

# strengthening families

THROUGH EARLY CARE & EDUCATION

## what are the protective factors?

The five Protective Factors are the foundation of the Strengthening Families approach. Extensive evidence supports the common-sense notion that when these Protective Factors are present and robust in a family, the likelihood of abuse and neglect diminish. Research also shows that these are the factors that create healthy environments for the optimal development of all children.

### PARENTAL RESILIENCE

No one can eliminate stress from parenting, but building parental resilience can affect how a parent deals with stress. Parental resilience is the ability to constructively cope with and bounce back from all types of challenges. It is about creatively solving problems, building trusting relationships, maintaining a positive attitude, and seeking help when it is needed.

### SOCIAL CONNECTIONS

Friends, family members, neighbors, and other members of a community provide emotional support and concrete assistance to parents. Social connections help parents build networks of support that serve multiple purposes: they can help parents develop and reinforce community norms around childrearing, provide assistance in times of need, and serve as a resource for parenting information or help solving problems. Because isolation is a common risk factor for abuse and neglect, parents who are isolated need support in building positive friendships.

### CONCRETE SUPPORT IN TIMES OF NEED

Parents need access to the types of concrete supports and services that can minimize the stress of difficult situations, such as a family crisis, a condition such as substance abuse, or stress associated with lack of resources. Building this Protective Factor is about helping to ensure the basic needs of a family, such as food, clothing, and shelter, are met, and well as connecting parents and children to services, especially those that have a stigma associated with them, like domestic violence shelter or substance abuse counseling, in times of crisis.

### KNOWLEDGE OF PARENTING AND CHILD DEVELOPMENT

Having accurate information about raising young children and appropriate expectations for their behavior help parents better understand and care for children. It is important that information is available when parents need it, that is, when it is relevant to their life and their child. Parents whose own families used harsh discipline techniques or parents of children with developmental or behavior problems or special needs require extra support in building this Protective Factor.

### SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL COMPETENCE OF CHILDREN

A child's ability to interact positively with others, to self-regulate, and to effectively communicate his or her emotions has a great impact on the parent-child relationship. Children with challenging behaviors are more likely to be abused, so early identification and work with them helps keep their development on track and keeps them safe. Also, children who have experienced or witnessed violence need a safe environment that offers opportunities to develop normally.

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## how are protective factors built in families?

Most professionals who work with children and families are already doing many things to build Protective Factors. The research behind Strengthening Families identified seven program strategies that exemplary early care and education centers used to build Protective Factors in families. People working in early childhood, child welfare, family support, and many other fields can use similar strategies with families and children they encounter. The seven Program Strategies are:

### FACILITATE FRIENDSHIPS AND MUTUAL SUPPORT

Programs offer many opportunities for parents to get to know each other, develop mutual support systems and take leadership. Strategies included sponsoring sports teams, potlucks, classes, camping trips and field trips, advisory groups, board leadership and volunteer opportunities. Outreach to fathers and other family members is important.

### STRENGTHEN PARENTING

Programs have many ways for parents to get help on parenting issues when they needed it: a class or a support group, opportunities to meet with teachers, family support workers or other staff, home visits or resources from a lending library. Offering opportunities for parents to observe their children and providing chances to learn about parenting on evenings or weekends support this strategy.

### RESPOND TO FAMILY CRISES

Offering extra support to families when they needed it through designated family support workers or other staff who had the time, training, and expertise to connect families to the support they needed help when families face illnesses, job loss, housing problems, and other issues.

### LINK FAMILIES TO SERVICES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Programs can link parents to job training, education, health care, and other services through their community networks. Specialized staff, such as family support workers and mental health consultants help identify families needing extra support and work with staff and parents to address those needs.

### VALUE AND SUPPORT PARENTS

The quality of the relationship between parents and staff influences a program's ability to connect with parents. Support, training, and supervision of staff to help them do this effectively is important. A program's positive regard for families should be part of every aspect of its work and reflected by every member of its staff.

### FACILITATE CHILDREN'S SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Programs help children build the capacity to articulate their feelings and get along with others, often using a curriculum, such as "Second Step" or "I Can Problem Solve." Parents say their child's ability to express emotions and self-regulate helps them understand their children and changes their behavior towards them.

### OBSERVE AND RESPOND TO EARLY WARNING SIGNS OF ABUSE AND NEGLECT

Programs train and support staff to observe children carefully and respond at the first sign that something might be wrong. Programs can use indicators such as frequent absences, missing payments, or other signs of parental stress as opportunities to reach out to families and connect them with supports or services. Special protocols for child abuse or neglect reporting can allow programs to provide continuity and support for families that are the subject of reports. Ongoing relationships between program staff and staff at child protective services can ensure that children are safe and parents get the services they need.

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