

Strong Parents, Stable Children: Building Protective Factors to Strengthen Families



Strong Parents, Stable Children: Building Protective Factors to Strengthen Families is about promoting healthy child development and protecting and nurturing young children.

Every family experiences challenges and stress. However, even when different families face similar struggles, some cope better than others. There are many reasons why families handle stress differently, but one has to do with protective factors. Protective factors are strengths and resources that families draw upon during difficult times. Protective factors help promote optimal development by helping families succeed and thrive, even in the face of risks and challenges.

Children are at greater risk of maltreatment when families are under a lot of stress. Numerous studies have shown that protective factors can reduce the likelihood of abuse and neglect. Helping professionals can help parents who might otherwise be at risk of abusing their children find resources, supports, and coping strategies to help them parent effectively despite risks.

Following are five protective factors that, when present, increase the overall well-being of children and families:

Concrete Support in Times of Need

Families need support and services that address their needs and help minimize stress caused by challenges.

Parental Resilience

Ability of parents to be strong and flexible when encountering difficulties, adversity, and trauma.

Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development

Parents need information and strategies to support physical, cognitive, language, social, and emotional development.

Social and Emotional Competence of Children

Sometimes children need help expressing their feelings and emotions. Parents can help children learn to communicate clearly, recognize and regulate emotions, and build and maintain relationships.

Social Connections

Families need to build and maintain positive relationships that can provide emotional, instrumental, informational, spiritual, and other helpful support.

Understand that risk factors do not invariably lead to maltreatment, but rather increase the probability that these problems will arise. Although it is important to identify which risk factors are present, the more important issue is how many are present. As risk factors accumulate, the likelihood of negative outcomes increases. When we focus on building strengths and promoting positive home environments for children, we may help put children on a path to a generational cycle of protective factors instead of a cycle of risks.



Concrete Support in Times of Need

It is critical for families to receive the support they need when they need it.

Families need access to supports and services that can limit stress during tough times. Recognizing what type of help is needed and knowing where to turn is a challenge for many families, particularly during a crisis. Many families face a pileup of stressors, so a variety of services may be necessary.

Parents' ability to focus on parenting and providing necessary care for their children is directly related to targeted services they receive. When basic needs are met, families have more time and energy to focus on children's safety and well-being.

Helping parents identify and access available resources may help alleviate stress that can lead to maltreatment. Families need to know how to ask for help, they need to know and understand their rights, and many need help navigating complex service systems. Further, certain types of needs, such as treatment for mental health, substance abuse, and domestic violence, might be associated with stigma and shame, which may prevent families from seeking the help they need.

Helping families identify and access concrete supports should be done in a way that helps build confidence and skills so they know where to turn in the future. Families need to know they are not alone. After families are back on their feet, they might benefit from giving back to others by volunteering for the same types of services that helped them.

Parental Resilience

Resilient parents are better able to cope with everyday stressors and bounce back from occasional crises and adversity.

The way parents respond to stress is often more important than the stressor itself. No one can *eliminate* parents' stress, but how parents *cope* with stress can be managed.

Resilient parents have skills that can help them reduce their stress, which is a known risk factor for child abuse and neglect. They maintain a positive attitude, build trusting relationships, and seek help when needed. Resilient parents are also less likely to take out frustration and anger on their children.

Children whose parents are resilient can learn important skills to help them be resilient as they grow up. They are better at meeting and making friends and handle stress more appropriately than children whose parents are not as resilient.

For parents who are less resilient, even minor everyday stressors are a challenge. Add to that a pileup of stressors that is common for many families, and the risk of maltreatment increases. Even if parents are knowledgeable about parenting and child development, it is difficult to use that knowledge during tough times. Stress also spills over into other areas, including couple relationships and work productivity.

Less resilient parents need resources, support, and role models to help them be more nurturing to their children. Watch for signs of distress and offer support, and encouragement. When families trust people who are in a position to help, they will feel more comfortable and be more likely to ask for help when needed.



Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development

Good parenting requires an understanding of typical child development.

Parents who know what children can and cannot do at different stages have more realistic expectations, which helps them be more patient and nurturing. We sometimes expect children to behave like little adults, but young children lack the cognitive and emotional skills necessary to know right from wrong. Sometimes observing same-aged children helps parents recognize that their children's behaviors are normal.

When parents do not know about typical development, interpret children's behaviors in a negative way, or do not know how to handle bad behaviors, they are more likely to grow frustrated and may be more likely to take that frustration out on their children.

Many people think punishment and discipline are the same, but they are very different. Punishment refers to unpleasant or painful methods to stop misbehavior. Positive discipline, on the other hand, is about teaching and guiding children so they learn to manage their emotions and make better choices in the future. Parents need to understand that even within the same family, every child is different. A parenting style or discipline technique that works with one child may not work with another. Positive discipline helps keep children safe. The more positive discipline is used, the less punishment will be necessary.

To better understand parenting and child development, parents need information that is readily available and relevant. Mentoring, advice, and practice may also be useful for some parents. Parents who experienced harsh discipline during childhood and those who have a child with behavioral or developmental problems or special needs may require additional support in this area to help them reduce their frustration and provide the help their child needs.



Social and Emotional Competence of Children

Positive relationships support healthy social and emotional development

Children's social and emotional competence is crucial to developing healthy relationships with family and peers. The quality of early care and nurturing has a long-lasting impact on how children develop. Before children learn to communicate, parents must be observant and use their best guess to respond to children's needs. When cues are misinterpreted, children and parents might become increasingly frustrated.

As children grow, so does their ability to communicate, manage their emotions and behaviors, and solve problems effectively. Parents help promote healthy social and emotional development by helping children learn how to express their feelings, self-regulate, and make friends. Children whose parents model these behaviors are better able to recognize their own and others' emotions, take others' perspectives, and differentiate between appropriate and inappropriate ways of behaving. In contrast, children who have not had these skills modeled may not feel remorse or show empathy and they may have limited language and cognitive skills, all of which might inhibit their ability to interact well with peers. Through appropriate interventions, however, these children can learn appropriate social and emotional skills and have improved outcomes.

Social and emotional development is affected by children's attachments and interaction with their environment. Parents who are attentive and provide consistent nurturing are more likely to have children with healthy social and emotional development. However, some children have developmental delays in their social and emotional development. Children who cannot express their emotions and needs through words may be at greater risk for abuse. When these delays are identified early and appropriate services are provided, children are more likely to sustain positive development.

Protective factors are important for the healthy development of *all* families!

Social Connections

Every family needs a strong, supportive network of family, friends, neighbors, and others during both good times and bad.

All families need people who care about them and who they can turn to for advice, support, and help solving problems. Parents and caregivers who have an emotionally supportive network of family, friends, and others find it easier to care for themselves and their children. Parents who are isolated and have few social connections are at higher risk of maltreating their children.

To feel connected, secure, and confident, parents need access to emotional, informational, instrumental, and spiritual support. These types of support help improve parents' moods, help them be more responsive to their children, improve parental satisfaction and well-being, and buffer against feelings of anxiety, anger, and depression. Children benefit from social connections as they participate in positive activities that allow them to interact with peers and build friendships.

As families build support networks and receive help from others, this encourages them to look for opportunities to give back through mutually beneficial relationships.

Another important way that social connections benefit families is they help reinforce norms about behavior and appropriate parenting, including avoiding harsh discipline and establishing realistic expectations. They also provide an opportunity for parents to see how their children are similar to or different from same-aged children.

Social isolation is a serious risk factor for child maltreatment. Families that are new to a community, new parents, and those who are recently divorced will benefit when others inform them about local programs, services, and supports.

Nurturing families and helping them cope in times of need can help them build and maintain healthy relationships. Although each of your professions might be pretty different, ultimately you all want to help parents do the best for their children, to help parents be the best parents they can be, and help ensure children thrive.

Research has demonstrated that the five protective factors reduce the incidence of child abuse and neglect by providing parents with the information and skills they need to parent effectively. When agencies and organizations incorporate these protective factors into programming and services, positive relationships can be established with families. If a relationship and trust have been established, it will be easier to recognize the signs of stress and help build families' protective factors during tough times thus decreasing the likelihood of maltreatment.



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