



The Guidance Center of Westchester's

The Foundations in Feelings Collaborative Action (FIF CAP) Program is a unique, multi-faceted, culturally sensitive, intensive program to help high risk young children succeed in preschool. FIF-CAP builds social-emotional capacities in children from birth to age five. We work with more than 500 children in various early childhood settings throughout Westchester County, including Head Start programs, local childcare centers and UPK programs. The ultimate goal of FIF is for no child to be asked to leave a daycare or preschool program due to behavioral issues and no child is hospitalized for mental health concerns. Our FIF staff provides a pro-social program called Second Step, designed to build emotional resilience and self-regulation skills in children. We also provide staff development and skills training around the social-emotional development of children and a parent group support. When a child is identified as "high-risk" by an evidence-based screening tool or by staff observation, we provide a Functional Behavioral Assessment (FBA), a Behavioral Intervention Plan, and parenting training and support.

The core value of the program is that all preschool children can learn and are entitled to an education that is emotionally responsive and inclusive. Preschool education prepares children for Kindergarten and yet youngsters are expelled from public and private programs at an alarming rate. These children then face an enormous disadvantage by Kindergarten age and often go on to repeated suspensions and school failure by age six.

The primary reason for preschool expulsion is overwhelmingly due to behavior challenges. Children, who disrupt classrooms, are unable to follow directions, cannot get along with peers, and are asked to leave preschools without any alternate plans in place. Many children go from one school to another, and it is not unusual to find four year olds who have been expelled from three or more settings. Often these children wind up sitting in front of a TV all day at home or in the home of an unlicensed childcare provider.

These behavior issues cut across socio-economic lines but are also found disproportionately in lower income areas. In Westchester County, these communities of high need include Yonkers, Mt. Vernon and Ossining and New Rochelle. The centers served by FIF CAP qualify for services by virtue of enrolling a significant percentage of children eligible for free and reduced lunch or childcare subsidies.

In addition, the ground breaking ACES (Adverse Childhood Experiences) Study informs us that toxic stress profoundly affects the developing brain and creates a significantly higher lifetime risk of a variety of diseases. **FIF CAP addresses this issue by building resilience and social-emotional skills in young children and targeting the location where they spend much of their time, i.e. in school settings.**

Caregivers and teachers are helped to understand the meaning of children's behavior based on the principal that "all behavior has meaning." Negative behavior is a child's way of communicating what he or she cannot express verbally, or may not even understand.

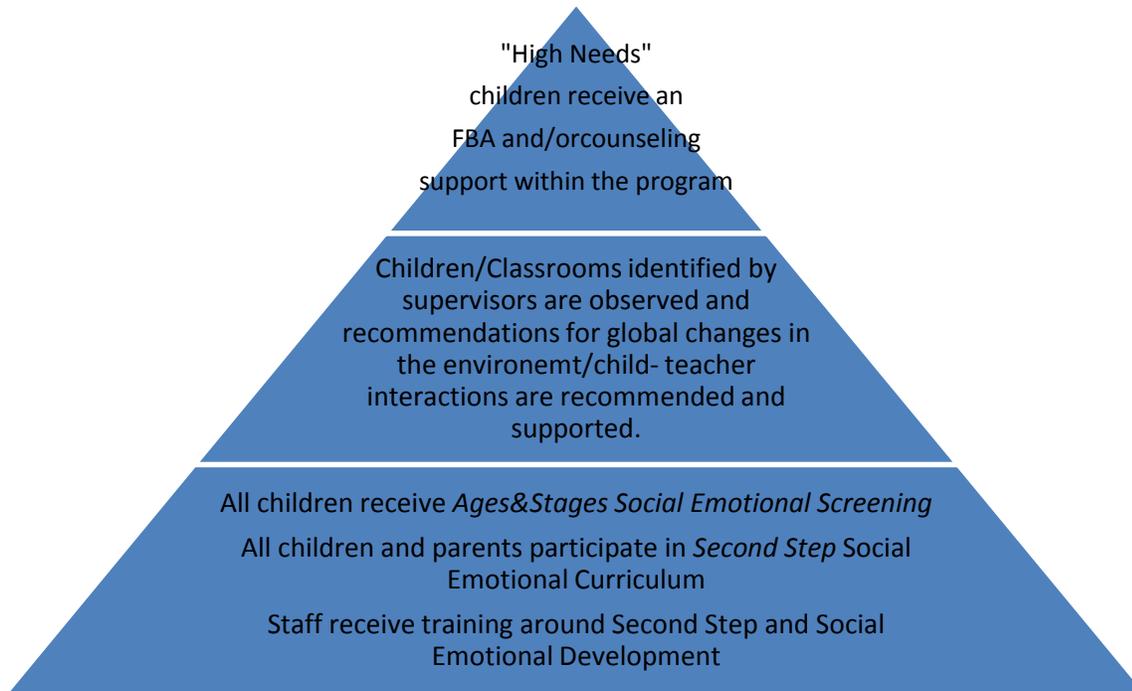
FIF CAP social workers intervene with the classroom staff, child and family. Together they create a "CAP"(Collaborative Action Plan) to put in place in the classroom. This requires a commitment from the school to re-think some of the ways behaviors are traditionally handled. Schools must want to create learning environments that support emotional well-being as well as cognitive development.

Toward this end, the program offers professional development training for classroom staff. In the 2014-15 school year, for example, **over 100 early childhood educators were trained** in childcares and UPK classes around Westchester County. An important aspect of the training is the use of a **nationally recognized social-emotional curriculum called Second Step**, which is designed to **help children develop social-emotional skills such as empathy, emotional regulation, problem solving and executive functioning skills.** Numerous research studies are informing us that these are the priority skills children need in order to succeed in school and life.

Family work is part of every intervention as well. Parents must give their permission to work with their child. Social workers meet with parents (at the center or their home) to better understand what is going on in the home environment. A significant percentage of the children served have traumatic histories. Understanding of the impact of trauma on young children is crucial to the work. Since high levels of ongoing stress profoundly affect brain development in the earliest years, children who come from disorganized or chronically stressed homes are at higher risk for behavior problems. Thus children and families are referred for mental health treatment if indicated.

Currently FIF CAP has one and a half full time social workers on staff, funded by a private foundation. In the 2014-15 school year, the program prevented expulsion of 62 high risk preschoolers. All of these interventions required *intensive* work with the family, individual child and early childhood site. Services are provided in Spanish (by a native speaker) for those families who are more comfortable with that language.

FIF CAP is a Pyramid Model



**The Guidance Center of Westchester's Foundation in Feelings
Collaborative Action Plan**