

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

CBCAP State Example: Louisiana Children's Trust Fund

The Louisiana Children's Trust Fund is pleased to fund and support the McMains Children's Developmental Center in providing parent support and training to families of children ages 3 to 18 with significant cognitive and physical disabilities. "Me Too" is a 6-week program that teaches parents and caregivers how to use augmentative communication devices, including adapted books, toys, and appliances. The goal is to enable families to integrate this equipment into their everyday lives and engage their child in daily home activities such as cooking, game night, and story time.

The program increases the number of positive parent-child interactions, thereby improving parent-child relationships. In addition, the program offers a social work component to assist with case navigation, communication, scheduling, and access to additional resources, all of which are critical components in strengthening the family unit to prevent child abuse and neglect.

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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 childproof 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 <https://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 conflict 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: Texas Department of Family and Protective Services — Prevention and Early Intervention

The Prevention and Early Intervention (PEI) division of the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services helps create opportunities for children, youth, and families to be strong and healthy by funding community-level, evidence-informed programs and systems of support upstream from crisis and intensive interventions. PEI launched the [HelpandHope.org](http://www.helpandhope.org) website as part of a universal strategy to promote healthy parenting, normalize seeking help, support communities in serving families, and connect those in need to local and State resources.

[HelpandHope.org](http://www.helpandhope.org) is a central resource of parenting and child development information that helps parents nurture and bond with their children. Resources include fun and informative videos as well as tips for dealing with some of the most challenging aspects of parenting—everything from bedtime battles and crying babies to conflict with teenagers.

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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 issues, marital conflict, substance use, 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 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

- Remind families that some stress is normal, and parenting is stressful for *everyone*. The key is how you respond to it.
- Suggest that parents 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, and ensure that they are available to staff and to parents when additional support is needed.

Words to live by: Flexibility and inner strength keep families strong in times of stress.

- 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.
- 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 use 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: California Department of Social Services, Office of Child Abuse Prevention

Financial stressors such as unemployment, financial insecurity, and debt can have a negative impact on parental resilience and can reduce a parent's capacity to cope with stress. To address this stress, in 2018 the California Department of Social Services, Office of Child Abuse Prevention awarded 10 Economic Empowerment grants to community-based organizations throughout the State. These grants provide funding for support and training in the *Your Money, Your Goals* toolkit developed by the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau at <https://www.consumerfinance.gov/>. This curriculum empowers parents by strengthening their ability to manage money, use financial services, and access products that work for them, therefore lowering financial stress, boosting resilience, and reducing risk factors that contribute to child maltreatment.

The 10 Economic Empowerment grantees will reach a variety of populations, including Chinese-speaking families, Spanish-speaking farm workers, single female head-of-household families, and Tribal populations.

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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. 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 can also 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 the families you work with to the event.

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

*Some activities adapted from the Center for the Study of Social Policy’s Strengthening Families Protective Factors Action Sheets at <https://cssp.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/ProtectiveFactorsActionSheets.pdf>.

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: Colorado Office of Early Childhood

The Colorado Community Response (CCR) program is a voluntary prevention program available to families who have a “screened out” referral, closed high-risk assessment without the provision of child welfare services, or a closed family assessment response without a service plan. The core components of the program include case management, family goal setting, financial education, one-time financial assistance, and resource referrals.

CCR sites are funded to provide social capital-building activities such as community potlucks, parent cafés, ice cream socials, parent-child play groups, and back-to-school picnics. Each of these activities provides an opportunity for families to feel connected to their community and helps to prevent isolation.

In 2017, the Social Work Research Center in the School of Social Work at Colorado State University and the Kempe Center for the Prevention and Treatment of Child Abuse and Neglect completed a 3-year independent evaluation of the CCR program. One of the largest changes was observed in the area of social connections. CCR also was found to increase protective factors for participating families in the domains of resiliency, concrete support, nurturing and attachment, and child development/knowledge of parenting.

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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. Visit the website at <http://211.org/>.
- 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 shelter for women who have experienced domestic abuse, mental health services, or substance use 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.

CBCAP State Example: Kansas Children's Cabinet and Trust Fund

The Kansas Children's Cabinet and Trust Fund supports the Response Advocate program, which employs case managers who work side by side with local law enforcement to assist families identified as being at-risk for child maltreatment. Response advocates provide concrete support to families by offering home visiting, goal-setting assistance, education on child development, and referrals to community resources such as child care, day shelters, and food pantries. They also work with families to help them secure health insurance, housing, and financial assistance.

In some cases, a Response Advocate will accompany a police officer to a home. Other times, they will visit a family following their involvement with law enforcement. Their number one goal is to ensure that all of a family's needs are met, thereby increasing the family's ability to keep their children safely at home.

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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. It is important to identify any such concerns as early as possible and to provide services to children and their parents that facilitate healthy development.

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.

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

*Some activities adapted from the Center for the Study of Social Policy's Strengthening Families Protective Factors Action Sheets at <https://cssp.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/ProtectiveFactorsActionSheets.pdf>.

- 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: Wisconsin Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention Board

Five for Families is a statewide public awareness campaign developed as a universal prevention strategy by the Wisconsin Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention Board. The campaign's primary goal is to increase knowledge of the protective factors framework. Five for Families translates this framework into everyday language for parents, caregivers, friends, neighbors, and community members to communicate the five essential strengths that keep every family strong. Five for Families language was developed in partnership with parents, caregivers, and family support professionals.

Parents can access information and ideas to identify and build upon their family strengths at [fiveforfamilies.org](https://www.fiveforfamilies.org). The Helping Children Understand Feelings section of this website explains how showing children how to express themselves, handle emotions, and get along with others can strengthen the family. It features interviews with Wisconsin parents and grandparents sharing their understanding of how helping children understand feelings has benefitted their families. It also includes questions to consider and activities for families to try at home.

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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?

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 to be able to get out for an evening?

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 child care, etc.]?
- What kind of help do you need to get to these services?

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

Sandra is a 28-year-old mother of two who has struggled with substance use issues for close to 10 years. She has two children—Kayla, age 4; and Joshua, who is just 9 months old. Although Sandra is no longer with Kayla's father, John, he is still active in their lives and has Kayla 3 days a week.

Joshua's father moved away and is not actively involved in their lives. Sandra and John have a strong coparenting relationship, and John often helps Sandra out with care for both children. Although Sandra's substance use has been a source of tension between the two of them, John has been supportive of her while she has pursued treatment in the past.

When Kayla was 2, a child neglect report was filed on Sandra. Although no case was opened, Sandra viewed it as a wake-up call and successfully completed a 90-day inpatient treatment program for treatment and recovery.

Sandra considers herself to be an engaged mom. She sings songs, plays age-appropriate games with both Kayla and Joshua, and is tuned in to their needs and limits. However, she recognizes that there have been times when drug misuse has negatively impacted her parenting. Recently, Sandra's mother kept Kayla during the week and John kept Kayla on the weekends while Sandra was in inpatient treatment. Kayla had temper tantrums at times. Other times she clung to her grandmother and was afraid that she would leave her.

Once Sandra came home, she remained drug free until recently. Sandra was prescribed painkillers as part of her recovery from Joshua's birth and has been gradually increasing her substance misuse, combining prescription and street drugs. She recognizes the drug misuse is getting in the way of her parenting and work but doesn't know exactly how to stop or where to turn for help.

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

Zainah is a 23-year-old who recently migrated from Syria with her 3-year-old son, Adnan, and husband, Sayid. The family was forced out of their homeland due to war more than 3 years ago. Initially, they were able to stay with relatives and then spent almost 18 months in a refugee camp. They are newly settled in Minneapolis, where they have some extended family and are connected to the broader Syrian community. Zainah is not working and spends her days at home with Adnan, although recently she has been leaving the house to meet other young mothers from the Syrian community who gather at each other's homes during the day.

As Zainah has been spending more time with other mothers with young children, she has developed concerns about Adnan's slow speech development. Adnan becomes sad and gets frustrated when he can't express himself. Zainah's friend, Sarah, who has a 3-year-old daughter, was the first person she talked to about her worries. Sarah has encouraged Zainah to take Adnan to the doctor to be evaluated. Zainah has been reluctant to do this because she struggles with English, is uncomfortable talking with the doctor, and generally finds the U.S. health-care and social services system overwhelming. Sarah, who has been in the United States since she was 7, speaks English fluently. She has offered to go with Zainah to the doctor's office, to serve as a translator.

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?