Chapter 2: Working With Families Using the Protective Factors

Nurturing and Attachment

Juggling the demands of work, home, and other responsibilities leaves many parents feeling like they do not have nearly enough time with their children. But even small acts of kindness, protection, and caring—a hug, a smile, or loving words—make a big difference to children. Research shows that babies who receive affection and nurturing from their parents (a relational-level protective factor) have the best chance of developing into children, teens, and adults who are happy, healthy, and possess individual-level protective factors such as relational, self-regulation, and problem-solving skills. Research also shows that a consistent relationship with caring adults in the early years of life is associated with better grades, healthier behaviors, more positive peer interactions, and an increased ability to cope with stress later in life.

Infant brains develop best when a few stable caregivers work to understand and meet the infant’s need for love, affection, and stimulation. Conversely, neglectful and abusive parenting can have a negative effect on brain development. A lack of contact or interaction with a caregiver can change the infant’s body chemistry, resulting in a reduction in the growth hormones essential for brain and heart development. Furthermore, children who lack early emotional attachments will have a difficult time relating to peers.

As children grow, nurturing by parents and other caregivers remains important for healthy physical and emotional development. Parents nurture their older children by making time to listen to them, being involved and interested in the child’s school and other activities, staying aware of the child or teen’s interests and friends, and being willing to advocate for the child when necessary.

How Workers Can Help

• Suggest a family game night! Loan games for parents to play with their children, if possible, and remind them that even young children can play board games on an adult’s “team.”

• Offer parents materials for a simple craft that they can make with their child.

• Teach new parents basic infant massage. Encourage parents to make eye contact and name each body part as they rub lotion on their baby.

Words to live by: Strong families show how much they love each other.
How Programs Can Help

• Use parent education strategies (workshops, lending libraries) as opportunities to share information about how a strong parent-child bond enhances brain development and supports positive behavior in young children.

• Share resources available from your agency and throughout the community on how parents can nurture and connect with their children at every age.

• Engage and include all important adults in a child’s life, including fathers, grandparents, and extended family, as part of a child’s “nurturing network.”

• Acknowledge cultural differences in how parents and children show affection.

• Recognize that when a child does not show a positive response to the parent (due to an emotional, developmental, or behavioral disability, for example), the parent may need additional support.

CBCAP State Example: Nebraska Children and Families Foundation

Nebraska Children and Families Foundation provides Parent-Child Interaction Therapy (PCIT) for children ages 2 to 7, with a focus on improving the quality of the parent-child relationship and changing parent-child interaction patterns. One primary use is to treat clinically significant disruptive behaviors. Families demonstrated significant improvements in nurturing and attachment and other protective factors, including parental resilience and knowledge of parenting and child development.

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Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development

Parents who understand the usual course of child development are more likely to be able to provide their children with respectful communication, consistent rules and expectations, developmentally appropriate limits, and opportunities that promote independence. But no parent can be an expert on all aspects of infant, child, and teenage development or on the most effective ways to support a child at each stage. When parents are not aware of normal developmental milestones, interpret their child’s behaviors in a negative way, or do not know how to respond to and effectively manage a child’s behavior, they can become frustrated and may resort to harsh discipline.

As children grow, parents need to continue to foster their parenting competencies by learning about and responding to children’s emerging needs. Information about child development and parenting may come from many sources, including extended families, cultural practices, media, formal parent education classes, or a positive school environment that supports parents. Interacting with other children of similar ages also helps parents better understand their own child. Observing other caregivers who use positive techniques for managing children’s behavior provides an opportunity for parents to learn healthy alternatives.

Parenting styles need to be adjusted for each child’s unique temperament and circumstances. Parents of children with special needs may benefit from additional coaching and support to reduce frustration and help them become the parents their children need.

How Workers Can Help

- Encourage parents to see the world from their child’s point of view. For example, you might explore a room together on hands and knees, to help a parent understand how to child-proof for their toddler.
- Talk with parents about what children can typically do at different ages. Discuss any concerns about what their child can or cannot do. Family-friendly information about developmental milestones from 2 months to 5 years can be found on the CDC website at http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/actearly/milestones/index.html.
- Encourage parents to join a parenting group or class where they can share and learn new parenting strategies.

Words to live by: Being a great parent is part natural and part learned.
How Programs Can Help

- Offer informal, daily interactions between parents and program staff, plus coaching from staff on specific developmental challenges when they arise (e.g., inconsolable crying, eating or sleeping problems, biting, sharing toys, lying, problems with peers).
- Educate staff on parenting and child development so that they can play a more effective role in coaching parents on these issues.
- Provide parent-child interaction training opportunities through classes or workshops that address topics parents request or that respond to current issues.
- Provide observation opportunities such as video monitors or windows into classrooms and outdoor space, where parents can watch their child interacting with other children and learn new techniques by observing staff.
- Give parents opportunities to participate in conversations with other parents about their own experiences as children and how they want to change their parenting.
- Offer a lending library of educational materials about parenting and child development.

CBCAP State Example: PASOs for Parents (South Carolina)

PASOs stands for “Perinatal Awareness for Successful Outcomes” in English and translates to “Steps” in Spanish. This community-based program serves Latino families with children ages birth to 12, to prevent first incidences of child abuse and neglect by enhancing family protective factors. It uses the Group Triple P (Positive Parenting Program) curriculum to provide education on family health and positive parenting skills, offers individual guidance for participants in need of resources, and partners with health-care and social service providers to enhance effectiveness of their services.

Teams of promotores, or community health workers, are being developed across the State to help extend the program’s reach. The promotores are Latino parents who have graduated from the parenting course and have received additional training in parenting skills and community resources to support their peers. These empowered parent leaders reach isolated members of the Latino community who may be at higher risk of child abuse or neglect and provide further parenting resources to vulnerable families. The promotores receive continuing education and support through monthly meetings and an annual conference.

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Parental Resilience

Parents who can cope with the stresses of everyday life, as well as an occasional crisis, have resilience—the flexibility and inner strength to bounce back when things are not going well. Parents with resilience also know how to seek help in times of trouble. Their ability to deal with life’s ups and downs serves as a model of coping behavior for their children. This can help children learn critical self-regulation and problem-solving skills (individual-level protective factors).

Multiple life stressors, such as a family history of abuse or neglect, physical and mental health problems, marital conflict, substance abuse, and domestic or community violence—and financial stressors such as unemployment, financial insecurity, and homelessness—can reduce a parent’s capacity to cope effectively with the typical day-to-day stresses of raising children. Conversely, community-level protective factors—such as a positive community environment and economic opportunities—enhance parental resilience.

All parents have inner strengths or resources that can serve as a foundation for building their resilience. These may include faith, flexibility, humor, communication skills, problem-solving skills, mutually supportive caring relationships, or the ability to identify and access outside resources and services when needed. All of these qualities strengthen their capacity to parent effectively, and they can be nurtured and developed through concrete skill-building activities or through supportive interactions with others.

How Workers Can Help

- Ask parents to keep a self-care diary, to help them remember to make time for themselves each day.
- Offer to meet parents and children outside, or take a walk with them on a nice day. Emphasize the importance of fresh air and exercise in managing stress.
- Teach parents concrete strategies for relaxation. For example, guide them to take a few deep breaths and allow their body to relax while thinking of a place where they feel happy. Let them know that they can do this any time they feel uncomfortable or stressed.

How Programs Can Help

- Hire or develop staff who can form and maintain trusting relationships with families, and provide opportunities for these relationships to flourish.
- Understand that mental health consultants are an integral part of the staff team, available to staff and to parents when additional support is needed.
- Train staff to observe and assess children for early signs of child or family distress and respond to children and their families with encouragement and support.

Words to live by: Flexibility and inner strength keep families strong in times of stress.
• Partner with resources in the community that help families manage stress and deal with crises, including programs that offer family-to-family help for personalized, sustained support, as well as services such as mental health counseling, substance abuse treatment, domestic violence programs, and self-help support groups.

• Provide resources to help parents understand the causes of stress and how it affects health, relationships, and family life.

• Teach parents concrete skills to prevent stress, such as planning and goal setting, anticipating difficulties, problem-solving, communication, and self-care.

• Link parents with resources for stress management, such as exercise opportunities, relaxation techniques, and venues for meditation or prayer.

**CBCAP State Example: Parent to Parent of Pennsylvania**

The mission of Parent to Parent of Pennsylvania (P2P of PA) is to link families of children and adults with disabilities or special needs to volunteer peer supporters over the phone for purposes of support and information. P2P of PA helps strengthen parents' capacity to cope effectively with the day-to-day stresses of raising children with disabilities or special needs. Utilizing an extensive mentor base of more than 1,700 peer supporters, P2P of PA matches families based upon the physical disabilities, developmental disabilities, special health-care needs, and behavioral/mental health concerns of their children. P2P of PA also helps parents and family members locate a support group that meets their needs and provides technical assistance to grassroots groups that are interested in starting a support group where none exist.

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Social Connections

Parents with a network of emotionally supportive friends, family, and neighbors often find that it is easier to care for their children and themselves. Most parents need people they can call on once in a while when they need a sympathetic listener, advice, or concrete support such as transportation or occasional child care. In other words, a positive community environment—and the parent’s ability to participate effectively in his or her community—is an important protective factor. On the other hand, research has shown that parents who are isolated and have few social connections are at higher risk for child abuse and neglect.

Social connections support children in multiple ways. A parent’s positive relationships give children access to other caring adults, a relationship-level protective factor that may include extended family members, mentors, or other members of the family’s community. Parents’ social interactions also model important relational skills for children and increase the likelihood that children will benefit from involvement in positive activities (individual-level factors). As children grow older, positive friendships and support from peers provide another important source of social connection.

Being new to a community, recently divorced, or a first-time parent makes a support network even more important. It may require extra effort for these families to build the new relationships they need. Some parents may need to develop self-confidence and social skills to expand their social networks. In the meantime, social connections also can come from other caring adults such as service providers, teachers, or advocates. Helping parents identify resources and/or providing opportunities for them to make connections within their neighborhoods or communities may encourage isolated parents to reach out. Often, opportunities exist within faith-based organizations, schools, hospitals, community centers, and other places where support groups or social groups meet.

How Workers Can Help*

- Work with parents to develop an EcoMap showing the people and institutions that are sources of support in their lives.
- Role play with parents to help them practice approaching another parent with whom they would like to be friends. Choose a realistic scenario, such as at a school event, on the playground, or in a place of worship.
- Plan a group class or get together and invite all of the families you work with to the event.

Words to live by: Connecting with friends builds a strong support system.

How Programs Can Help

- Set aside a welcoming space for parents to mingle and talk. Provide coffee, snacks, or other “perks.”
- Create opportunities for parents to plan social events that reflect their interests or culture.
- Use regular potluck dinners with parents and children to reach out to new parents and foster new friendships.
- Sponsor sports and outdoor activities for parents, including fathers.
- Provide classes and workshops on parenting, cooking, health, and other topics of interest.
- Create special outreach activities for fathers, grandparents, and other extended family members.
- Offer parents who seem interested specific suggestions, information, or services to help them make social connections.
- Offer resources to help parents overcome transportation, child care, and other barriers to participating in social activities.

CBCAP State Example: Family Hui Hawaii

Family Hui Hawaii (FHH) coordinates peer-to-peer support hui (groups) for families based on the age of their children (birth to 5 years) and neighborhood. FHH offers families a safe place to build relationships through 12 weeks of discussions using a research-based curriculum of parenting strategies and early childhood development knowledge.

The peer-led framework builds community and hope by teaching positive parenting principles that empower parents and promote healthy child development through adolescence. It also provides social support to reduce isolation and parental depression.

The impact of FHH is evident in the commitment of its members to give back to the program. Many participants in a group have agreed to lead another hui after theirs has concluded. Other groups continue to meet long after the 12-week program—some for more than 15 years. Recently FHH has expanded to California, North Carolina, and Virginia through the efforts of former hui members who moved away from Hawaii and wanted to positively impact their new communities. Family Hui’s program has existed for more than 35 years and continues to reach families, one by one, with its tried and true formula of parental support, encouragement, and empowerment.

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Concrete Support for Families

Families whose basic needs (for food, clothing, housing, and transportation) are met have more time and energy to devote to their children’s safety and well-being. When parents do not have steady financial resources, lack a stable living situation, lack health insurance, or face a family crisis (such as a natural disaster or the incarceration of a parent), their ability to support their children’s healthy development may be at risk. Families whose economic opportunities are more limited may need assistance connecting to social service supports such as housing, alcohol and drug treatment, domestic violence counseling, or public benefits.

Partnering with parents to identify and access resources in the community may help prevent the stress that sometimes precipitates child maltreatment. Offering concrete supports also may help prevent the unintended neglect that sometimes occurs when parents are unable to provide for their children.

When needed services do not exist in your community, work with parent-advocates and community leaders to help establish them. Parents who go public with their need usually find that they are not alone. The fact that a parent is willing to publicize a cause may mobilize the community. Parents who are new to advocacy may need help connecting with the media, businesses, funding, and other parts of the community to have their needs heard and identify solutions.

How Workers Can Help

- Teach families about calling “2-1-1” (if available in your community) to find resources to meet a specific need or learn more about organizations that support families in their community.
- Support parents in learning how to navigate service systems, ask for help, and advocate for themselves to receive needed support.
- Encourage families to organize a clothing swap or babysitting co-op in their neighborhood.

Words to live by: Strong families ask for help when they need it.
How Programs Can Help

• Connect parents to economic resources such as job training and social services.
• Serve as an access point for health care, child care subsidies, and other benefits.
• Provide for immediate needs through a closet with extra winter coats and a direct connection to a food pantry; facilitate help from other parents when appropriate.
• Help families access crisis services such as a battered women’s shelter, mental health services, or substance abuse counseling by helping families make initial calls and appointments, assisting with transportation, and providing the name of a contact person in addition to a phone number.
• Link parents with service providers who speak their language or share a similar background, when available.
• Train staff to listen for family stress and initiate positive conversations about family needs.
• Let parents know about all available community resources, so they may select what is most appropriate for their needs.
• Develop processes for parents to share information about formal and informal resources that they find helpful.

CBCAP State Example: Oregon’s Family Support and Connections Program

This CBCAP-funded program serves families who are receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). Families and service providers work together to identify critical needs and create solutions to address them. This includes both providing information about community resources and ensuring that the families are capable of accessing them.

Assistance provided includes the following:

• Parent mentoring to develop an outcome-driven, strength-based family plan
• Crisis services and emergency funds, including provision of household items that will enhance family stability and that cannot be provided through other resources
• Information and referral to community resources to enhance family stability, such as housing services, domestic violence shelters, legal aid, mental health services, clothing closets, food pantries, and recreation opportunities
• Transportation to parenting classes, support groups, and other services

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Social and Emotional Competence of Children

Children’s emerging ability to form bonds and interact positively with others, self-regulate their emotions and behavior, communicate their feelings, and solve problems effectively has a positive impact on their relationships with their family, other adults, and peers. (Within the ACYF conceptual model, these are referred to as individual-level protective factors.) Parents and caregivers grow more responsive to children’s needs—and less likely to feel stressed or frustrated—as children learn to tell parents what they need and how parental actions make them feel, rather than “acting out” difficult feelings.

On the other hand, children’s challenging behaviors or delays in social-emotional development create extra stress for families. Parenting is more challenging when children do not or cannot respond positively to their parents’ nurturing and affection. These children may be at greater risk for abuse. Identifying and working with children early to keep their development on track helps keep them safe and helps their parents facilitate their healthy development.

Words to live by: Children get along better with others when they have words to express how they feel.

How Workers Can Help*

- Ask parents to share an experience that typically makes their child sad, frustrated, or angry. Explore what the child does when feeling those emotions, how the parent responds, and how the child responds to the parent. Help parents identify opportunities to support their child in using words and skills to cope with strong emotions.
- Engage parents and children in a game or art activity that helps children learn to express themselves in ways other than words.
- Create a lending library of picture books about coping with different emotions for parents to read with their children.

How Programs Can Help

- Use both structured curriculum and informal interaction to teach children to share, be respectful of others, and express themselves through language.
- Include discussions about the importance of feelings in programming for children and parents.
- Create and post a chart that describes which social and emotional skills children typically do and do not possess at different ages.
- Provide art programs that allow children to express themselves in ways other than words.

• Foster ongoing engagement and communication with parents about their children's social and emotional development and the actions the program is taking to facilitate it. Children often take home what they are learning at school.

• Encourage and provide opportunities for parents to share resources with each other and exchange ideas about how they promote their children's social and emotional development.

• Take timely action when there is a concern—this might include asking another experienced teacher or staff member to help observe a child, talking with the parent, or bringing in a consultant.

CBCAP State Example: Second Step (Georgia)

The Second Step program is a classroom-based curriculum designed to promote children's social and academic success by decreasing problem behaviors, increasing students' school success, and promoting self-regulation. Organized by grade level, the program teaches children to identify and understand their own and others' emotions, set and achieve positive goals, and make better decisions when they are upset. The Second Step program is appropriate for whole classrooms of children, not just those at risk.

Second Step lessons focus on building concrete skills. They address topics such as skills to support learning, empathy, management of strong feelings, and friendship skills. Lessons provide opportunities for discussion, modeling, coaching, and role-plays. They can be incorporated into a variety of classes, including health, science, math, social studies, and language arts. Take-home materials for parents bolster family engagement and support and reinforce learning beyond the school setting.

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Questions to Ask to Explore Protective Factors With Caregivers

Asking questions is an important part of partnering with parents. Parents may feel more comfortable voicing concerns and exploring solutions when providers ask questions that:

- Focus on the parents’ own hopes and goals for their children.
- Help parents identify and build on their current strengths.
- Model nurturing behavior by acknowledging frustrations and recognizing the parents’ efforts.

The following are some specific questions that may help providers partner with families to identify strengths and needs around each protective factor.

Using these questions, you can help caregivers identify their own stresses and needs, as well as the successful coping strategies they already use and their personal, family, and community resources. You can then make referrals to essential services, supports, and resources that will feel most relevant and helpful. Some parents might need additional support in identifying their needs, addressing their feelings about asking for help, navigating eligibility requirements, or overcoming other barriers (such as transportation or child care).

Nurturing and Attachment

- When you spend time with your child, what do you like to do together?
- How do you engage your child during everyday activities (e.g., diapering, meals, driving in the car)?
- What happens when your child [cries for a long time, has a tantrum, skips school]?
- How do you let your child know that you love him or her?
- What do you do when your child does something great?

Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development

- What do you like about your child?
- What are some of the things you find challenging as a parent?
- Why do you think your child [cries, eats slowly, says “no,” breaks rules]?
- How have you let your child know what you expect?
- How have you seen other parents handle this? What would your parents have done in this situation?
- How do you think your child compares to other children his/her age?
Parental Resilience

- What do you do to take care of yourself and gather strength?
- What kinds of frustrations or worries do you deal with throughout the day? How do you solve these problems as they come up?
- How are you able to meet your children’s needs when you are dealing with stress?
- How do you and your spouse or partner support each other in times of stress?
- What are your dreams and goals for yourself and your family? What steps are you taking toward those goals?

Concrete Support for Families

- What do you need to be able to [stay in your house, keep your job, pay your heating bill]?
- How have you handled this problem so far? Is it working? Why or why not?
- Are there community groups or other local services that might be able to help?
- Did you know that [local program] provides [free job training, meals on weekends, low-cost childcare, etc.]?
- What kind of help do you need to get to these services?

Social Connections

- Do you have family members or friends nearby who help out once in a while?
- Do you find it easy or challenging to make friends?
- Would you be interested in meeting other parents who also [have a new baby, have a teenager, like to cook, sing in a choir]?
- What kind of support would you need in order to be able to get out for an evening?

Social and Emotional Competence of Children

- What happens when there is a conflict in your house?
- Are your child’s emotions ever hard for you to deal with?
- What kinds of things help your child calm down when he or she is upset?
- How do you talk to your child about feelings?
- How does your child get along with friends?
Protective Factors in Practice

The following scenarios illustrate how multiple protective factors support and strengthen families who are experiencing stress. These vignettes may be used during training for new family support workers, as a learning tool when working one-on-one with parents, or to stimulate discussion at a Parent Café.

Scenario 1

Lina, age 25, and her 3-year-old son, Diego, moved from Bogotá, Colombia, to Virginia 1 year ago to be with her older sister and her family. Lina is happy to be with her older sister but misses her parents, who are still in Colombia. Although Lina is able to speak English, she is experiencing some culture shock in her new environment. Lina is working in her sister's hair salon.

Lina’s sister recently helped her enroll Diego in Head Start. He is verbal and very energetic; however, his behavior is sometimes aggressive, and he occasionally pushes other children. He has a hard time finishing any classroom activity. When his teacher tries to talk to him about his behavior, he shrugs and ducks his head, often appearing startled or afraid. His teacher learned from the Head Start family advocate that Lina has recently started seeing a new boyfriend. Because the family advocate has a good relationship with the family, it was decided to schedule a family team meeting to discuss Diego’s behavior and offer support to Lina.

Consider the degree to which each protective factor is present at the end of the scenario.

• Nurturing and attachment
• Knowledge of parenting and child development
• Parental resilience
• Social connections
• Concrete support for families
• Social and emotional competence of children

What other kinds of support might help strengthen this family?
Scenario 2

Steven, a 30-year-old father, is raising his two children alone after losing his wife in a tragic car accident 6 months ago. Steven and his children—Dana, age 8, and Johnny, age 10—have suffered emotionally over this loss. Steven is also struggling with the practical task of getting himself to work and the children to school on time during the week, although family and friends are assisting with the children on weekends.

Dana and Johnny are having increasing difficulties at home and in school. Dana is not eating well and wants to be left alone most of the time. Johnny is getting in fights with the children in his class. Steven, along with his sister Renee, recently met with the school counselor and teachers to discuss the children’s situation. School officials are aware of the children’s recent loss of their mother and have suggested that the family receive bereavement counseling and art therapy to help them through this traumatic time. Renee has agreed to help Steven with the children in the evenings.

Consider the degree to which each protective factor is present at the end of the scenario.

• Nurturing and attachment
• Knowledge of parenting and child development
• Parental resilience
• Social connections
• Concrete support for families
• Social and emotional competence of children

What other kinds of support might help strengthen this family?