

The Five Protective Factors

The five Protective Factors are the foundation of the Strengthening Families approach. Extensive research supports the common-sense notion that when these protective factors are present and robust in a family, the likelihood of child abuse and neglect diminish. (*www.strengtheningfamilies.net*)

Parental Resilience – The ability to cope and bounce back from all types of challenges

- Parental psychology plays an important role in both the causes and prevention of child abuse and neglect. Parents who are emotionally resilient are able to maintain a positive attitude, creatively solve problems, and effectively rise to challenges in their lives – and they are less likely to abuse or neglect their children.
- Parents who have experienced violence or abuse and neglect or who have risk factors for becoming abusers need caring relationships to help them develop and maintain positive relationships with their children. Parents who know and trust staff are more likely to reveal problems such as domestic violence or feelings of frustration and ask for assistance.

Social Connections – Friends, family members, neighbors, and other members of a community who provide emotional support and concrete assistance to parents

- Helping parents build constructive friendships and other positive connections can reduce their isolation, which is a consistent risk factor in child abuse and neglect. Isolation is a problem in particular for family members who are in crisis or need intensive help, such as victims of domestic violence.
- Social connections build parents' "social capital," their community network of family, friends, neighbors, churches, etc. on whom they can call on for help solving problems. Social connections enable parents to develop and reinforce community norms about behavior; norms against violence help reduce child abuse and neglect. Friendships lead to mutual assistance in obtaining resources that all families need from time to time, including tangible assistance (e.g., transportation, respite), as well as emotional support.

Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development – Accurate information about raising young children and appropriate expectations for their behavior

- Parents who understand normal child development are less likely to be abusive and more likely to nurture their children's healthy development. Observing other children helps parents understand their own children in context.
- Parents often need timely help from someone they trust in order to address children's problem behaviors, such as biting or hitting, without resorting to harsh discipline techniques. Parents of children with developmental or behavior problems or special needs require support and coaching in their parenting roles to reduce their frustration and provide the help their children need.

Concrete Support in Times of Need – Financial security to cover day-to-day expenses and unexpected, access to formal supports, and informal support from social networks

- Child neglect can be a consequence of family crisis, a parental condition such as substance abuse, or stresses associated with lack of resources. For example, support could be shown through initiating contacts or inviting conversation if staff suspects a family problem or emergency, serving as an access point for assistance, giving referrals to specific individuals at service agencies (not just the agencies themselves), providing transportation to assistive agencies, if needed.

Children's Social and Emotional Development – A child's ability to interact positively with others and communicate his or her emotions effectively

- Children with challenging behaviors are at greater risk for abuse. Identifying and working with children early to keep their development on track helps keep them safe. Helping children develop socially and emotionally has an impact on the way parents and children interact. As children learn to verbalize their emotions rather than act them out, they are more able to tell parents how they feel, what they need, and how their parents' actions make them feel. Parents can then be more responsive to their children's needs and less likely to yell or hit. In particular, children who have experienced or witnessed violence need a safe environment, trained staff, and opportunities to develop normally.