

Protective Factors Part 2

Presenters: Female Narrator; Tom Oates, Child Welfare Information Gateway; Cailin O'Connor, Center for the Study of Social Policy; Tabitha Kelly, Arlington County (VA) Children and Family Services

[00:00:00]: [MUSIC]

FEMALE NARRATOR [00:00:03]: This is the Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast, a place for those who care about strengthening families and protecting children. You'll hear about the innovations, emerging trends and success stories across child welfare direct from those striving to make a difference. This is your place for new ideas and information to support your work to improve the lives of children, youth, and families.

TOM OATES [00:00:33]: Today, we wrap up our two part series on protective factors in child welfare by taking a look at how local agencies are implementing protective factors holistically within their agencies - from the practices and services they provide, to working internally between peers and supervisors.

[00:00:51]: Hello all, Tom Oates from Information Gateway, here. In part one, we pulled apart deep definitions of protective factors and heard about ways different individual professionals can identify and use protective factors in working with children and families. We also discussed ideas and methods for how entire communities and community-based groups can be involved and use similar techniques and a common language to help bridge some of the gaps between service providers.

[00:01:20]: This episode continues a conversation we had with Cailin O'Connor, a senior policy analyst for the Center for the Study of Social Policy. Cailin is integral into CSSP's Strengthening Families Approach and Protective Factors Framework. And Tabitha Kelly, division chief with Arlington County, Virginia's Children and Family Services, where they've incorporated protective factors across their agency, We discussed some tangible ways professionals can help parents build the skills that improve protective factors; along with how agencies can train various levels of staff.

[00:01:56]: So take a listen to what Tabitha's been able to accomplish in Arlington County - which is a diverse, densely populated location directly bordering Washington D.C. - and how Arlington County and CSSP worked directly together to build a sustainable framework across the agency. There are some really good takeaways here that can help you and your agency - if you're interested - in applying protective factors in your work with parents and families. So let's get to it. This is part two of our conversation on protective factors with Cailin O'Connor and Tabitha Kelly.

[00:02:31]: So when we talked in Part One, we really addressed a lot of the needs at the professional level in engaging the parents and working with the families, and we also touched base on how other community groups that child welfare agencies may interact with can recognize and implement and, kind of, use protective factors and how they're helping children and families.

[00:02:53]: So Cailin, let's get back to, kind of, that agency level, here - and we know when it comes to agencies there are multiple levels - but let's just start a little but at the frontline work, or the

professionals, and what are you seeing with CSSP and how professionals help parents build the skills - or build the awareness, even - that can lead to those really positive differences, those improvements in strengthening their protective factors?

CAILIN O'CONNOR [00:03:18]: One of the things I think is really powerful with Strengthening Families, is that these protective factors are universal. So, we're not sitting a family down and saying, 'here are all the ways that you're not measuring up, we're instead saying, 'we know that families need these characteristics to do well and to thrive and to give their children the childhood that they want to give them; so, let's look at where you are on each of these and where you might need some support'.

[00:03:44]: And so it really approaches it from a universal standpoint and it doesn't, it doesn't put families in a defensive position, but it rather says, 'we know that you have strengths that have allowed you to get to this point in your life and we know that you need some support right now, let's figure out what it is'. So that's one thing.

[00:04:04]: I also think that we need caseworkers to feel the same approach - from their supervisor and from their agency - that we want them to take with families. Just like we want parents to take that approach with their children and we can't expect parents to be positive and strength-based with their children if we're not being positive and strength-based with them, we need the caseworker to feel that from their supervisors as well.

[00:04:28]: And so it really is a parallel process that goes all through the agency and through the system, and I think when caseworkers are experiencing that treatment from their supervisor, they can then turn around and take that approach - a more generous, giving people the benefit of the doubt, working with them on what they need kind of approach.

TOM OATES [00:04:48]: And so in Arlington, where Tabitha, you've been able to implement this - first off, let me pull back, why? Why did, why did you decide that, you know, really infusing protective factors holistically across the agency, you know, why did that decision, you know, come into play, and then what does that really kind of mean?

TABITHA KELLY [00:05:12]: Yeah, about three years ago, if memory serves correctly, we just started taking a look around - the agencies were really busy, there were lots of different initiatives and lots of things going on, and there, we had a variety of staff who were performing different roles - and what we found is that we did not have a shared language; we were busy; we often talked or worked in cross-purposes, if you will.

[00:05:40]: Everyone had the best intentions and we were doing good work, don't get me wrong, but we needed a unifying approach to the way in which we did our work and in Children and Families, we were like, okay let's sit down and the protective factors framework, it suited our needs in terms of unifying the approach it was a universal approach that was easy for staff to understand and it complemented the work that was already being done. It's a research informed approach already, so that was very, very attractive to us; and it worked for both emphasizing parent and child well-being - so the two generation approach worked for our staff here in Children and Family Services - so I thought it was broad enough

and unifying enough to bring 100 people together within the division and it was really, it was a great move when we discovered the framework and started to engage CSSP as our partner.

TOM OATES [00:06:45]: And then, of course, you had to actually do it. SO then you've got, like you mentioned, you know, you're talking 100 staff, so training staff, doesn't just mean the frontline workers, it's also the supervisors and the multi- the multiple levels of an agency. So how were you training all of these different staffs - knowing it's kind of like this puzzle with a lot of different pieces to it, and each piece fits a different part along the way - how were you able to implement concurrent training, you know, knowing that you've got a huge turnover issue to deal with as well?

TABITHA KELLY [00:07:20]: Yes, that is always a challenge, and you know, when we began this protective factors journey, we sat with managers from a variety of different disciplines - I'll say that first and foremost - we have Child Welfare in the room, we had Behavioral and Mental Health staff in the room, Childcare Services staff, we had eligibility workers in the room and our Parent-Infant Education staff, because we really did want to unify the different parties in which we worked. First and foremost, ourselves, but we wanted to make sure that everyone could see the importance and to see themselves in this work - and that helped with buy-in - so that was really, really important right from the start.

[00:08:08]: And then, starting with managers - I believe the key to success at an agency is your middle line management staff because they're going to be held accountable for implementing any new change or any new initiative - so we started holding a series of sessions with middle managers to educate them on what are the protective factors? How does this work with what is already in existence here and know this does not double your workload - it will actually create some efficiencies for you in the long-run.

[00:08:42]: And so, when they began to see themselves in the work, they became invested, they began talking to their frontline staff in individual sessions and in team meetings. And so, the vision was just not mine as the director, it became a shared vision and thus we moved faster together and so the training started with managers and then they took it to individual team meetings. We sent out lots of email blasts, you know, 'did you know this?', or, 'let's talk about social connections today; let's applaud this worker for finding a family who is overseas or Facebook and now they're flying to this country to visit with this child that's in care', I mean that's a real story, right, and so, you're celebrating successes, getting people excited, and it just takes off.

[00:09:41]: And from there, we brought CSSP in - Cailin came in herself - she came to do a one day training with 100 of my staff, and then the managers had to then take more of that in subsequent meetings, and we launched a supervisory toolkit - we're really, really proud of that, we launched the supervisory toolkit in July of 2016, that the supervisors can use in individual consultation sessions with the workers, they have action tip sheets that can help coach the workers to support families differently. So there's a lot of different strategies and layers to this, and you have to be energetic and persistent.

TOM OATES [00:10:28]: You sound like right now a sales coach, because it sounds that - at many points - this was and is a sales job to get, kind of, for some folks to make that kind of approach, that kind of shift - well it sounds like you were successful in that. So talk to me, you mentioned about the

supervisory toolkit and getting their staff to implement, to work at it - talk to me as if you're talking to another agency somewhere across the country, when they look at you and go, okay so what does this look like on the grassroots level, what does this look like when that first family engagement happens?

TABITHA KELLY [00:11:06]: Okay, well, I mean, right from the first interaction, you're not planning for them, you're planning with the family. And, you may, that may mean that you go at a slower pace, or that you break down goals in a way that the family, obviously can absorb, not just to please your court documentation. And so, it is a process and sometimes workers can get a little frustrated, because we have federal timelines, right, in which we have to abide by and so, you have to gently nudge families and educate them on the timeline but like a marketing tool, you're getting their buy-in to move forward, as well, right, because ultimately, what they want is their child to be safe and they want us out of their lives, right, and so if we can join together for the health and safety of their child in an expeditious manner, then that's what we will try our hardest to do.

[00:12:09]: And you know a supervisor can very well take out some of these tip sheets and say, 'alright, well, let's work on this', if this mother or father or grandmother or caregiver has identified social connections as a need - because at Arlington we have a lot of, it's a transient community, so there's a lot of social isolation here, there's a large immigration population, and so we often find that although we're densely populated, people are lonely and they don't know where to go for support in their community. So you may just have to brainstorm where to go with this family, put them in the car and go there together and see if that takes hold and then you continue to chip away - you know, again, it's very concrete, and you have to be focused and you have to be persistent.

TOM OATES [00:13:05]: Yeah, there's, I mean, how do you train for that diligence along the way, and as long as somebody can understand that this is, you know, there's not the magic pill, this is going to be a slow process and as long as there is those incremental steps along the way, that's success - especially when you're skill building, you know, literally building strength - doesn't happen overnight.

TABITHA KELLY [00:13:29]: Absolutely, working with their core partners to help them understand that, as well.

TOM OATES [00:13:34]: So as Tabitha mentioned you, Cailin, that literally you came down and it sounds like you came in for the one day and that's all you needed to do, just swooped in, you know, the magic pixie dust just sprinkled all over everybody and then they were all good. Give me a little better sense of how CSSP and Arlington County kind of partnered together.

CAILIN O'CONNOR [00:13:54]: Yeah, it was a little more complicated than that. Actually, one of my former colleagues, Nilofer Ahsan, and a consultant who works with us, Juanita Blount-Clark, had been working with Arlington before I stepped in and had really been developing some of these tools that they were going to use which other jurisdictions can also use, which has been fabulous, that we've worked with Arlington to develop certain tools, we've worked with North Carolina, with Connecticut and with Utah, to develop other tools and then as those tools are developed for a specific jurisdiction, we then make a more national version of it that anyone could use or modify.

[00:14:35]: So that's been a really helpful process and Arlington has both been a part of contributing to getting those materials developed and then has also benefitted from the work done in other jurisdictions. So that's been going on for a few years now and some training was done at the management level - prior to my getting involved - and then in 2016 as we were developing the supervisor's toolkit, we came in, Juanita and I came in and did a full day training with staff - all staff - as well as, I think we did half a day or another day with the management and supervisors to really look through, so how is this going to apply in each of your different staff groups, and how are - for example, on the behavioral health side, we're less familiar with this - and how are they going to implement it in their work, and how would it be reflected in all of these different, you know the documentation that you have to go through?

[00:15:32]: So it's been quite a process with that. We, from the national level have a lot of materials and tools available that we can tweak for the specific jurisdiction, so we are able to do that. The training that we did in Arlington is a modification of a training that's available on our website, the people can download the slides and use them, but when we come in we can really modify it for the particular audience and get the activities tweaked to suit the crowd we're talking to.

TOM OATES [00:16:00]: Sure and we'll make sure that we actually put a link to the Strengthening Families Approach and the Protective Factors Framework in the show notes on the web page for this podcast. So, Cailin, what, are you seeing common challenges across the board with agencies - has there been one particular sticking point that you're finding the most challenging, or is it different for each agency?

CAILIN O'CONNOR [00:16:25]: I can say a couple things, one that has been challenging is - both theoretically and with some really concrete, practical things - theoretically, there is sometimes a concern that when we focus on strengths, we lose our focus on safety. And we need to always help people, caseworkers in particular, understand how we can do both at the same time, and how the focus on protective factors will get us to longer-term safety and thriving, in addition to addressing the immediate safety threats.

[00:16:56]: So we always have to be sure that we're not giving the impression that we're cancelling out - like we don't worry about risk anymore, we just make sure they've got a friend to call if they need help - that's not what we're talking about. And then more concretely, a lot of jurisdictions around the country use the safety practice model that refers to protective capacities - and there's been some confusing in the field about protective factors and protective capacities - so we did develop some materials to help explain how those are related to each other and in shorthand I could say now, protective capacities are actions that parents will take to keep a child safe in the face of risk. So it's sort of will you step in and protect the child in this dangerous situation? And those are often things that the families that come into the Child Welfare System have protective capacities that are not fully developed and they need to focus on those and build those up before we can consider their children safe.

[00:17:57]: Protective factors are more universal. They are more of aspirational - no one is ever completely, you know, filled up on social connections, or you know, it's not a milestone that you reach and then have in place. So they're more of the aspirational, the long-term thriving - where protective

capacities are very immediate and very focused on how the parent will protect the child in specific risky situations.

[00:18:30]: So when we talk about that with caseworkers we often have to go into that - of what are the protective capacities? We had in Wisconsin, the Department of Children and Families actually did a crosswalk - which protective capacities relate to which protective factors. And then at the national level we took that and some other materials and conversations to develop a set of slides that show, sort of, how we're - our goal with building protective factors is that families will not encounter those risky situations as often and that they'll be better equipped to deal with them when they do - but it doesn't change where the safety threshold is. We still need to focus on getting families to that safety threshold before we send them back out into the world on their own but we can, at the same time, be building up these protective factors that will make them more likely to thrive in the long-run.

TOM OATES [00:19:19]: It really, really points that middle manager level of constantly reinforcing these skills and these actions for those caseworkers because, you know, there's so many little questions about how are you applying and what are we doing and trying to either institute the behaviors for the professional level and maybe even change some habits along the way.

[00:19:41]: So, Tabitha, let me ask you, how have you seen, what's been, how's it going so far? Talk to me about what kind of changes you have seen in Arlington.

TABITHA KELLY [00:19:51]: Well we definitely are speaking the same language now, so that's really, really important. So we've acquired a shared language and we have had the hurdle of, hey if you're focusing so much on strengths, are you just bleeding heart social workers, are you sugarcoating the facts for the courts? And so we've had that struggle, and the protective factors has simultaneously helped us to acknowledge the risks and the strengths and so we have educated some of our community partners so that they can help us in this and we can - I've even gone to the judges and we've talked about protective factors - I'm really happy to report that one of our judges has really taken hold to this and in her swearing in ceremony, she mentioned protective factors being a critical piece of positive outcomes for families, so our agency, we were just like so, so excited.

[00:20:58]: So that has been amazing that we have received positive feedback from our court officials on the way in which we're documenting our efforts to support families and buffer the risks. We have received positive feedback from parents in the way in which we are engaging them and particularly through our parenting education classes, because they - it's not a class where it is a check-off box and you're sitting there and someone is talking at you for two hours - really an interactive session where parents are sharing their experiences and hearing from each other, and I will add one of the beautiful points of the parent education class that we have is a home visiting component. And so the instructor is actually conducting a home visit to each family to give them real-time parenting support and to reinforce some of the principles that are being taught in the class if the parent is too embarrassed or shy to ask a question, they can do it there, as well.

[00:22:13]: So that's been really a big change and we also through vacancies in turnover, we're repurposed a couple of positions so we now have created a little mini team that focuses on protective

factors as, like, their cohort here, and so they are, in order to make a referral to this team, the worker has to identify the specific protective factor in which the parent needs more support. And then, a plan is created with the parent to bolster those skills. So those are some of the changes that we've seen here. Very exciting work.

TOM OATES [00:23:00]: Have you had to validate this? Have you had to turn around - and once you guys made the decision, I'm sure there may have been somebody that said, 'alright what does success look like?' How are you, you've been giving some qualitative results, but are there any quantitative results that you're able to find that measure the impact?

TABITHA KELLY [00:23:22]: Sure. And it's, it's difficult because they're intertwined, right - when families are engaged, for example and they're using their voice and choice in a family partnership meeting, and really working on those action steps, you're more likely to be reunified faster. So we're seeing our permanency rates increase, our foster care population over time has decreased, and so that's an interesting challenge for us now, so that where the focus is becoming more on a preventative-side, versus a foster care focused-side. We are tracking how many of our case plans actually embed protective factors in them - that's a new thing. And so, we're looking at qualitative data measurements so that we can tell a different story later on with some real, hard data. But, we can, I can tell you our recidivism rates for repeat child maltreatment are very low, it's less than 2%.

TOM OATES [00:24:30]: That's great. And I'm sure that these were the kind of numbers that you were, you know, hoping for, or targeting, because there's got to be a point where you had to go and sell this - not only across to the hundred folks, but you had to sell this to one or two people, who maybe be a little higher up on the food chain. So when someone is thinking about, 'you know, this sounds great, I'd like to kind of go through this effort; how do I get senior management buy-in; especially when they're going to turn to me and go, 'how much is this going to cost?'

[00:25:00]: Where did that challenge come into play and then how did you overcome it?

TABITHA KELLY [00:25:04]: That's a great question, and funding and finances is always going to be a concern. So, I will tell you, I did not ask for additional funding to support this. What we did, we repurposed and reallocated resources that already existed, so that was really helpful. For example, becoming really, really clear and familiar with your funding strings so that you can know how to maximize them is going to be critically important - because again, the protective factors framework overlays already existing programs and practices, so that you can just change the way in which you're doing things, not necessarily have to be a large financial impact.

[00:25:56]: Now, we reallocated our federal funding Promoting Safe and Stable Families Act, and we geared some of that funding toward more concrete supports. If a one month rental assistance is needed for you to be reunified with your child, I'm going to use Promoting Safe and Stable Families funding to support that effort. If a child needs a bed to be able to visit you on a trial home visit, we're going to make sure that child has a bed and a place to sleep for the weekend when they're visiting mom and dad.

[00:26:33]: So those are, like, really tangible, on the ground things where my manager said, 'oh, no

additional funding? Okay, go ahead, let's see how this works.' And so we were smart about the way in which we used our money and you really have to be intentional about it so when you see an opportunity - you know even though that opportunity may be a vacancy, right, you may not want to fill that same vacancy with the same position, you might want to shift the focus - and that's where we built this little mini team that focuses on protective factors, does that make sense?

TOM OATES [00:27:14]: Yeah, it totally does. And thank you for diving in deep, here on this. And of course, Tabitha's been giving us a sense of what's happening in Arlington County, Virginia, and so you're able to see, kind of, the results from the families from, kind of, those big data points on permanency and number of foster care or time in foster care.

[00:27:34]: Cailin, I want to pull back and, kind of, take this and look at it from a different potential benefit for an agency as we're talking about how it can be implemented throughout a community, we're talking about how it can be a success in terms of working with families. Are you seeing from the various states that once this, kind of, process, this mindset gets added that not only - because it was mentioned at the very beginning, you talked about treating the families as partners and having that kind of respect. Is that aura, or that environment then actually trickling down with the peer-to-peer relationship or the supervisor to the supervisee - what I'm getting at, are you seeing the benefits of treating families in a different manner flipping to where cohorts and peers are treating each other within an agency together in a better manner?

CAILIN O'CONNOR [00:28:28]: I see Tabitha nodding her head, I think she is saying they are seeing this there. I don't have concrete examples but I do think that when you flip that switch about seeing the best in people, focusing on strengths, approaching parents as partners, assuming that we all want the best for this child - that is a very big difference, and you can't go back after that. And I think it permeates your, all of your relationships. It permeates how you do your work, but it also permeates how you interact with the families at your child's school and your own personal life, or what you think about a family you see out in public with the child throwing a tantrum - you take a different approach once you've gotten this switch flipped and really think about parents from a strength-based perspective.

[00:29:22]: So I do think it affects those peer-to-peer relationships and the supervisor relationships. I don't have concrete examples of that, I do know we had some Wisconsin counties that were reporting less burnout - both on a sort of anecdotal level of just caseworkers saying they were less burnt out, but also seeing less turnover as they implemented this approach and really made it so the caseworker isn't the bad guy. Nobody wants to go to work and be the bad guy every day, when you're in it to help kids, that gets really tiring. So I think it has a lot of potential for changing how people see their work and how they feel about their work and how they relate to each other.

TOM OATES [00:30:04]: Tabitha, you were nodding your head?

TABITHA KELLY [00:30:07]: Sure. I really think that this idea of taking care of families and partnering and being respectful of them permeates the child welfare organizations, right, we believe in parallel process, so we celebrate successes of staff, we acknowledge when people have had a hard day. We have really become, I think, far more aware of the need for self-care amongst our busy staff here and so we've

taken the time for example to divide the workload, sometimes, when staff are overwhelmed, staff go out together on home visits to support each other particularly when they're concerned about a potential, you know, conflict interaction.

[00:30:57]: We also started debriefing critical incidents that have happened. Unfortunately, we had a child suicide last year and that really did take a toll on our staff. And although we are healers, we needed help and so, we believe - just as we tell families - everybody needs help sometimes. We elicited the help of our Adult Behavioral Health staff to come in to support my team here in Child and Family Services so that they didn't have to do it all, right? So we have a series of debriefing sessions around grief and loss and our own trauma response to hard things that are happening with families. And I think this is really - the protective factors framework - has helped us and it dovetails nicely with the Trauma Informed Care Initiatives that we have here, right?

[00:31:57]: The other thing is when you catch someone doing good, right, just like in elementary school, we have a performance award program that anyone can acknowledge another staff member - peer-to-peer, supervisor-to-supervisor, on up and down the chain of command - and they get, you know, a little financial kickback for being acknowledged and that has been really helpful to some people.

TOM OATES [00:32:25]: Turns out we all could use some protective factors along the way. Cailin O'Connor, Tabitha Kelly, I thank you guys so much, for not only the work you're doing, but the time you're spending here with us. Thanks again for being a part of this and thanks for doing what you're doing, we really appreciate it.

TABITHA KELLY, CAILIN O'CONNOR [00:32:40]: Thank you!

TOM OATES [00:32:45]: Now Tabitha Kelly was recently the guest on one of the Center for the Study of Social Policies' Strengthening Families network webinars. She discussed how Arlington is continuing to shift the family and youth experience within their department. We'll make sure to put a link to the webinar within the show notes there.

[00:33:05]: So hey, if you haven't listened to Part One, I really encourage you to do so. We really touched on guidance for child welfare and social workers on what they can do to help identify and recognize both the presence and or absence of protective factors and tools to support those conversations with parents and families.

[00:33:22]: We'll also point to the National Child Abuse Prevention Month website, which contains the really popular Prevention Resource Guide. You can download the entire guide for free or use the site to dive into each section. And when you check it out, be sure to look at chapter two: Working with Families Using the Protective Factors, which helps break down the protective factors and provides guidance for both workers and programs. The website also has a series of vignettes on putting protective factors in practice and these are five scenarios that demonstrate how protective factors directly support Strengthening Families. They're really good for training new staff and working directly with parents, too.

Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast – Protective Factors Part 2 - TRANSCRIPT

[00:34:03]: You know, we love the feedback we're getting on these and the other Information Gateway Podcasts, so hey, keep it coming! You can reach us at info@childwelfare.gov, we would love to hear your ideas and your thoughts and as always, check out the other podcasts and head toward Information Gateway for your information needs - including the nation's largest child welfare related library, nearly 90,000 titles including journal articles, books, digital material; and you can conduct an advanced search right there at the website at childwelfare.gov.

[00:34:35]: So that's it for our two-part series on protective factors. My thanks to Cailin O'Connor and Tabitha Kelly and thanks to you for listening to the Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast. I'm Tom Oates, have a great day!

FEMALE NARRATOR [00:34:54]: Thanks for joining us for this edition of the Child Welfare Information Gateway podcast. Child Welfare Information Gateway is available at childwelfare.gov and is a service of the Children's Bureau, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families. The views and opinions expressed on this podcast do not necessarily reflect on those of Information Gateway, or the Children's Bureau.

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