Welcome!

If you are here, you are someone who cares about families. You are in good company. This Prevention Resource Guide was created to support all who seek to promote family well-being and prevent child abuse and neglect. Our hope is that many people like you—including community-based service providers, policymakers, health-care providers, program administrators, teachers, child care providers, parent leaders, mentors, judges and attorneys, and faith leaders—may find these resources useful.

Because we each come to this common goal with different backgrounds and experiences, this chapter introduces a few key concepts that make up the foundation for the resources and examples provided in this guide. We hope that these resources will be useful to you as you partner with others in your community to support families.

PROTECTIVE FACTORS

The Office on Child Abuse and Neglect, within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ Children’s Bureau, released its first Prevention Resource Guide more than 15 years ago with the goal of raising awareness about emerging child abuse prevention concepts. As in past years, this guide was developed in partnership with Child Welfare Information Gateway and the FRIENDS National Center for Community-Based Child Abuse Prevention.

Child abuse prevention occurs at three levels: primary (directed at the general population), secondary (focused on families where risk factors are present), and tertiary (focused on families where maltreatment has already occurred). This guide focuses on primary and secondary prevention: stopping abuse or neglect before it occurs. Because no one can predict exactly where, when, or in which families abuse or neglect will occur, we believe the best way to prevent it is to create conditions in which all families can thrive.

Promoting protective factors has been the foundation of the Prevention Resource Guide for many years. Protective factors are positive conditions or attributes in individuals, families, communities, or the larger society that mitigate or eliminate risk in families and communities, thereby increasing the health and well-being of children and families. Protective factors help parents find resources, supports, or coping strategies that allow them to parent effectively, even under stress. Since 2007, this Prevention Resource Guide has employed a protective factors framework adapted from the Strengthening Families framework, developed by the Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP).
The following are the six protective factors in this framework:

- Nurturing and attachment
- Knowledge of parenting and child and youth development
- Parental resilience
- Social connections
- Concrete supports for parents
- Social and emotional competence of children

A protective factors approach to the prevention of child maltreatment focuses on positive ways to engage families by emphasizing their strengths and what is going well, as well as identifying areas where families may need additional support to reach their full potential. This approach also can serve as the basis for collaborative partnerships with other service providers, such as early childhood, behavioral health, maternal and child health, and other family-serving systems that support children and families and promote well-being.

The protective factors are universal, but they manifest differently in different cultural and familial contexts. In applying the framework, those working with families are encouraged to affirm families’ culture and parenting styles and to support children’s positive identity development and ability to thrive in a diverse society (C. O’Connor, CSSP, May 13, 2022).

Today, the importance of protective factors is widely recognized. Some communities have risen to the challenge and created comprehensive family well-being systems that wrap an array of protective interventions around families with phenomenal results. However, many child- and family-serving agencies and systems still struggle to consistently integrate and implement a protective factors approach in their day-to-day engagement with families.

This Prevention Resource Guide focuses on cultivating deeper understanding and providing examples of how families, neighborhoods, communities, and States are using protective factors in their efforts to protect children, strengthen families, and promote well-being. Throughout this guide, the protective factors serve as a theoretical underpinning for many of the strategies described. Although they are not always referenced directly, they continue to be infused in this work in countless ways.

Foundational information about the protective factors can be found on the Child Welfare Information Gateway website. For a list of protective factors resources, see page 53 of this guide.

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1 “Nurturing and attachment” is not delineated as a separate protective factor within Strengthening Families; however, it is an implicit and valued component to the entire framework.

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**Children’s Bureau Grant Programs**

The following Children’s Bureau grant programs support multidisciplinary, community-level efforts to create child and family well-being systems that prevent child abuse and neglect. Examples from each program are featured throughout this guide.

Established in 1996, the **Community-Based Child Abuse Prevention** (CBCAP) program supports grants in each State that—among many important actions—develop, operate, enhance, and coordinate efforts to prevent child abuse and neglect and strengthen and support families.

**Community Collaborations to Strengthen and Preserve Families grants**, funded in 2018 and 2019, support further development, implementation, and evaluation of community-based primary prevention strategies.

The 2021 **Family Support Through Primary Prevention (FSSP) grants** are intended to demonstrate integrated, cross-sector approaches to transforming traditional child welfare systems into comprehensive child and family well-being systems that enhance protective factors in racially and culturally appropriate ways.
A SOCIAL-ECOLOGICAL APPROACH

All families face stressors and challenges that are beyond their control. A social-ecological model acknowledges the many different levels of factors that influence caregivers’ ability to nurture and protect their children. These levels include society (e.g., Federal and State policies and societal norms about parenting), system (e.g., collaborations within a community or jurisdiction to support families), organization (e.g., programs and policies of a single agency), community (e.g., representing the voices of community members and leaders with lived experience), and the family itself.

The overlapping rings in the model show how factors at one level influence those at other levels. To prevent maltreatment, it is often necessary to act at multiple levels of the model at the same time.

The next five chapters of this guide each address a different level of the social-ecological model:

- Chapter 2: Creating a More Supportive Society for All Families
- Chapter 3: Building Proactive Child and Family Well-Being Systems
- Chapter 4: Aligning Organizations for Family Resilience and Healing
- Chapter 5: Embracing Community and the Wisdom of Families With Lived Expertise
- Chapter 6: Protective Factors Conversation Guides for Partnering With Families

These chapters offer a wealth of information, resources, and examples from Federal partners, Children’s Bureau grant recipients, as well as communities and organizations—publicly and privately funded—that have employed the strategies in this guide in their efforts to effect real change for children and families.

We have found that the most successful prevention efforts are rarely accomplished by implementing an isolated program or practice. Instead, these efforts employ and integrate many of the concepts represented here over time, in authentic partnership with families and through innovative collaboration with an array of partners, building on lessons learned along the way.
COMMITHING TO EQUITY

Families are impacted by organizations, systems, and society in different ways. We know that some families, including families of color and those living in poverty, experience disproportionate systemic challenges, such as underresourced neighborhoods, barriers to employment, discriminatory housing practices, and racially biased policing that routinely challenge the foundation of strong families and communities. When we disregard the additional stressors families of color and those living in poverty face, we risk blaming families for poor outcomes rather than taking into account the burdens of oppression and stigma they face.

For these reasons, we have found two additional models essential to expanding the conversation about the myriad influences on family well-being and what we all can do to change inequitable systems:

- The CSSP created a Social Ecological Model of Racism & Anti-Racism that describes what racism looks like at each of four social-ecological levels: intrapersonal, interpersonal, institutional/community, and systemic/societal. At each level, the model also describes actions everyone can take to work toward antiracist systems, institutions, and relationships.

- The World Health Organization’s (WHO’s) social determinants of health framework can help us consider the ways that socioeconomic and political contexts (including policies and societal values) drive inequitable child and family well-being outcomes. It encourages looking beyond programs that focus on improving the situations of families that are already in vulnerable living and working conditions (“intermediary determinants”) toward the creation of policies and processes (“structural determinants”) that can create more equitable opportunities for health and well-being for all families, across generations.

WHO Conceptual Framework on the Social Determinants of Health


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2 For more about this model and its application to adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), see https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0190740916303449.
The impact of societal inequities can be readily seen in child and family services. Historically, families of color have been overregulated and oversurveilled by the child welfare system (see sidebar on page 6). Generations of Native American families have been traumatized by policies that contributed to widespread, systematic removal of their children. Poverty continues to be confused with neglect by decision makers at all levels of the child welfare system. Concerns remain regarding the marginalization and diminished roles of fathers. In addition, children and youth with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities and expressions have been significantly overrepresented in a foster care system that is too often ill-equipped for their needs, resulting in higher rates of entry and lower rates of reunification with family than their heterosexual and cisgender peers. One analysis of nationally representative data found that lesbian, gay, bisexual, and same-sex attracted youth were nearly 2.5 times as likely as heterosexual youth to be placed in foster care.

The Children’s Bureau is committed to the work of advancing equity. In response to Executive Order 13985 on “Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government,” the Children’s Bureau has prioritized the review and identification of its own policies that exacerbate inequity. As a result, the Children’s Bureau has outlined specific steps it is taking to address equity in the Equity Public Statement. This work is crucial to increasing benefits to Black and Brown children, including families who have experienced multigenerational systemic interventions and inequitable outcomes.

Throughout this Prevention Resource Guide, we have emphasized the inclusion of examples of family support strategies that take an antiracist approach.

In our work with children and families, it is important to ask ourselves, “Are we administering our programs equitably? Are we listening to and partnering with the families and communities that are most affected by inequities? Are we removing the obstacles to access? What more do we need to do?” To that end, chapters 2 through 5 conclude with a series of “questions to consider.” We invite you to use these both for individual reflection in your work with families and as a starting point for collective action within your agency, community group, or jurisdiction.

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Movement-Building Organizations Supporting Equity and Family Integrity

The upEND Movement, a collaborative movement launched by CSSP and the University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work, argues that the current child protection system and its policies and practices are deeply rooted in racism, which results in surveillance and separation of families. It proposes to dismantle, rather than reform, the current oppressive system and create new, antiracist ways in which society supports children, families, and communities, including through structures and practices that address family poverty and strengthen families while keeping children safe and thriving in their homes. A 2021 report, How We endUP, offers ideas about how communities can move toward the abolition of family policing while asserting that specific policy and practice changes must be developed in community.

Through its UnSystem Innovation Cohort, Minneapolis-based nonprofit organization Alia committed to guiding a set of 10 public child welfare agency leaders representing five jurisdictions through a whole-system transformation process. From 2018 to 2021, each jurisdiction worked with one professional and one lived-experience guide toward the common aspiration: “Family connections are always preserved and strengthened.” At its completion, which involved shifts in agency mindset and practice with no legislative policy change or increased funding allocation, the total number of youth in care across all five cohort jurisdictions decreased by 29 percent, the total number of youth in residential care decreased by 39 percent, and the total number of children removed from their families was reduced by 31 percent, with no child deaths or egregious incidences.

The Movement for Family Power works to “end the foster system’s policing and punishment of families and to create a world where the dignity and integrity of all families is valued and supported.” Through conferences and reports and planning and advocacy campaigns, the Movement builds community with and among people working to shrink the foster care system, raises social consciousness around the harms of the foster care system in order to reclaim and reimagine safe and healthy families, and disrupts and curtails foster care system pipelines to reduce the harm inflicted by family separation.

Example: A More Perfect Union Parent Cafés

Be Strong Families (BSF) adapted the Parent Café model (one approach to structured peer-to-peer conversations) to offer parents and caregivers an opportunity to connect, learn, and get support from each other on racial justice issues.

A More Perfect Union Parent Cafés began in 2016 because BSF wanted to respond to how many African American parents were feeling about the racism they were experiencing in their day-to-day lives. Leadership realized that what the organization does best—develop transformative conversations—could allow people to experience the emotional safety needed to share their feelings, gain support from each other, and brainstorm strategies and solutions to keep their families safe.

What emerged was a realization and a tool: When people have a safe space to connect across differences, they develop compassion for and understanding of other peoples’ realities, disrupt stereotypes, and create stronger ties to each other. A More Perfect Union Parent Cafés, organized around the protective factors, honor the broader context for parenting in a complex and often unjust world and help parents and caregivers positively and proactively navigate this landscape.