



# RESEARCH PROFILE

## PARENTS ANONYMOUS® EVIDENCE SUPPORTS THE *STRENGTHENING FAMILIES* APPROACH

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### INTRODUCTION

Research establishes that child abuse and neglect is a contributing factor to many chronic diseases and psychological problems (CDC, 2008). Since 1969, Parents Anonymous® Inc. has implemented a strengths-based model of child abuse and neglect prevention serving millions of parents, caregivers and children of all ages in diverse communities worldwide impacting this public health issue. The courageous founders, a tenacious mother, Jolly K., and a social worker, Leonard Lieber, developed this unique mutual support and shared leadership® model framed around the belief that all parents, caregivers, children and youth have strengths that can be fostered through a positive and caring environment. Through Parents Anonymous® Groups, the National Parent Helpline®, and *Shared Leadership® in Action* Programs, parents become leaders and effective change agents for themselves and their families by engaging in meaningful shared leadership® with staff to positively impact communities and society. The outcomes of the array of Parents Anonymous® Programs include improvements in individual behaviors, family dynamics, community well-being and responsive public policy which reflect all levels of the social ecological prevention framework (Garbarino, 1977).

Shared leadership® represents a paradigm shift in practice by replacing traditional approaches of “doing to” with “working together with” parents. Typically, efforts to prevent child abuse and neglect reflect a “blaming and shaming” approach, focusing on the reduction of identified risk factors related to the incidence of maltreatment (Mikton & Butchart, 2009); however, many child welfare advocates acknowledge the importance of enhancing protective factors by promoting positive developmental outcomes using a primary prevention approach (Fraser & Richman, 1999; Lerner, Almerigi, Theokas, & Lerner, 2005; National Council on Crime and Delinquency, 2007). Safe,

stable, and nurturing relationships have been established as essential to childhood development and a central edict to the public health approach to preventing child maltreatment (Middlebrooks & Audage, 2008). Furthermore, protective factors act as buffers by helping families defend against negative influences from their surroundings. Recently, the Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) developed the *Strengthening Families* approach to unite research and practice around protective factors to prevent child abuse and neglect (CSSP, 2010a). The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how the research on the effectiveness of Parents Anonymous® Programs to prevent child abuse and neglect provides valuable evidence for the *Strengthening Families* approach.

### THE *STRENGTHENING FAMILIES* APPROACH

The *Strengthening Families* approach is focused primarily on the promotion of five protective factors to prevent child abuse and neglect. These protective factors include (CSSP, 2010a):

- *Parental Resilience* (parents’ ability to effectively cope with the various challenges of parenting and everyday life)
- *Social Connections* (emotional and concrete assistance from friends, family, neighbors, and other community members)
- *Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development* (accurate information about how to raise children and appropriate expectations of child behavior)
- *Concrete Support in Times of Need* (financial security as well as access to formal financial support, such as Temporary Assistance to Needy Families [TANF], and informal support from social networks)
- *Children’s Social and Emotional Competence* (children’s ability to effectively interact with other people and appropriately communicate their emotions).

Strategies for building these protective factors vary from program to program. Currently, the approach has not been associated with any specific strategy or strategies for its implementation. The Center for the Study of Social Policy believes that its *Strengthening Families* approach can be built into programs and systems in every state (CSSP, 2010a). Thirty-two states have interagency leadership teams in the *Strengthening Families* National Network. The approach impacted an estimated two million children between ages 0 to 5 in child care during 2005 alone (CSSP, 2010b). All Parents Anonymous® Programs—weekly support groups, National Parent Helpline® and *Shared Leadership® in Action* Programs—effectively prevent child abuse and neglect using the *Strengthening Families* approach.

## PARENTS ANONYMOUS® GROUPS

Parents Anonymous® Inc. operates an international network of accredited organizations that adhere to National Benchmarks and Standards of Practice to ensure quality services based on *Strengthening Families* evidence. Parents and caregivers attend the Adult Group while their children and youth (ages 0 to 18) attend the specialized Children and Youth Groups. The weekly groups are free of charge in a setting where participants provide emotional support, build a sense of community, and empower each other to address their problems and seek solutions. Parents Anonymous® mutual support groups for adults are co-led by a trained group facilitator and parent group leader (a group participant selected by other group members). The groups allow parents and caregivers to foster and maintain mutual support and shared leadership® by creating an environment of personal growth and leadership development for all participants. The specialized Children's and Youth Groups focus on age appropriate strategies to strengthen emotional well-being and foster peer-to-peer support. Parents Anonymous® groups are made available in partnership with community-based entities such as faith-based organizations, social service agencies, schools, mental health programs and homeless shelters worldwide.

When parents come together in a Parents Anonymous® group, a powerful mechanism for attitude and behavior change is created through “the helper-therapy principle” where in reaching out to support others, parents in turn help themselves (Reissman & Carroll, 1995). Through group participation, parents build self-confidence in their ability to address personal issues and make

long term changes in their families. Through shared leadership® parents and caregivers support one another and partner with the group facilitator when building on their strengths and overcoming various challenges regarding child and youth development, interpersonal communication, positive discipline, domestic violence, drug and alcohol problems, effective parenting strategies, and social concerns. Mutual support is the psychological process of giving and getting help that fosters a sense of trust, belonging and community; creates opportunities for catharsis, confession, and supportive criticism; encourages role modeling; and teaches by example effective coping strategies (Levine & Perkins, 1987). Research confirms that this powerful reciprocity creates a “safe and supportive” setting for parents, youth and children to deal with the underlying psychological issues and social factors impacting their feelings and behaviors (Maton, 1988). Four theoretical constructs characterize the principles of the Parents Anonymous® model:

- ❖ **Leadership:** Individuals are valued and parents and youth are considered effective and necessary leaders who shape the direction of their families, programs, and communities. Self esteem building leads to empowerment for program participants.
- ❖ **Mutual Support:** Parents and children/youth give and get help from one another in the group. Contrary to the typical subordination of participants in service delivery, mutual support is exemplified by the reciprocal roles of Parents Anonymous® group participants.
- ❖ **Shared Leadership®:** Staff, parents and youth form meaningful partnerships in developing, implementing and evaluating Parents Anonymous® Programs and other service delivery and public policies impacting families, including all policy-making and organizational functions. Together, they share responsibility, expertise and leadership to ensure responsiveness, strengthen families and improve services and communities.
- ❖ **Personal Growth:** Parents Anonymous® believes that parents and caregivers are committed to creating positive change, improving themselves, and improving the lives of their children. All Programs are founded on the premise that parents, children and youth transform their attitudes, learn new behaviors, and build on their strengths to make long-term positive changes in their lives.

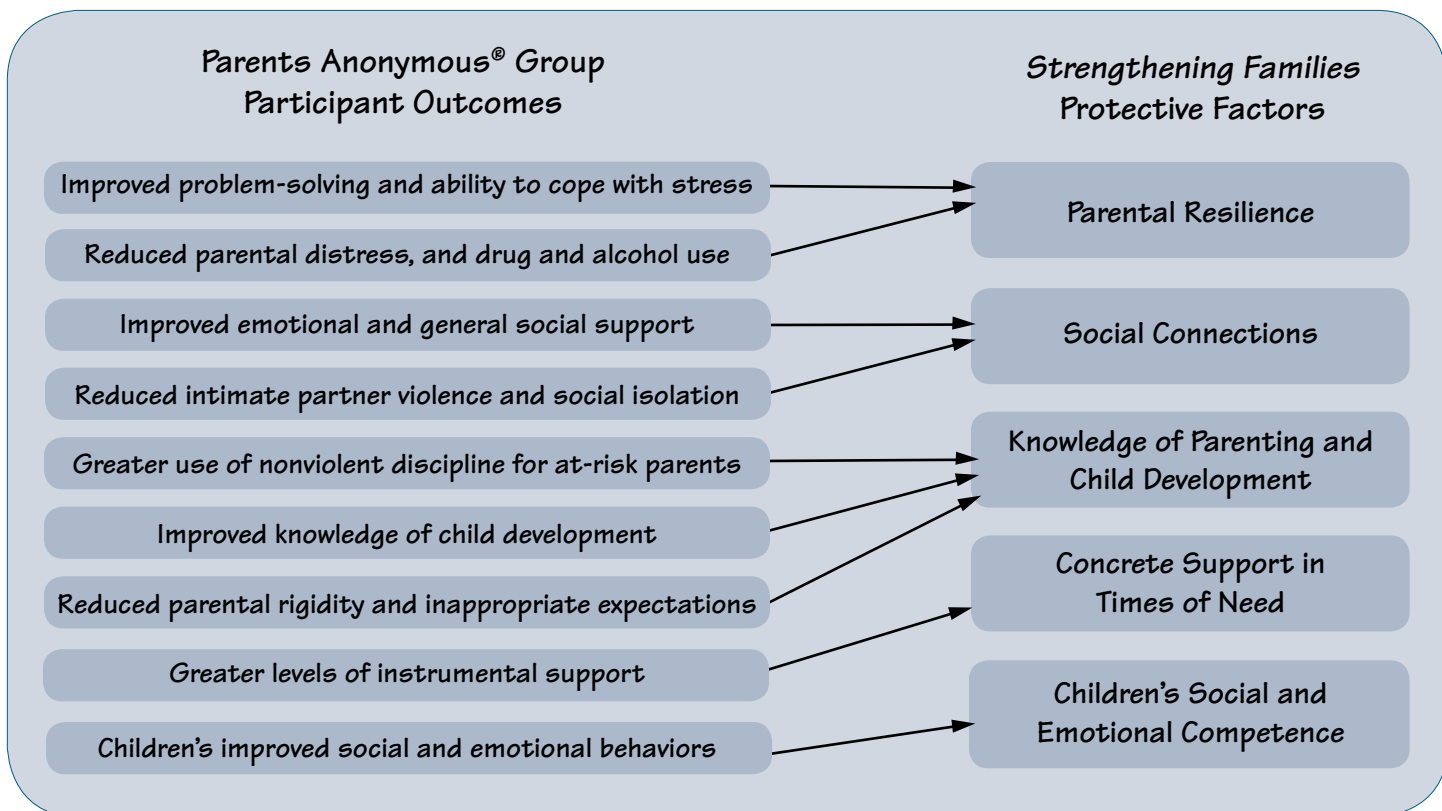
## PARENTS ANONYMOUS® GROUPS ADDRESS PROTECTIVE FACTORS – THE EVIDENCE

Findings from several evaluation studies show that Parents Anonymous® Groups promote the five protective factors identified in the *Strengthening Families* approach (see Figure 1). The first national study of Parents Anonymous® Groups, a one-time survey of 613 participants, showed that the groups effectively built protective factors and reduced risk factors among participants (Behavior Associates, 1976). Soon after, another evaluation verified these findings (Lieber & Baker, 1977). Case review, interview, and quantitative data abstraction studies of parents in 89 child abuse and neglect treatment programs found that parents who participated in Parents Anonymous® Groups were more likely to resolve their issues than parents who did not participate (Cohn, 1979; Cohn & Daro, 1987).

A three-year national evaluation of Parents Anonymous®, funded by the Office of Juvenile Justice

and Delinquency Prevention, U.S. Department of Justice, assessed the relationships among group participation, risk factors, protective factors, and child maltreatment outcomes. For the quantitative portion of the study, 206 parents new to Parents Anonymous® Groups completed three interviews over a six-month period. For the qualitative portion of the study, 36 Spanish-speaking parents completed semi-structured, in-person interviews and participated in group observations and focus groups. The evaluation found that all parents showed improvements on some child maltreatment indicators, risk factors and protective factors after six months of participation in Parents Anonymous® Groups, and that all parents most in need at the beginning of the group participation showed statistically significant improvements on all measures (NCCD, 2007, 2008).

**Figure 1. Aligning Parents Anonymous® Group Outcomes and the *Strengthening Families* Protective Factors**



## Parental Resilience

Parental resilience is one of the protective factors within the *Strengthening Families* approach as well as an outcome of the Parents Anonymous® Groups.

- Parents demonstrated improvements in their problem-solving skills and ability to cope with stress after participating in Parents Anonymous® Groups (Alexander, 1980; Borman & Lieber, 1984; Hunka, O'Toole, & O'Toole, 1985; Savells & Bash, 1979).
- Sharing their stories in the support groups helped alleviate parents' suffering due to stress, depression, and low self-esteem. Participating in the group seemed to validate their lives as worthy and important enough to share; thus, they felt able to change from being overwhelmed by their problems, to being able to address them (NCCD, 2007).
- Drug use significantly declined in parents who scored highest on drug use when they first started attending Parents Anonymous®, suggesting that over six months parents learned more effective methods of coping with stress in their lives (NCCD, 2007).
- Intimate partner emotional violence significantly declined in parents who were experiencing domestic violence when they first started attending Parents Anonymous®, suggesting that over six months parents improved their relationship skills (NCCD, 2007).

## Social Connections

Parents Anonymous® Groups also enhance the social connections protective factor identified by the *Strengthening Families* approach.

- Parents reported lower levels of social isolation after participating in Parents Anonymous® Groups (Alexander, 1980; Borman & Lieber, 1984; Hunka, O'Toole, & O'Toole, 1985; Savells & Bash, 1979).
- The quality of parents' relationships with their partners improved as a result of their involvement in Parents Anonymous® Groups. Parents credited participation in the support groups with teaching them new communication skills, and more about the opposite sex. The groups encouraged parents to support each other and work as a team regarding their parenting decisions (NCCD, 2007).
- Among those who had the lowest levels of emotional support when they started attending Parents Anonymous®, there was significant improvement in emotional support after six months of group participation (NCCD, 2007).

- Among those who had the lowest levels of general social support when they started attending Parents Anonymous®, there was significant improvement in general social support after six months of group participation. The same change was seen among other participating parents, but to a lesser degree (NCCD, 2007).

## Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development

Increased knowledge of parenting and child development has been identified as an outcome of Parents Anonymous® group attendance, as well as a protective factor identified by the *Strengthening Families* approach.

- Parents demonstrated improvements in their knowledge of child development and lower levels of inappropriate expectations of themselves and their children after participating in Parents Anonymous® Groups (Alexander, 1980; Borman & Lieber, 1984; Hunka, O'Toole, & O'Toole, 1985; Savells & Bash, 1979).
- At the meetings, parents said they learned about child development and how their own behavior affects their children. Learning about child development appeared to help these parents prepare for changes in their children's behavior and handle difficult behaviors (NCCD, 2007).
- Group members indicated that they learned to be more aware of the effect their actions had on their children and increased their efforts to strengthen their relationships with their children rather than alienating them (NCCD, 2007).
- Parents credited Parents Anonymous® with teaching them new ways to interact with and discipline their children, including techniques which might not have occurred to them without the group (NCCD, 2007).
- For parents with the lowest scores on parenting sense of competence when they first began Parents Anonymous®, significant improvement was shown after six months of group participation suggesting that parents became more confident in their parenting role (NCCD, 2007).

## Concrete Support in Times of Need

The fourth parent-centered protective factor within the *Strengthening Families* approach-- concrete support in times of need--has also been identified as

an outcome of Parents Anonymous® Group attendance. Group Facilitators and Parent Group Leaders serve as resources and link families with additional services such as housing, mental health, education, social services, and employment.

- Among those who started the groups with the lowest levels of concrete support, there was significant improvement in the degree of concrete support received after participating in Parents Anonymous® Groups (NCCD, 2007).
- Parents indicated that through Parents Anonymous® Groups, they learned about their rights, improved their ability to recognize when a law was broken, and learned that there are laws that protect them. After participating in Parents Anonymous®, parents reported becoming more comfortable contacting the previously-feared police for assistance, regardless of immigration status (NCCD, 2007).
- Involvement in Parents Anonymous® helped some parents find new jobs, get a driver's license, and get involved in their community (NCCD, 2007).

### Children's Social and Emotional Competence

An evaluation of the Children and Youth groups suggests that participation effectively creates positive changes in children's social and emotional development, the fifth protective factor in the *Strengthening Families* approach.

- A substantial percentage of self-identified abused older children sought help through Parents Anonymous® Children and Youth Groups (Behavior Associates, 1983).
- Parental observations of improvements in their children's social and emotional behavior during participation in the Children and Youth Groups included positive changes in:
  - ▶ concentrating
  - ▶ crying
  - ▶ fear of being alone
  - ▶ fear of being hurt
  - ▶ getting along with other children
  - ▶ getting along with parents
  - ▶ lying
  - ▶ seeking attention through negative behavior and
  - ▶ verbal aggression (Behavior Associates, 1983).
- Children indicated that the Children and Youth Group was useful because it taught them how to interact with parents more appropriately and control

their anger and not act out. They also reported that the groups helped them learn that they are not alone with their problems (Behavior Associates, 1983).

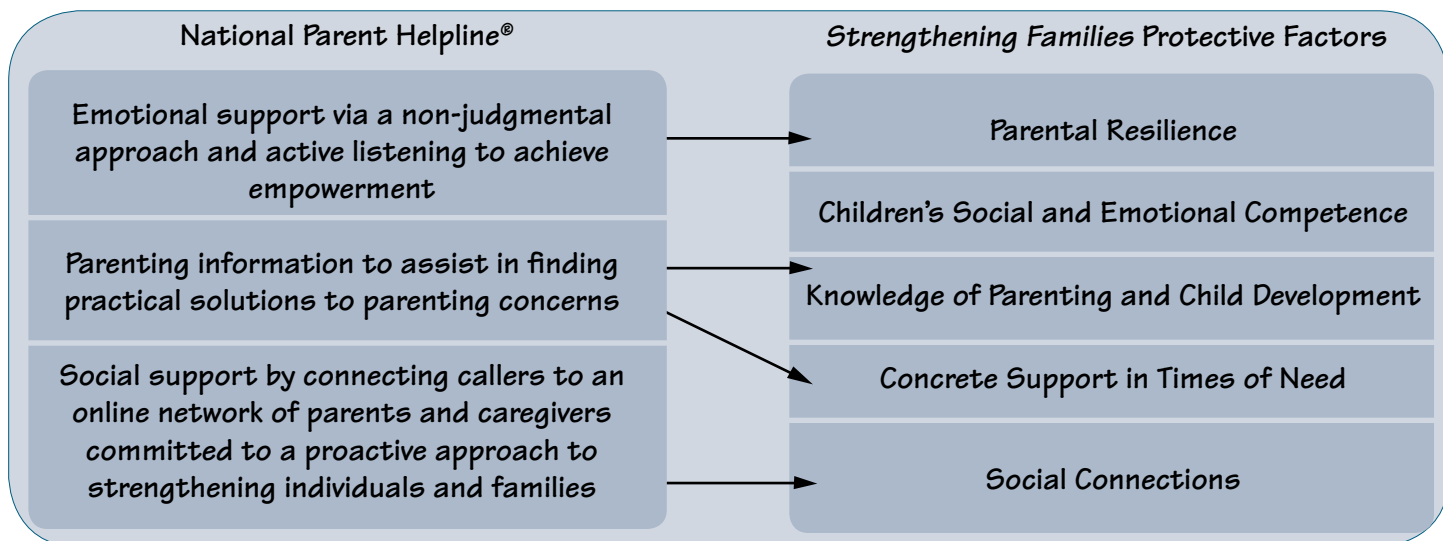
## NATIONAL PARENT HELPLINE®

Being a parent is a critically important job, 24 hours a day, every day of the year. All parents and caregivers benefit from support at some time in order to provide safe and nurturing homes for their children. Parents and caregivers face many challenges — economic insecurity, community safety, the education of their children, nurturing positive child development and the prevention of child abuse and juvenile delinquency — just to name a few. Where can a parent turn to get emotional support and assistance to develop solutions to the issues they face raising their children? **The answer is the landmark National Parent Helpline® launched on February 1, 2011.**



*Asking for Help is a Sign of Strength®.* With one telephone call or computer mouse click parents and caregivers become empowered to resolve their issues and receive referrals to services when appropriate. The National Parent Helpline® website includes comprehensive online parenting resources and a bulletin board for parents and caregivers to share their Helpline® experiences to build community and help others. This vital national resource will assist parents with a wide range of issues such as parenting, positive discipline techniques, effective communication strategies, stress reduction, and personal care and safety, as well as provide referrals to such resources as community-based prevention programs, shelters, substance abuse programs, respite care, and child care. When parents feel empowered they utilize and expand their own social support networks and build on their resiliency to strengthen their families, reach out to others in their communities and create long term societal change that benefits everyone.

**Figure 2. Aligning National Parent Helpline® to Protective Factors**



All five *Strengthening Families* protective factors are addressed through the National Parent Helpline® (1-855- 4A PARENT). A trained Helpline Advocate provides:

- Emotional support through a non-judgmental approach and active listening to achieve parent empowerment.
- Parenting information to assist in finding practical solutions to parenting concerns:
  - ▶ Online resource libraries for appropriate referrals
  - ▶ Transfer for emergency or crisis response
  - ▶ Linkages to the Parents Anonymous® Inc. network of accredited organizations operating weekly Adult and Children and Youth groups and other services where appropriate
  - ▶ Access to nationally-recognized parenting publications
- Social support by connecting callers to an online network of parents and caregivers committed to taking a proactive approach to their health, their children’s well-being, and the holistic development of their family.

## SHARED LEADERSHIP® IN ACTION PROGRAM

Shared leadership® embraces innovative practices, fosters comprehensive policy change, and systems reform. Often professionals and policymakers do not include parents when addressing community and societal

level change, based on the “expert” model of decision-making. In shared leadership®, staff and parent leaders share responsibility, expertise, and leadership in activities that affect families and communities. In principle, shared leadership® fosters democratic participation by those engaged in service delivery systems. In practice, shared leadership® involves parents and staff working together to plan, enact, and evaluate systems change. When staff and parents engage in shared leadership®, attitudes are transformed and better outcomes are achieved that reflect the *Strengthening Families* protective factors. Leveraging community responsibility for child protection and asking parents to identify who want to change to determine the scope and nature of supports needed for their families leads to more successful prevention of child abuse and neglect (Daro, 2008).

The *Shared Leadership® in Action* Program is targeted at the community and societal levels of change where staff and parents work together to ensure the adoption of the five *Strengthening Families* protective factors in agency policies and practices; service delivery systems; and local, state and federal policies that impact the well-being of all families. The *Shared Leadership® in Action* Program has seven key components:

- 1. Assessment and Planning.** The Shared Leadership® Assessment Tool (SLAT) determines the strengths and barriers for parents and staff to work on shared leadership® activities. This personal and organizational readiness information guides the development of a work plan that includes action steps, key individuals,

resources needed, a timeline, and measurable goals and objectives.

- 2. Development of organizational structures to support shared leadership® strategies.** Shared leadership® strategies require an organizational structure for Parent Leaders and staff to work together, share information, review and revise plans, receive training and create opportunities for shared leadership®. Many organizations have created Shared Leadership® Task Forces or Parent Leadership Teams that meet regularly and provide a foundation for lasting change. Several state agencies have engaged in *Shared Leadership® in Action* to improve policies impacting education, child welfare, child abuse prevention, health care and mental health services. Five Michigan state agencies formed a Parent Advisory Council to engage parents in policymaking through shared leadership® to achieve positive results for families across the child welfare, mental health, education, public health and disabilities systems (Polinsky, 2007). The Minnesota Children's Trust Fund partnered with Parents Anonymous® Inc. to train a new Parent Leadership Steering Committee to improve child maltreatment prevention policy and programs (Polinsky, 2009).
- 3. Shared Leadership® in Action Training Institute.** Parents Anonymous® Inc. utilizes the *Shared Leadership® in Action* Trainer's Manual and the *Shared Leadership® in Action* Guidebook for Participants (Parents Anonymous® Inc., 2004) to increase the knowledge, skills and abilities of parents and staff to engage in shared leadership® activities. Numerous evaluation studies on the effectiveness of *Shared Leadership® in Action* training have consistently revealed statistically significant ( $p=.05$ ) increases in knowledge and abilities, especially in being able to define shared leadership®, understanding ways to develop leadership skills, being able to develop a *Shared Leadership® Action* Plan and applying what was learned in the training to work and everyday life (Polinsky, 2007).
- 4. Ongoing technical assistance.** Parents Anonymous® Inc. provides ongoing telephone, in-person, and electronic technical assistance to support staff and Parent Leaders in all aspects of implementing shared leadership® strategies. This may include additional

leadership development trainings, development of new role descriptions, and assistance in producing policy documents.

- 5. Supports for Parent Leaders and staff.** Throughout all aspects of the *Shared Leadership® in Action* Program, Parents Anonymous® Inc. works with staff and Parent Leaders to identify and build on strengths and remove barriers so that parents can have more meaningful roles to achieve project objectives. Supports include problem-solving, team-building and seeking concrete supports for Parent Leaders and staff.
- 6. Ongoing recruitment.** Ongoing recruitment is necessary for maintaining an active group of Parent Leaders and staff working in shared leadership®. Parents Anonymous® Inc. assists organizations in developing and implementing effective outreach materials and strategies. The SLAT is used to track growth in shared leadership® activities and changes in attitudes and perceptions.
- 7. Evaluation.** Parents Anonymous® Inc. has developed the Leadership Practices & Behaviors Inventory (LPBI), a standardized tool to measure the degree to which an individual (parents and staff) implement leadership practices and behaviors. To assess leadership practices, the LPBI measures the five Practices of Exemplary Leadership: *Model the Way* (sets an example that reflects shared values), *Inspire a Shared Vision* (future-oriented, enlists others), *Challenge the Process* (risk-taker, loves challenges), *Enable Others to Act* (fosters collaboration, involves others), and *Encourage the Heart* (recognizes contributions and accomplishments) (Kouzes and Posner, 2003; Polinsky, 2007-2008).

The LPBI also includes a scale to measure levels of leadership behaviors for parents and staff. Numerous California county child welfare agencies have implemented new practices of shared leadership®: implementing new Parent Mentor and Parent Partner Programs, producing outreach materials and videos from the viewpoint of parents involved in family strengthening systems, identifying shared leadership® outcomes in county Systems Improvement Plans, and modifying staff development trainings to ensure meaningful parent engagement (Polinsky, 2005).

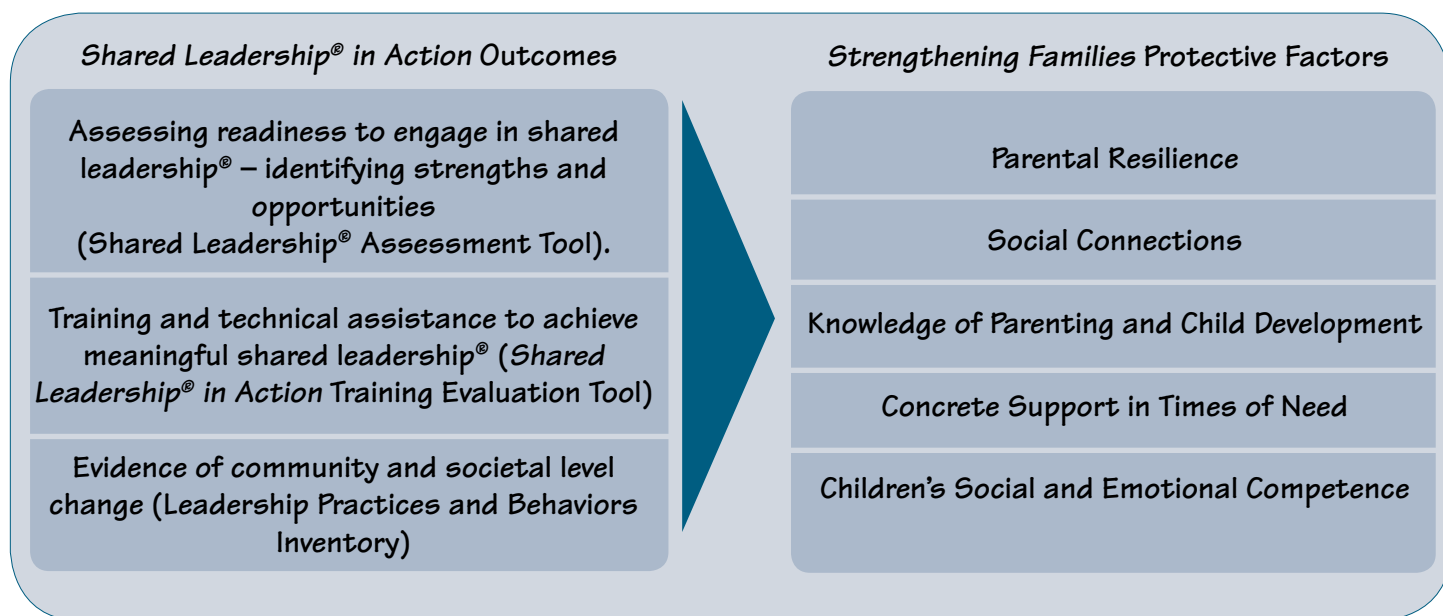
Parents Anonymous® Inc. research on various *Shared Leadership® in Action* Program projects demonstrates how parent leaders create significant change at the community and societal levels of prevention that reflects the five protective factors. In the Pomona Parents in Action Project, California parents developed leadership skills and partnered with staff to have the city clean up a local park to create a safe neighborhood setting for teens to avoid gang involvement. These parents also successfully advocated with the Pomona Unified School District to establish the first ever Spanish GED class to address the needs of this predominantly Spanish-speaking community and obtained donations for car seats and free health screenings for families (Polinsky, 2008). To ensure the meaningful involvement of parents as prescribed in the federal Community-based Child Abuse Prevention Program, Parents Anonymous® Inc. implemented the *Shared Leadership® in Action* Program with Texas Community Partnerships to strengthen families (Polinsky, 2010).

Many shared leadership® efforts have been successfully achieved at the state and federal policy levels to ensure responsiveness to families’ needs. Parents Anonymous® Inc with the California State Parent Team, in partnership with the California Department of Social Services, implemented numerous shared leadership® initiatives impacting policy-making

statewide, such as: addressing mental health and child protective service policy issues with the California Child Welfare Council; implementing the online California Parent Engagement Center to foster development and awareness of evidence-informed and evidence-based shared leadership® strategies; developed and conducted annual California Parent Leadership Conferences; and is conducting research on the impact of Parent Partners on family outcomes in wraparound programs.

Several Parents Anonymous® parent advocacy efforts ensured the passage of and significant revisions to the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act of 1974, 1996, 2003, 2010 (P.L. 93-247; (CAPTA, 1974). The groundbreaking Congressional testimonies of Jolly K. (the parent founder of Parents Anonymous®) in 1973 and Tanya Long (a national parent leader) in 2008 in which their personal story and leadership efforts exemplified the vital role parents play in creating meaningful change in their family and communities (Hoffman, 1978). Parents Anonymous® Parent Leaders nationwide secured important legislative changes in Title II of CAPTA: Community-Based Child Abuse Prevention Programs (CBCAP) in 1996, requiring for the first time the commitment and ongoing involvement of parents in policy decisions, planning, implementation and evaluation of the state lead agency and locally funded programs. Congress highlighted the successful work of

**Figure 3. Aligning *Shared Leadership® In Action* Program Elements with the *Strengthening Families Protective Factors***





Parents Anonymous® in shared leadership® as a model for accomplishing these provisions (Senate Report, 1996). These examples of shared leadership® are notable because of their impact on society overall by improving

public policy changes that have shaped the prevention agenda by incorporating the five *Strengthening Families* protective factors (see Figure 3).

## CONCLUSION

Since 1969, all Parents Anonymous® Programs have demonstrated that shared leadership® is an essential method for achieving the five *Strengthening Families* protective factors. When parents are utilized as effective change agents and serve as prevention champions in partnership with staff, better outcomes are achieved across the social ecology framework by positively impacting individuals, families, communities and society.

Determined to break the cycle of child abuse, Jolly K., a courageous mother seeking help for her family, partnered with Leonard Lieber, her social worker, to launch Parents Anonymous® weekly support groups and complementary children and youth groups worldwide. These humble beginnings provided a platform for parents and staff to work together in the design and delivery of prevention strategies that build on the strengths of parents, families, communities, and society in general. Research confirms that for over four decades Parents Anonymous® Groups have not only reduced risk factors but improved the five protective factors of the *Strengthening Families* approach to prevent child abuse and neglect.

Furthermore, parents and caregivers can strengthen their families by contacting the National Parent Helpline® to receive emotional support and referrals resulting in empowerment or by visiting the website, facebook and twitter accounts. This important resource builds parental resiliency and social connections, increases knowledge of parenting and child development, provides concrete

supports in times of need, and enhances children's social and emotional competence by positively impacting those who call, their families and communities and by improving overall societal outcomes.

When parents are utilized as leaders working with staff or policymakers, shared leadership® becomes the cornerstone of effective programs, caring communities and responsive social policies to prevent child abuse and neglect. Numerous research and evaluation studies on the *Shared Leadership® in Action* Program have yielded promising results from shared leadership® projects that have impacted child maltreatment prevention by promulgating the five *Strengthening Families* protective factors. In addition, standardized tools confirm consistent and reliable measurement of shared leadership® that can have widespread applicability.

Research on the effectiveness of Parents Anonymous® Programs to prevent child abuse and neglect provides valuable evidence for the *Strengthening Families* approach. Through shared leadership®, parents, families, agencies, communities, and policymakers are empowered to create and maintain safe, stable and nurturing relationships that ensure the five protective factors: parental resilience, social connections, knowledge of parenting and child development, concrete supports in times of need and children's social and emotional competence.

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