

Chapter 1: Strengthening Individuals, Families, and Communities

Protective Factors

Protective factors are conditions or attributes of individuals, families, communities, or the larger society that reduce or eliminate risk and promote healthy development and well-being of children and families. These factors help ensure that children and youth function well at home, in school, at work, and in the community today and into adulthood. Protective factors also can serve as safeguards, helping parents who might otherwise be at risk of abusing their children to find resources, supports, or coping strategies that allow them to parent effectively—even under stress.

Research has found that successful interventions must both reduce risk factors and promote protective factors to ensure child and family well-being. There is growing interest in understanding the complex ways in which these risk and protective factors interact within the context of a child's family, community, and society to affect both the incidence and consequences of child abuse and neglect.

Protective Capacities and Protective Factors: Common Ground for Protecting Children and Strengthening Families

Protective factors and caregiver protective capacities are complementary frameworks. Whereas protective factors are characteristics of individuals, families, communities, or the larger society that promote well-being, caregiver protective capacities are specific, individual attributes that are directly related to child safety.

Protective capacities are used by child welfare practitioners to assess child safety and risk. A caregiver with these cognitive, emotional, and behavioral characteristics ensures the safety of his or her child and responds to threats in ways that keep the child safe from harm.

Both frameworks are strengths-based approaches to assess and serve families. We can best ensure child safety and promote child and family well-being by promoting both caregiver protective capacities (at the individual level) and protective factors (at the individual, family, and community levels).

For more information, see the “Protective Capacities and Protective Factors: Common Ground for Protecting Children and Strengthening Families” infographic from the Capacity Building Center for States at <https://go.usa.gov/xR7nY>.

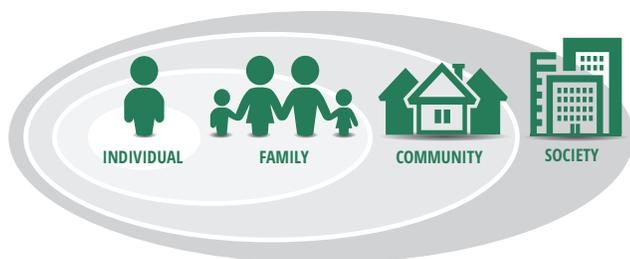
Established Protective Factors Approaches

There are many protective factors approaches in development and use by various agencies, programs, and practitioners who seek to prevent child abuse and neglect and promote child well-being. While some approaches are more grounded in research than others, there is no single “right way” to talk about protective factors. The most important message is that focusing on protective factors is critical and sorely needed for the prevention of child maltreatment and promotion of child and family well-being.

This chapter highlights approaches developed by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP), and the Administration on Children, Youth and Families (ACYF). Key differences among these approaches include the following:

- **Populations of focus.** The ACYF conceptual model focuses on specific in-risk populations, whereas the other approaches are based on research on general at-risk populations.
- **Domains of the social ecology.** Social ecological theory examines how individuals exist within and are shaped by their individual characteristics, their families and other relationships, their communities, and society as a whole. All approaches define their protective factors in ways that apply across the social ecology; however, the parts that are emphasized vary depending on how the protective factors were studied for different populations.

Social Ecological Model for Preventing and Responding to Child Maltreatment



Despite these differences, there are strong similarities and alignments across the approaches. The overarching goal of these approaches is the same: promotion of child, youth, and family well-being. Other similarities include the following:

- They are research informed and have been reviewed by experts.

- They describe positive conditions or attributes of individuals, families, or communities that reduce risk factors and help to promote child, youth, or family well-being.
- They provide varying degrees of guidance for practical application in programming for families, children, or youth.
- They identify positive social connections, resilience, and social-emotional competence as specific protective factors.
- They can be used to inform policymakers, practitioners, and consumers.

Child Welfare Information Gateway has developed several products centered on protective factors. For information about how protective factors approaches developed by these three organizations align, see *Protective Factors Approaches in Child Welfare* at https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/protective_factors.pdf.

Essentials for Childhood

CDC's Essentials for Childhood model identifies the importance of safe, stable, and nurturing relationships and environments as key components in preventing child maltreatment. It then proposes strategies that communities can use to promote the types of relationships and environments that help children grow up to be healthy and productive citizens. The goals of Essentials for Childhood include the following:

- Raise awareness and commitment to promote safe, stable, and nurturing relationships and environments and prevent child maltreatment.
- Use data to inform actions.
- Create the context for healthy children and families through norms change and programs.

- Create the context for healthy children and families through policies.

Information about Essentials for Childhood is available at <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/childmaltreatment/essentials.html>.

Strengthening Families™ and Youth Thrive™

Strengthening Families and Youth Thrive are protective factors frameworks developed by CSSP. The first focuses on families with young children (ages 0–5), and the other on youth ages 11–26. Each includes five factors:

A detailed description of the Youth Thrive framework is available at <http://www.cssp.org/reform/child-welfare/youth-thrive>.

ACYF Protective Factors Conceptual Model

ACYF’s goal in completing a comprehensive literature review and developing the resulting conceptual model was to provide information that can be used to guide practice and policy approaches aimed at increasing protection; enhancing resilience; and promoting physical, mental, social, and emotional well-being for the children, youth, and families who are the focus of ACYF services. This includes five vulnerable

Strengthening Families Protective Factors	Youth Thrive Protective and Promotive Factors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parental resilience • Social connections • Knowledge of parenting and child development • Concrete support in times of need • Social-emotional competence of children 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Youth resilience • Social connections • Knowledge of adolescent development • Concrete support in times of need • Cognitive and social-emotional competence in youth

Each protective factor is supported by research from several fields of study. The Strengthening Families framework includes a policy component for applying protective factors in practice settings across multiple service systems. The Youth Thrive framework describes how youth can be supported by parents and practitioners in ways that advance healthy development and well-being and reduce the impact of negative life experiences.

A detailed description of the Strengthening Families framework is available at <https://www.cssp.org/young-children-their-families/strengtheningfamilies>.

populations: children and youth exposed to domestic violence, pregnant and parenting youth, runaway and homeless youth, victims of child abuse and neglect, and youth in or transitioning out of foster care. These children are primarily in-risk (versus at-risk), so the focus of the literature review was to identify factors most salient for those already coping with adverse experiences and situations. Through an extensive review of available research, ACYF identified 10 protective factors with the strongest evidence for ACYF populations. These exist at multiple levels of the social ecology:

Individual Level

- Self-regulation skills
- Relational skills
- Problem-solving skills
- Involvement in positive activities

Relationship Level

- Parenting competencies
- Positive peers
- Caring adults

Community Level

- Positive community environment
- Positive school environment
- Economic opportunities

More information is available in the Preventing Child Abuse & Neglect section of the website for Child Welfare Information Gateway at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/preventing/>, including the following publications discussing current research linking protective factors to well-being for in-risk populations served by ACYF:

- *Promoting Protective Factors for Children and Youth in Foster Care: A Guide for Practitioners* <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/guide-fostercare/>
- *Promoting Protective Factors for Children Exposed to Domestic Violence: A Guide for Practitioners* <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/guide-domesticviolence/>
- *Promoting Protective Factors for In-Risk Families and Youth: A Guide for Practitioners* <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/in-risk/>
- *Promoting Protective Factors for Pregnant and Parenting Teens: A Guide for Practitioners* <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/guide-teen/>

- *Promoting Protective Factors for Victims of Child Abuse and Neglect: A Guide for Practitioners* <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/victimscan/>

Protective Factors in This Guide

Since 2007, this Resource Guide has employed a protective factors framework adapted from the Strengthening Families framework developed by CSSP with the addition of a sixth factor: nurturing and attachment.

Attachment refers to the relationship that develops as a result of a caregiver's sensitive attention to a child and the child's responses to the caregiver. A strong and secure emotional bond between children and their caregivers is critical for children's physical, social, and emotional development, including their ability to form trusting relationships and to exhibit positive behaviors. Helping parents learn and practice the nurturing skills that lead to strong, secure attachments is a well-supported pathway to positive outcomes for children.



Although “nurturing and attachment” is not delineated as a separate protective factor within Strengthening Families, it is an implicit and valued component to the entire framework. Similarly, CDC’s Essentials for Childhood promotes nurturing relationships on the societal level, while the ACYF protective factors conceptual model acknowledges the importance of nurturing and attachment in factors such as “relational skills,” “parenting competencies,” and “caring adults.”

In this way, although different organizations use varying approaches to promote protective

factors, it is clear that the various models and frameworks complement one another, and in fact overlap in many areas. For the past several years, this Resource Guide, while continuing to draw primarily from the Strengthening Families framework with the addition of nurturing and attachment, has highlighted elements from the CDC and ACYF efforts where synergies exist. By implementing a comprehensive protective factors approach, we move closer to a prevention-oriented society where all sectors recognize the value of health and well-being for all individuals, families, and communities.

Implementing a Protective Factors Approach

Implementing a protective factors approach involves more than changes to individual practice. Programs, policies, and systems also must adapt in order to create incentives, capacity, and impetus for individual workers to take on a protective factors approach. The following are some of the ways that state and local agencies are implementing protective factors.

Parent Cafés and Community Cafés

Parent cafés and community cafés are important tools used to engage parents directly in building protective factors for themselves and their families. Adapted from the World Café™ (<http://theworldcafe.com/>), parent cafés and community cafés are structured, small-group conversations that bring parents together to discuss issues that are important to them.

Although they stem from the same model, there are some differences between parent cafés and community cafés, as illustrated in the table on the following page.

The general approach is as follows:

- A casual café environment is created by setting up small tables (six or eight participants per table) and including food, tablecloths, flowers, and other accessories.
- Parents are invited to join conversations at these intimate café tables, where a trained parent leader leads the discussion, using carefully crafted questions.

- After a short period of time on the first question, the groups intermingle at new tables for a second question. Table hosts convey the key points from the previous group's conversation to help each conversation build on the last. Each session involves about three interrelated questions.

In many cases, cafés are offered in series. Café series provide an opportunity to build relationships among parents over time and to engage them in thinking in a deeper and ongoing way about a particular issue.

Cafés are being implemented across the country in community centers, schools, early care and education programs, and other settings where parents and caregivers gather. Find more information about parent and community cafés on the CSSP website at <https://www.cssp.org/community/constituents-co-invested-in-change/community-and-parent-cafes>.

Examples:

- First Five of Butte County, CA, offers monthly parent cafés in three communities. They welcome all families, including foster, adoptive, and those currently involved with the child welfare system. Free dinner and child care are provided. Find more information at <http://www.butteparentcafe.com/about-us/>.
- Community cafés are being implemented in communities throughout Alaska with support from the Alaska Children's Trust Fund. Watch a video that describes the process and shows scenes from several cafés at <http://www.ctfalliance.org/alaskavideo.htm>.

	Parent Café	Community Café
Approach to building protective factors	The focus is directly on sharing information about and discussing the protective factors.	The focus is on using the protective factors to discuss an issue of concern to the community.
Café design	Cafés follow a set format to work through each of the protective factors.	Each café is designed by its hosts to address an issue of concern.
Local variation	There is room for local and cultural modifications within the structure.	Each café is different; cultural modifications are encouraged.
For more information	Be Strong Families: http://www.bestrongfamilies.net/build-protective-factors/parent-cafes/	The Community Café: http://thecommunitycafe.com

- Oregon’s Project LAUNCH funded eight communities across the state to offer parent cafés to promote the protective factors. These events also helped to develop parent leadership skills, as parents were trained to facilitate the cafés as hosts. Find more information at <http://www.oregon.gov/oha/ph/HealthyPeopleFamilies/Babies/Documents/LAUNCHParentCafeissuebrief.pdf>.
- East Durham (NC) Children’s Initiative hosted a 4-week parent café series on trauma, adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), and their effects on child development. The events focused on prevention tips and strategies, and they included presentations by parent advocates and community partners, time for Q&A, and a unity circle. Find more information at <http://edci.org/stories/parent-cafe-on-adverse-childhood-experiences?lang=en>.

Strengthening Families Self-Assessment

The Strengthening Families self-assessment is a simple tool to help programs identify practical changes that will enhance their ability to build protective factors. It was developed based on a yearlong study of exemplary program practice involving nearly 100 programs across the country. The self-assessment helps programs identify both their strengths and concrete, actionable areas where they can improve their practice. An online version of the self-assessment allows programs to track which items they have completed, where their program strengths and areas of focus are, and what action plans are in process.

The self-assessment is designed to be completed by a team that includes at least one parent, one staff member, and the program director. When team members complete the self-assessment on their own and bring it to a meeting, differences in perspective are revealed that can point the way to small but significant changes.

Programs have used the self-assessment in a variety of ways. For example:

- In one early care and education program, the director was surprised to learn through the self-assessment process that parents and staff members were not aware that she had many materials available to share about parenting and child development. In response, a brochure rack was placed in a common area, stocked with resources that had previously been in a file cabinet in the director's office. The materials increased parents' knowledge of parenting and child development and even became a catalyst for parents to connect with one another around common concerns, such as toddler tantrums.
- In several states, groups of early care and education center directors have come together to complete one section of the self-assessment at a time and discuss the strengths and areas for improvement they identified. Meeting regularly over time, they became a learning community, sharing their experiences implementing changes in their programs and supporting each other in continuing the work.

CSSP offers four versions of the self-assessment, which are specific to different kinds of programs. For more information, visit <https://www.cssp.org/reform/strengtheningfamilies/practice#program-self-assessments>.

FRIENDS Protective Factors Survey

The FRIENDS Protective Factors Survey is a pre-post evaluation tool for use with caregivers receiving child maltreatment prevention services. It is a self-administered survey that measures protective factors in five areas: family functioning/resiliency, social support, concrete support, nurturing and attachment, and

knowledge of parenting/child development.

The primary purpose of the Protective Factors Survey is to provide feedback to agencies for continuous improvement and evaluation purposes. The survey results are designed to help agencies measure changes in protective factors and identify areas where workers can focus on increasing individual family protective factors. For example:

- The Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA), Washington, DC, is using the Protective Factors Survey for ongoing evaluation and assessment with its parent education and support grantees. Findings thus far indicate an improvement in family functioning, decreased risk, and increased protective factors. CFSA will work with FRIENDS to analyze the program survey scores to determine whether program interventions were meaningful in achieving positive behavior change that enhances family protective factors.
- New York State Family Resource Centers, supported through the CBCAP program, have administered the Protective Factors Survey to participants before and after receiving services. The survey has helped to demonstrate statistically significant improvements in family functioning among populations who are at historically greater risk for child maltreatment, including those with low incomes and those who have not graduated high school.
- In Michigan, all direct service grants that are funded through the Children's Trust Fund (CTF) administer the Protective Factors Survey to program participants. Systematic use of the survey has improved CTF's ability to assess and report on participant outcomes from a diverse array of programs.

Improvements have been seen across each subscale, with the greatest improvement in the area of family functioning.

For more information, visit <http://friendsnrc.org/protective-factors-survey>.

Online Protective Factors Training

Several organizations have developed training tools to support implementation of a protective factors approach. These include the following:

- The FRIENDS Online Learning Center is a resource designed to meet the demands of providing free, high-quality, subject-specific training for CBCAP State Lead Agencies, their grantees, and others. The Online Learning Center offers continuing education and professional development opportunities that are available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. To learn more, visit <https://friendsnrcelearning.remote-learner.net/>.
- The National Alliance of Children's Trust and Prevention Funds offers a free online curriculum. Developed by the Alliance in partnership with members of the Alliance's Early Childhood Initiative and CSSP, "Bringing the Protective Factors Framework to Life in Your Work—A Resource for Action" includes seven 2-hour modules: an overview, one module for each protective factor, and a final "review and reflection" module. To learn more, visit www.ctfalliance.org/ or contact info@ctfalliance.org.

Protective Factors Frameworks for Child Welfare Practice

A growing number of child welfare jurisdictions are adopting a protective factors approach for child welfare practice. These jurisdictions are looking at protective factors not just as a prevention strategy but as a framework for thinking about how they can work with caregivers in ways that enhance their ability to nurture and support the well-being of the children in their care and reduce the likelihood of future maltreatment.

For example, Connecticut has adopted a Strengthening Families practice model for its child welfare services. All families that are part of the Family Assessment Response track (an alternative response track for families where there is no immediate safety threat) are assessed not just for risk but also for protective factors. Training materials and guidance have been developed to support caseworkers in applying a protective factors approach in key aspects of casework practice.

A chart outlining the ways that other states are incorporating protective factors into their child welfare practice can be found on the CSSP Strengthening Families website at <https://www.cssp.org/young-children-their-families/strengtheningfamilies/about/body/SF-in-CW-2016.pdf>.

A similar chart also is available for child abuse and neglect prevention at <https://www.cssp.org/young-children-their-families/strengtheningfamilies/about/body/SF-in-CANP-2016.pdf>.