

Promoting Healthy Families in Your Community

2008 Resource Packet

Child Welfare Information Gateway, Children's Bureau,
FRIENDS National Resource Center For Community-Based Child Abuse Prevention.

Promoting the Five Protective Factors

This chapter provides background and guidance for service providers and others on exploring each of the five protective factors with parents. Each protective factor is addressed individually, and for each one you will find:

- Brief background on why the protective factor is important for strengthening families and reducing the risk of abuse or neglect
- Areas to explore with parents as you both identify strengths and needs, and questions for parents to consider that will facilitate the dialogue
- Strategies and resources that may serve to strengthen families

For each protective factor, the focus is on helping parents identify and build on their strengths and on empowering them to identify strategies for enhancing their parenting capacity. This provides the foundation for the provider to work in partnership with the parent and family to explore opportunities for supporting the family.

The resources and suggestions provided in this chapter are just a starting point for developing the parent-provider partnership. Other considerations are equally important. For example, the parent and provider should find a mutually comfortable place to meet, such as the parent's home, a coffee shop, a picnic bench in a nearby park, or at a religious institution or school. A casual setting may facilitate a more friendly and conversational discussion.

The five protective factors covered in this chapter are:

- **Nurturing and attachment**—The importance of early bonding, as well as nurturing throughout childhood. Building a close bond helps parents better understand, respond to, and communicate with their children.
- **Knowledge of parenting and of child and youth development**—Information about what to anticipate as children develop and strategies for effective parenting. Parents learn what to look for at each age and how to help their children reach their full potential.
- **Parental resilience**—How parents' ability to cope and problem solve affects their ability to deal effectively with everyday stress or a major crisis. Recognizing the signs of stress and knowing what to do about it can help parents build their capacity to cope.

- **Social connections**—Identifying ways to help parents expand their social networks to build a broader base of parenting support. Parents with an extensive network of family, friends, and neighbors have better support in times of need.
- **Concrete supports for parents**—Finding out what basic resources are available in the community and how to access them to address family-specific needs. Caregivers with access to financial, housing, and other concrete resources that help them meet their basic needs can better attend to their role as parents.

For more information on protective factors that reduce the risk of child abuse and neglect, visit the Child Welfare Information Gateway web page on Protective Factors:

<http://www.childwelfare.gov/preventing/promoting/protectfactors>

Nurturing and Attachment

Parents today have a lot on their plates. 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 kiss, or a smile—make a big difference to children. Research shows time and again that babies who receive affection and nurturing from their parents have the best chance of developing into children, teens, and adults who are happy, healthy, and competent. Research also shows that a relationship with a consistent, caring adult in the early years is associated in later life with better academic grades, healthier behaviors, more positive peer interactions, and an increased ability to cope with stress.

Brain development in infants is positively affected when parents work to understand and meet their basic needs for love and affection or provide comfort when they are hungry, bored, tired, wet, or cold. Conversely, neglectful and abusive parenting can have a negative effect on brain development. Research shows that 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, the ability to feel remorse and empathy are built on experience. Children who lack early emotional attachments or who grow up fearful and expecting to be hurt 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. While physical contact becomes less important, listening and talking become more vital to the relationship. Parents nurture their older children by being involved and interested in the child's school and other activities, aware of the child or teen's interests and friends, and willing to advocate for the child when necessary.

When parents spend time and energy discovering and paying attention to their children's needs, they are rewarded with positive, open, and trusting relationships with their children.

Parents who develop the ability to respond sensitively to the needs of their child, no matter what age, will find parenting easier and more enjoyable.

Exploring Strengths and Needs

Regardless of the child's age, parents can take advantage of opportunities in their sometimes hectic lives to listen and respond to their child in a nurturing way. Even a few minutes of quality time in the car, at the store, or while cooking dinner mean so much to a child. Your role as a partner with the parent is to model and acknowledge nurturing behaviors as parents make connections with their baby, child, or teen.

In order to explore . . .	Ask the parent . . .
<p>How the parent is handling the basic needs of the child—nutrition, safety, health care</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What does your child like to eat? • How much does your child sleep? • What happens during a usual day or night? At school? After school?
<p>How the parent observes and attends to the child</p> <p>Specific play or stimulation behaviors</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When you spend time with your child, what do you like to do together? How long are you able to spend on that activity? • What kinds of games do you like to play with your child? • What does your child like to do? • What is your child's favorite book or story?
<p>How the parent responds to the child's behavior</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What does your child do when he/she is sad, angry, tired? • What happens when your child: _____[tantrums, bedwetting, skipping school]?
<p>How the parent responds to emotional needs</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do you know when your child is happy? Sad? Lonely? Hurt? • How do you comfort your child?
<p>How the parent demonstrates affection</p> <p>How the parent models caring behavior</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do you show affection in your family? • How do you let your child know that you love him or her?

How the parent recognizes accomplishments

- What are your child's greatest gifts and talents?
- How do you encourage these talents?

How the parent provides a safe home and family environment

- All families experience conflict from time to time. What happens when there is conflict in your house?
 - How do you keep your child safe at home? In your neighborhood or community?
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Sharing Strategies and Resources to Strengthen Nurturing and Attachment

You can share resources available from your agency and throughout the community on how parents can connect with their children, listen to them, and become more involved in their lives. It is important to note that bonding is a two-way street. As children grow and develop the ability to socialize, relate, and communicate, it is easier for parents to respond positively to them. When a child does not show a positive response to the parent (due to age, a disability, or other factors), the parent may need additional support.

Resources to promote nurturing may include information about:

Impact of nurturing on development

- Information about infant and toddler development, including brain development
- The importance of an early secure attachment between parents and young children
- Information on shaken baby syndrome and sudden infant death syndrome
- Examples of secure parent-child attachment at all ages

Parenting strategies that promote nurturing

- Infant care and strategies that promote bonding and attachment (e.g., breastfeeding, rocking, using a baby carrier, responding to crying)
- Cultural differences in how parents and children show affection
- What to do when your child has an emotional or behavioral disability that limits his or her ability to respond to parental nurturing
- Ways to nurture children at every age
- How fathers nurture children
- How other important adults build caring relationships with children
- Ways to create and sustain healthy marriages that better support a nurturing home environment for children
- Ways to create quality time to play with children in the context of daily activities
- Communicating effectively with older children and resolving conflicts

Many parents, especially parents of infants, find that home visits are a convenient way to access resources. For providers, home visits allow you to visit with parents in an environment where parents and children may be most comfortable. Home visits also give you a chance to talk to parents about any material or safety needs in the home. However, some families may not feel comfortable having strangers in their home and may prefer to meet in another setting, such as a church, school, park, or office. For some families, a "neighborhood helper" or other person who shares the family's ethnic and cultural background may provide a bridge for connecting with the parent or caregiver.

There are a number of other resources for parents, including parenting support groups, parenting classes, and home visits from specific types of providers. Activities that provide a chance to get to know other parents, such as play groups, support groups, or classes, have the added bonus of giving parents the opportunity to form social relationships and supports.

Parental Resilience

Parents who can cope with the stresses of everyday life, as well as an occasional crisis, have resilience; they have the flexibility and inner strength necessary to bounce back when things are not going well. Parents with resilience are generally able to cope on their own, but they 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.

Multiple life stressors, such as a family history of abuse or neglect, health problems, marital conflict, and domestic or community violence—and financial stressors such as unemployment, poverty, and homelessness—may reduce a parent's capacity to cope effectively with the typical day-to-day stresses of raising children.

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 strengthen the capacity to parent effectively. In addition, community services that help families in crisis include mental health programs, substance abuse treatment, family and marital counseling and special education and treatment programs for children with special needs.

Exploring Strengths and Needs

By partnering with parents, you can help them pinpoint the factors contributing to their stress, as well as their successful coping strategies and their personal, family, and community resources.

In order to explore . . .	Ask the parent . . .
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What the parent identifies as his or her coping strengths and resilience• The parent's strengths in parenting	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What helps you cope with everyday life?• Where do you draw your strength?• How does this help you in parenting?• What are your dreams for yourself and your family?
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What the parent identifies as everyday stressors• Stressors precipitated by crises	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What kinds of frustrations do you deal with during the day?• Has something happened recently that has made life more difficult?
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Impact of stress on parenting• Impact of parenting on stress	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How are you able to meet your children's needs when you are dealing with stress?• How are your children reacting to [crisis]?
Whether there is marital stress or conflict	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How does your spouse or partner support you in times of stress?• How does your spouse or partner help with parenting?
Needs that might be identified by a different family member (not all family members may identify the same needs)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Are other family members experiencing stress or concern?• How are they dealing with that?• Has anyone in your family expressed concern about drug or alcohol abuse?
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Short-term supports (respite care, help with a new baby, help during an illness)• Long-term strategies (job training, marital counseling)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• When you are under stress, what is most helpful to you?• Are there places in the community where you can find help?

Sharing Strategies and Resources to Promote Parental Resilience

When parents identify and communicate what worries them most, there is an opportunity to offer some coping strategies and resources to begin to deal with the stress. Parents are not always aware how their ability to cope with stress may impact their capacity to parent and their children's development. You can help parents recognize that they can model coping behaviors for their children, since children observe and imitate parents in many ways. Empowering parents to seek help and take steps to combat stress is part of building both resilience and hope.

Some needs are obvious to all family members and to providers. Other needs, such as marital counseling or substance abuse treatment, may become apparent when one family member expresses concern about another. Partnering with the family includes helping all family members translate their concerns into specific needs that can be discussed and resolved. Many community resources and services are available to help families cope. Faith communities, community colleges, self-help groups, and social service agencies can help parents and caregivers develop problem-solving and communication skills that strengthen their ability to deal effectively with crisis, so they can continue to provide for their children.

Resources for building resilience may include information about:

Stress—causes and results

- How stress happens, including the "little things" that add up
- Ways to recognize stress and its triggers
- How stress affects health and coping
- How stress affects parenting, marriage, and family life

Finding ways to build resilience

- Stress management techniques, such as regular exercise, relaxation to music, and meditation or prayer
- How to prevent stress by planning ahead, anticipating difficulties, and having resources in place
- How to anticipate and minimize everyday stress
- How to handle major stressors, including accessing resources and supports from family, friends, faith communities, and other community resources
- Family management techniques, such as effective ways of communicating needs and concerns
- Programs that offer family-to-family help or mentoring for personalized, intensive, sustained services or support, especially in times of crisis
- Community supports such as mental health and counseling services, substance abuse treatment, domestic violence programs, and self-help support groups

Social Connections

Parents with a social 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. Conversely, research has shown that parents who are isolated, with few social connections, are at higher risk for child abuse and neglect.

Some parents may need to develop self-confidence and social skills to expand their social networks. Helping parents identify resources and/or providing opportunities for them to make connections within their neighborhood or community 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.

Exploring Strengths and Needs

Identifying and building on parents' current or potential social connections, skills, abilities, and interests can be a great way to partner with them as they expand their social networks. For parents who have difficulty establishing and maintaining social connections, your discussion may help them identify what is holding them back.

In order to explore . . .	Ask the parent . . .
The parent's social skills, willingness to join a group, and capacity to make and keep friends	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Who can you call for advice or just to talk?• How often do you see them?• Would you be comfortable/willing to attend a parent group (or other group) just to see if you like it?
The parent's current social support system, including family, friends, and membership in any formal groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Do you have family members or friends nearby who help you out once in a while?• Do you belong to a church, temple, mosque, women's group, men's group?• Do you have a child in the local school or Head Start program?
The parent's desire for new friends and social connections	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What kinds of things do you like to do for fun or to relax?• Would you be interested in meeting some other moms and dads who also [have a new baby, have a teenager, like to cook, sing in a choir, etc.]?

The parent's potential strengths and challenges in making social connections (include concerns such as parent's language, comfort level in groups, access to babysitting and transportation, recent arrival in community)

- What are some benefits of getting out or joining a group?
- What kind of support would you need in order to be able to get out for an evening?
- How does your spouse or partner help out so that you have some time with friends?

Needs that might be met with better social connections (for instance, respite care, a sympathetic listener, a role model)

- Would it help you to have more friends or acquaintances to call about _____?
- Would it help you to know other moms and dads who are dealing with _____?

The parent's interest in starting or facilitating a community group

What would it take to get a group of parents together to _____?

Sharing Strategies and Resources to Strengthen Social Connections

If parents express an interest in making social connections, you may want to offer suggestions, information, or services. Sometimes parents will not identify a lack of social connections or emotional support as an issue. Instead, they may be concerned about a child's behavior problem or their own depression. In addressing the parent's concerns, you can also provide information about how these needs might be met by connecting with others (e.g., a support group for parents with similar issues). You can also provide general information on how expanding social connections can reduce isolation and support parents.

Consider sharing the following:

Benefits of a broad social network

- Helps ease the burden of parenting
- Models positive social interactions for children and gives children access to other supportive adults
- Provides support in crises
- Offers opportunities to help others

Ways to broaden a social network

- Overcome transportation, childcare, and other barriers—for instance, taking a bus or carpool to a play group or joining a babysitting co-op to meet other parents and have occasional childcare

- Access community resources, especially those with which the parent has some experience (a church he or she attended, a Head Start program where the child is enrolled, a cultural center that offers services in the parent's native language)
- Join a parent's group or play group in the neighborhood, or start a new group

And if a group does not already exist . . .

Some neighborhoods and communities provide ample opportunities for neighbors to come together and friendships to develop. In other cases, agencies and organizations may welcome help in starting groups that bring families together for mutual support. These groups might start as an outgrowth of a widely recognized need in the community, such as new families that have just moved to the area or concerned citizens working against community violence. Community involvement is critical for these groups to be sustained over time. As a service provider, your role might be to bring individuals together (including parents), providing a meeting place, or simply encouraging a community leader to establish a group to meet a particular need.

Concrete Supports for Parents

Many factors affect a family's ability to care for their children. Families who can meet their own basic needs for food, clothing, housing, and transportation—and who know how to access essential services such as childcare, health care, and mental health services to address family-specific needs—are better able to ensure the safety and well-being of their children. When parents do not have steady financial resources, lack health insurance, or suffer a family crisis such as a natural disaster or the incarceration of a parent, their ability to care for their children may be at risk.

Poverty is associated with greater rates of child abuse and neglect, and families living in poverty often benefit from specific concrete supports, such as help with housing, food, transportation, childcare, clothing, furniture, and utilities. Partnering with parents to identify and access these resources in the community may help prevent the stress that sometimes precipitates child maltreatment. Providing concrete supports may also help prevent the unintended neglect that sometimes occurs when parents are unable to provide for their children.

Exploring Strengths and Needs

Working with parents to identify their most critical basic needs and locate concrete supports keeps the focus on family-driven solutions. As a partner with the family, your role may simply be making referrals to the essential services, supports, and resources that parents say they need.

In order to explore . . .	Ask the parent . . .
The parent's view of the most immediate need	What do you need to [stay in your house, keep your job, pay your heating bill]?
Steps the parent has taken to deal with the problem	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How have you handled this? • What kind of response have you gotten? • Why is this working or not working?
Ways the family handles other problems Current connections that might offer help for the new problem	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What has worked well in the past? • Are there community groups or local services that have been or might be able to offer assistance? • Do you belong to a faith community? Do you have a relationship with a pediatrician? Is your child enrolled at a local school?
Other services and supports that would help the family	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have you thought about _____ [local program that provides housing, food, etc.]? • Did you know that _____ provides [free homework help, meals on weekends, low-cost childcare]?
The parent's desire and capacity to receive new services, including completing applications, keeping appointments, and committing to the solution process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What kind of help do you need to get to these appointments? • When would be a good time for me to give you a call to see how it's going?

Sharing Strategies and Resources to Strengthen Concrete Supports

Parents may not always know about community resources that can help meet their basic needs or how to access essential services. Language or cultural barriers may make it difficult for some parents to identify services and make the necessary contacts. Providing information and connections to concrete supports can be a tremendous help to families under stress or in crisis. You might provide contact information (a person's name is most helpful) or help parents make the initial calls or appointments, depending on what parents say they need.

When specific services do not exist in your community, you may be able to work with parents or community leaders to help establish them. Parents can become powerful advocates for a

particular cause, such as low-cost, after-school programs or safe transportation for teens, if they know the process for forming groups and creating services.

Your expertise may be most helpful in the following ways:

Linking families with services

- Parents may not be aware of services that could help. You can let them know about all available resources, so they may select what is most appropriate for their needs.
- Parents are more likely to use culturally appropriate services. If you can link them with a service provider who speaks their language or comes from a similar background, parents may feel more comfortable and experience a greater benefit.
- Parents with many needs may be overwhelmed by the different requirements for accessing various services. A "systems of care" approach may be most useful, in which different helping systems work together to support the family.

Building community services

- Linking parents with community leaders and others to organize support, advocacy, and consulting groups gives parents the opportunity to use their experience to help others.
- Parents who go public with their need or cause usually find that they are not alone. The fact that a parent is willing to publicize a need or 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.