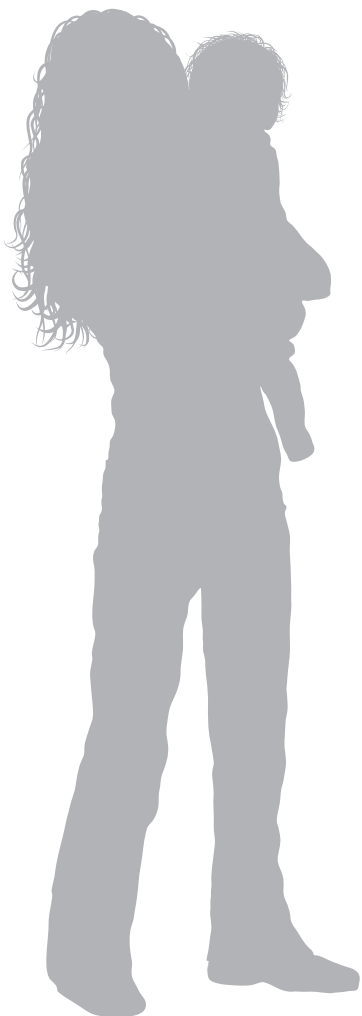


Chapter 2:

Working With Families: The Six Protective Factors

Nurturing and Attachment

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 smile, or loving words—make a big difference to children. Research shows 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 consistent relationship with a caring adult in the early years is associated with better grades, healthier behaviors, more positive peer interactions, and an increased ability to cope with stress later in life.



Infant brains develop best when a few stable caregivers work to understand and meet the infant's need for love, affection, and stimulation. Conversely, neglectful and abusive parenting can have a negative effect on brain development. 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, children who lack early emotional attachments 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. Parents nurture their older children by making time to listen to them, being involved and interested in the child's school and other activities, staying aware of the child or teen's interests and friends, and being willing to advocate for the child when necessary.

How Programs Can Help

- Use parent education strategies (workshops, lending libraries) as opportunities to share information about how a strong parent-child bond enhances brain development and supports positive behavior in young children.
- Share resources available from your agency and throughout the community on how parents can nurture and connect with their children at every age.
- Engage and include all important adults in a child's life, including fathers, grandparents, and extended family, as part of a child's "nurturing network."
- Acknowledge cultural differences in how parents and children show affection.
- Recognize that when a child does not show a positive response to the parent (due to an emotional, developmental, or behavioral disability, for example), the parent may need additional support.

How Workers Can Help

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. You can

also point out instances of positive interaction between parent and child to reinforce behavior.

Some parents have chosen to communicate the importance of nurturing and attachment this simply: “Our family shows how much we love each other.”

In order to explore ...	Ask the parent ...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How the parent observes and attends to the child Specific play or stimulation behaviors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How much time are you able to spend with your child or teen? When you spend time with your child or teen, what do you like to do together? How do you engage your child or teen during everyday activities (diapering, meals, driving in the car)? What games or activities does your child or teen like?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How the parent responds to the child’s behavior 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What does your child or teen do when he/she is sad, angry, tired? What happens when your child (cries for a long time, has a tantrum, wets the bed, skips school)?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How the parent demonstrates affection How the parent models caring behavior 	<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?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How the parent recognizes accomplishments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What are your child’s greatest gifts and talents? How do you encourage these talents? What do you do when your child does something great?

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Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development

Parents who understand the usual course of child development are more likely to be able to provide their children with respectful communication, consistent rules and expectations, and opportunities that promote independence. But no parent can be an expert on all aspects of infant, child, and teenage development or on the most effective ways to support a child at each stage. When parents are not aware of normal developmental milestones, interpret their child's behaviors in a negative way, or do not know how to respond to and effectively manage a child's behavior, they can become frustrated and may resort to harsh discipline.

As children grow and mature, parents need to continue to learn and change how they respond to their children's needs. Information about child development and parenting may come from many sources, including extended families, cultural practices, media, formal parent education classes, and a parent's own experiences. Interacting with other children of similar ages helps parents better understand their own child. Observing other caregivers who use positive techniques for managing children's behavior also provides an opportunity for parents to learn healthy alternatives.

Parenting styles need to be adjusted for each child's unique temperament and circumstances. Parents of children with special needs may benefit from additional coaching and support to reduce frustration and help them become the parents their children need.

- Provide observation opportunities such as video monitors or windows into classrooms and outdoor space, where parents can watch their child interacting with other children and learn new techniques by observing staff.
- Give parents opportunities to participate in conversations with other parents about their own experiences as children and how they want to change their parenting.
- Offer a lending library of educational materials about parenting and child development.



How Programs Can Help

- Offer informal, daily interactions between parents and program staff, plus coaching from staff on specific developmental challenges when they arise (e.g., inconsolable crying, eating or sleeping problems, biting, sharing toys, lying, problems with peers).
- Provide parent education opportunities through classes or workshops that address topics parents request or that respond to current issues.

How Workers Can Help

All parents have questions about raising their children, and they need timely answers and support from someone they trust. One way to describe this is simply to acknowledge, “Parenting is part natural and part learned.”

Parents may feel more comfortable voicing concerns and exploring solutions when providers:

- Focus on the parents’ own hopes and goals for their children
- Help parents identify and build on their strengths in parenting
- Model nurturing behavior by acknowledging frustrations and recognizing the parents’ efforts

In order to explore ...	Ask the parent ...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The parent’s view of his/her child’s strengths 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What does your child do best? • What do you like about your child?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How the parent views his/her own role 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do you like about being a parent of an infant (or preschooler, or teenager)? • What are some of the things that you find challenging as a parent?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How the parent observes and interprets the child’s behavior 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What kinds of things make your child happy (frustrated, sad, angry)? • What does your child do when he or she is happy (frustrated, sad, angry)? • Why do you think your child (cries, eats slowly, says “no,” breaks rules)?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How the parent encourages positive behavior through praise and modeling 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How have you let your child know what you expect? • What happens when she/he does what you ask?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whether the parent can identify alternative solutions for addressing difficult behaviors • Community, cultural, and ethnic expectations and practices about parenting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How have you seen other parents handle this? What would your parents have done in this situation? • What teaching (discipline) methods work best for you? • How does your child respond?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How the parent understands the child’s development • Any parental concern that the child’s behavior appears to be outside the normal range 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do you think your child compares to other children his/her age? • Are there things that worry you about your child? • Have others expressed concern about your child’s behavior?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How the parent encourages healthy development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do you encourage your child to explore his/her surroundings, try new things, and do things on his/her own?

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Parental Resilience

Parents who can cope with the stresses of everyday life as well as an occasional crisis have resilience—the flexibility and inner strength to bounce back when things are not going well. Parents with resilience 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, physical and mental health problems, marital conflict, substance abuse, and domestic or community violence—and financial stressors such as unemployment, financial insecurity, and homelessness—can 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 qualities strengthen their capacity to parent effectively, and they can be nurtured and developed through concrete skill-building activities or through supportive interactions with others.

How Programs Can Help

- Provide resources to help parents understand the causes of stress and how it affects health, relationships, and family life.
- Teach parents concrete skills to prevent stress, such as planning and goal setting, anticipating difficulties, problem-solving, communication, and self-care.
- Link parents with resources for stress management, such as exercise opportunities, relaxation techniques, and venues for meditation or prayer.
- Partner with resources in the community that help families manage stress and deal with crises, including programs that offer family-to-family help for personalized, sustained support, as well as services such as mental health counseling, substance abuse treatment, domestic violence programs, and self-help support groups.
- Hire or develop staff who can develop trusting relationships with families, and provide opportunities for these relationships to flourish.
- Understand that mental health consultants are an integral part of the staff team, available to staff and to parents when additional support is needed.
- Train staff to observe children for early signs of child or family distress and respond to children and their families with encouragement, support, and help in solving problems.



How Workers Can Help

The word “resilience” will not be understood by all parents. Explore alternative ways of talking about these skills, for example, using an affirmation such as: “I have courage during stressful times or in a crisis.”

By partnering with parents, you can help them pinpoint factors that contribute to their stresses, as well as the successful coping strategies they use 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?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What the parent identifies as everyday stressors Problem-solving skills Stressors precipitated by crises 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What kinds of frustrations or worries do you deal with during the day? How do you solve these everyday problems as they come up? Has something happened recently that has made life more difficult?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Impact of stress on parenting 	<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)?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How the parent communicates with his or her spouse or partner Whether there is marital stress or conflict 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How do you and your spouse or partner communicate and support each other in times of stress? What happens when you and your spouse or partner disagree?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Needs that might be identified by a different family member (not all family members may identify the same needs) Actions that a parent may need to take when additional needs are identified 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Are other family members experiencing stress or concern? Has anyone in your family expressed concern about drug/alcohol abuse, domestic violence, or mental health issues? What steps have you taken to address those concerns?
<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, religious or spiritual practices) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> When you are under stress, what is most helpful? Where in the community can you find help?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The parent’s ability to set and work toward personal goals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What are your dreams (long-term goals) for yourself and your family? What are your goals for your family or children in the next week (or month)? What steps might you take toward those goals in the next week (or month)?

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Social Connections

Parents with a 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 such as transportation or occasional child care. A parent's supportive relationships also model positive social interactions for children, while giving children access to other supportive adults. On the other hand, research has shown that parents who are isolated and have few social connections are at higher risk for child abuse and neglect.

Being new to a community, recently divorced, or a first-time parent makes a support network even more important. It may require extra effort for these families to build the new relationships they need. 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 neighborhoods or communities 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.

- Connect parents with organizations and resources outside the program, such as churches or other classes that fit their interest.
- Create special outreach activities for fathers, grandparents, and other extended family members.
- Offer parents who seem interested specific suggestions, information, or services to help them make social connections.
- Offer resources to help parents overcome transportation, child care, and other barriers to participating in social activities.



How Programs Can Help

- Set aside a welcoming space for parents to mingle and talk. Provide coffee, snacks, or other “perks.”
- Use regular potluck dinners with parents and children to reach out to new parents and foster new friendships.
- Sponsor sports and outdoor activities for parents, including fathers.
- Provide classes and workshops on parenting, cooking, health, and other topics of interest.

How Workers Can Help

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.

Encourage parents to express goals regarding social connections in their own terms, such as, "I have friends and know at least one person who supports my parenting."

In order to explore ...	Ask the parent ...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 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?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The parent's social skills 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?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 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)?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The parent's potential strengths and challenges in making social connections (including concerns such as parent's language, comfort level in groups, access to babysitting and transportation, recent arrival in the community) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 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?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Needs that might be met with better social connections (for instance, respite care, a sympathetic listener, a role model) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 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 _____?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The parent's interest in starting or facilitating a community group 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What would it take to get a group of parents together to _____?

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Concrete Supports for Parents

Families whose basic needs (for food, clothing, housing, and transportation) are met have more time and energy to devote to their children's safety and well-being. When parents do not have steady financial resources, lack health insurance, or face a family crisis (such as a natural disaster or the incarceration of a parent), their ability to support their children's healthy development may be at risk. Some families also may need assistance connecting to social service supports such as alcohol and drug treatment, domestic violence counseling, or public benefits.

Partnering with parents to identify and access resources in the community may help prevent the stress that sometimes precipitates child maltreatment. Offering concrete supports also may help prevent the unintended neglect that sometimes occurs when parents are unable to provide for their children.

- Train staff to listen for family stress and initiate positive conversations about family needs.
- Let parents know about all available community resources, so they may select what is most appropriate for their needs.

When needed services do not exist in your community, work with parent-advocates and community leaders to help establish them. Parents who go public with their need usually find that they are not alone. The fact that a parent is willing to publicize a 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.

How Programs Can Help

- Connect parents to economic resources such as job training and social services.
- Serve as an access point for health care, child care subsidies, and other benefits.
- Provide for immediate needs through a closet with extra winter coats and a direct connection to a food pantry; facilitate help from other parents when appropriate.
- Help families access crisis services such as a battered women's shelter, mental health services, or substance abuse counseling by helping families make initial calls and appointments, assisting with transportation, and providing the name of a contact person in addition to a phone number.
- Link parents with service providers who speak their language or share a similar background, when available.

How Workers Can Help

Most parents are unlikely to use or identify with the words “concrete supports.” Instead, they might express a goal such as, “My family can access services when we need them.”

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 to make referrals to the essential services, supports, and resources that parents say they need.

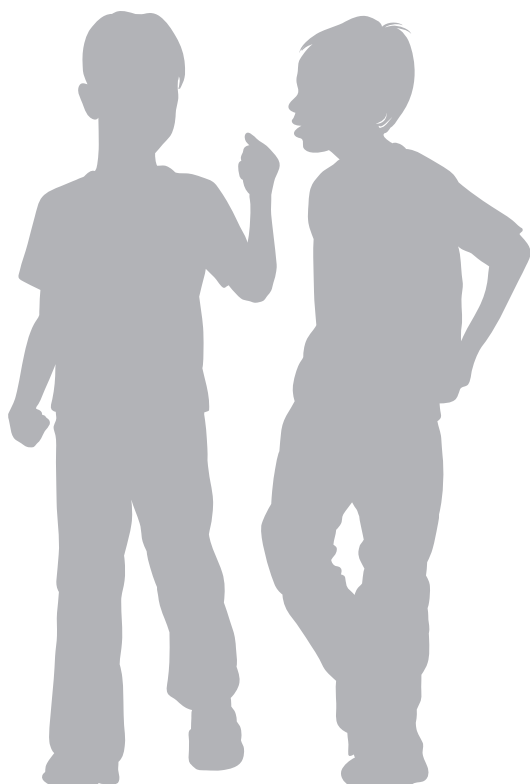
In order to explore ...	Ask the parent ...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The parent’s view of the most immediate need 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What do you need to (stay in your house, keep your job, pay your heating bill)?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Steps the parent has taken 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?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 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?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Other services and supports that would help the family 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Have you thought about _____ (local program that provides housing or food)? Did you know that _____ provides (free homework help, meals on weekends, low-cost child care)?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 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?

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Social and Emotional Competence of Children

Children's emerging ability to interact positively with others, self-regulate their behavior, and effectively communicate their feelings has a positive impact on their relationships with their family, other adults, and peers. Parents and caregivers grow more responsive to children's needs—and less likely to feel stressed or frustrated—as children learn to tell parents what they need and how parental actions make them feel, rather than “acting out” difficult feelings.

On the other hand, children's challenging behaviors or delays in social emotional development create extra stress for families. Parenting is more challenging when children do not or cannot respond positively to their parents' nurturing and affection. These children may be at greater risk for abuse. Identifying and working with children early to keep their development on track helps keep them safe and helps their parents facilitate their healthy development.



How Programs Can Help

- Use both structured curriculum and informal interaction to teach children to share, be respectful of others, and express themselves through language.
- Include discussions about the importance of feelings in programming for children and parents.
- Create and post a chart that describes which social and emotional skills children typically do and do not possess at different ages.
- Provide art programs that allow children to express themselves in ways other than words.
- Foster ongoing engagement and communication with parents about their children's social and emotional development and the actions the program is taking to facilitate it. Children often take home what they are learning at school.
- Encourage and provide opportunities for parents to share resources with each other and exchange ideas about how they promote their children's social and emotional development.
- Take timely action when there is a concern—this might include asking another experienced teacher or staff member to help observe a child, talking with the parent, or bringing in a consultant.

How Workers Can Help

As a partner with parents, your role may simply be to explore how parents perceive their children's social and emotional development and how that is affecting the parent-child relationship.

Not all parents will relate to the terms “social and emotional competence.” They may choose to communicate its importance in terms of the desired outcomes: “My children feel loved, believe they matter, and can get along with others.”

In order to explore ...	Ask the parent ...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How the parent provides a safe and stable home and family environment that supports healthy social and emotional development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How many people provide care for your baby or toddler? How often do these people change? What routines do you keep in caring for your young child? All families experience conflict from time to time. What happens when there is conflict in your house? How do you keep your child or teen safe at home? In your neighborhood or community?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Whether the parent identifies any delays in social and emotional development Where the parent might seek help for any concerns 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How does your child's ability to manage emotions and get along with others compare to other children his or her age? Do you have any concerns about your child's social/emotional skills? Who might be able to answer your questions about your child's social and emotional development?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How the parent responds to emotional needs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How do you know when your child or teen is happy? Sad? Lonely? Hurt? How do you comfort your child? How do you talk to your child about feelings?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How the parent understands the child's social and emotional competence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How does your child show affection toward you and other family members? How does your child get along with peers? How does your child handle feelings such as frustration or anger? How quickly is he or she able to calm down? What kinds of things help your child calm down when he or she is upset?

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