverty**

**Race matters in child poverty:**

- Black = 45%
- Latino = 29%
- White = 11%

(Source: Illinois Kids Count 2015 – [voices4kids.org](http://voices4kids.org))

# CHILDREN LIVING IN CONCENTRATED POVERTY\* BY RACE

## US CHILDREN

**Total – 13%**

**Black – 30%**

**Latino – 23%**

**White – 4%**

## ILLINOIS CHILDREN

**Total – 11%**

**Black – 40%**

**Latino – 13%**

**White – 2%**

Source: E. Kneebone, 2014

\* Refers to spatial density of poverty; 40% of people in a census tract live below the federal poverty level

# PRESCHOOL EXPANSION IN ILLINOIS: SERVING THE NEEDIEST CHILDREN

“Expanding access to high-quality preschool is critically important to ensure the success of our children in school and beyond.”

*Duncan, 2014*

Serving young at-risk children and families in challenging circumstances in rural, suburban and urban Illinois communities is essential to provide a solid foundation for learning.



QUALITY + ACCESS LEADS TO SUCCESS

# ASSUMPTIONS

- ❑ High quality early education is not a silver bullet, but an effective strategy to address the educational needs of young children in poverty.
- ❑ Stress, especially on-going stress due to environmental factors individuals cannot control may make it more difficult for parents to consistently support the child's early school experiences and meet teacher expectations for parent involvement.
- ❑ Early education interventions targeted at improving educational outcomes may be more effective if they intentionally develop and provide high-quality family support.
- ❑ Many family support workers may not have sufficient training and professional supervision to meet the needs of families with complex problems.

# CHILDREN BENEFIT FROM FAMILY-PARENT-GUARDIAN ENGAGEMENT

Children whose families/parents/guardians are engaged with early education and early elementary schools are more likely than children whose parents are not involved to:

- Academic gains
- Adapt better to school
- Have fewer behavior problems
- Attend school regularly (less absenteeism)
- Complete homework
- Have better social skills
- Have higher self-esteem
- Source: Hill & Taylor, 2004; Smith et al., 2013

# FAMILIES-CAREGIVERS-GUARDIANS BENEFIT FROM ENGAGEMENT WITH SCHOOLS

- Engaged families are more likely to be aware of and take advantage of resources in their broader community (Shannon & Bylsma, 2002)
- Meaningful involvement also serves to increase parents' social influence through their interaction with other parents, teachers and school leadership thereby enhancing their understanding of school practices, policies, and resources (Hill & Taylor, 2004; Smith et al., 2013)

# EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS BENEFIT FROM FAMILY-PARENT-GUARDIAN ENGAGEMENT

- Acquire greater knowledge of children that can support teaching and learning
- Acquire greater knowledge of families—their history, culture, values and expectations
- Develop a greater understanding of communities
- Family support and advocate for programs when needed—ex., threatened budget cuts
- Translators and interpreters
- Cultural guides and educators of staff

# ADULT-IDENTIFIED FAMILY NEEDS MAY BE RELATED TO CHILD OUTCOMES

Many families living in stressful high-poverty communities may need supports to meet basic needs more affluent families take for granted. Working with families on their priorities (e.g., referring them to housing opportunities, English classes, referral to legal services, guidance about their children) may help to build trusting relationships with individuals with limited social capital; and may help families gain needed supports. Family-identified needs may be a gateway to trust and trust is essential in partnering with families in early childhood.

Not all early education interventions can provide this type of family support. But, they may all have to address how to develop trusting relationships with parents and other family members—especially when those families have significant economic, health, mental health, safety, and social needs.

All of the successful early intervention programs (e.g., Head Start, Chicago Child-Parent Center, Abecedarian, Perry Preschool Project) had dedicated family support /family education staff.

# QUESTIONS

- What is the “model” or “theory of change” of family support?
- What are its goals, objectives and measures of success?
- How is it staffed? What are the credentials, training and experience requirements?
- What is the nature of the professional development FS staff receive? Is it targeted at improving their capacity to work with families with complex/multiple needs? Is it site specific? Is there follow-up coaching to ensure integration?
- Are family support staff, classroom teaches, and principals/directors perceived as a “team” that meets regularly to plan and discuss the FS work?
- Are family support workers provided with reflective supervision on a regular basis with experienced FS supervisors?
- Do FS staff speak and write in the languages of families served?
- How are FS staff supported to meet the needs of culturally, linguistically and racially diverse families?
- How are FS staff supported to meet the needs of culturally, linguistically and racially diverse families with children with diverse abilities?

# PERCEIVING SOME FAMILIES AS CHALLENGING

- ❑ Most early childhood professionals admit they have struggled with/or felt challenged by some families
- ❑ There is not always an easy fit between a practitioner, a program and a family
- ❑ Families with significant daily challenges, stressors and inadequate resources may have difficulty consistently connecting with EC program staff—this does not mean they are not concerned and invested in their children’s success
- ❑ Families of color and in poverty may be more negatively evaluated by staff (Delpit, 1995; Thompson, 2012)

# PERCEIVING SOME FAMILIES AS CHALLENGING

- ❑ Early childhood staff have histories/issues that may cause them to react to some families in ways that are unproductive ~ “ghosts in the nursery” (Fraiberg, 1975)
- ❑ Barriers to productive relationships:
  - ❑ Bias and prejudice
  - ❑ Not actively listening and defensiveness
  - ❑ Arrogance
  - ❑ Inexperience
  - ❑ Unexamined deficit perspectives
  - ❑ Lack of empathy
  - ❑ Language and communication problems
  - ❑ Job stress/ Personal stress
  - ❑ Anger
  - ❑ Inability or unwillingness to engage in critical self-reflection
  - ❑ Lack of knowledge of the families culture, history, values and background

# COMPONENTS OF HIGH QUALITY FAMILY SUPPORT EFFORTS

- Significant focus on the development of relationships with families served by the program.
- Staff specifically trained to support and work with families.
- Reflective supervision of FS staff provided regularly by experienced staff.
- Intentionally designed programs targeted at strengthening families identified needs, including adult needs (e.g., literacy, job searches). [Note: influence of anti-poverty origins of many EC programs, such as Head Start].
- Site-specific flexibility in implementation.
- Regular review of family cases in order to improve effectiveness and quality.
- Teams of staff work together to support families, e.g., teachers, family support worker, and director.
- Data collected and used to evaluate the program.
- Family and community voices and perspectives included to shape and inform program services and supports.

# EARLY CHILDHOOD STAFF NEED SUPPORT TO BE EFFECTIVE WITH ALL FAMILIES

- Professional development specifically designed to address culturally competent and humble ways of working with families
- Consistent, on-going coaching /mentoring and support to discuss work with families and children with a trained professional (e.g., clinical social worker)
- Professional development regarding “implicit bias” and its role in practice
- Developing communication skills—active listening, effective use of silence, offering support, use of translators/interpreters
- Professional-quality reflective supervision related to practice
- Communities of practice for staff—on-going, rigorous, goal oriented
- Learning how to learn from communities: developing community scans, assessments, walking in communities, talking with community members
- Home visiting on a regular schedule
- Use of mobile phones and other technology to stay in touch with families
- Learning how to co-construct expectations with families – what does engagement mean for both EC staff and families?



**What do you think?  
Questions, reflections, and  
opinions**

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