

A Walk Upstream

"The woman called for help. A crowd of adults gathered at the shore and began to help the woman."

Building on strengths: Enhancing protective factors for children and families

Researchers, practitioners, and parents can

identify and reduce the risk of child abuse and neglect. "protective" factors can mitigate those effects and provide benefits, resulting in greater resilience for parents and children. Successful family support activities and child abuse prevention programs are designed to promote these protective factors.

A body of research has identified these protective factors correlated with reductions in child abuse and neglect:

- Parental resilience
- Nurturing and attachment
- Social connections
- Knowledge of parenting and child development
- Effective problem solving and communication skills
- Concrete support in times of need
- Social and emotional competence of children
- Healthy marriages

Family support strategies for building on strengths

Family support and child abuse prevention programs can promote these protective factors by using the following effective strategies:

- Facilitate friendships and mutual support. Offer opportunities for parents in the neighborhood to get to know each other, develop mutual support systems and take leadership roles. Strategies may include sports teams, potlucks, classes, advisory groups, board leadership and volunteer opportunities.
- Strengthen parenting. Develop ways for parents to get support on parenting issues when they need it. Possibilities include classes, support groups, home visits, tip sheets in pediatricians' offices and resource libraries.
- Respond to family crises. Offer extra support to families when they need it, as in times of illness, job loss, housing problems and other stresses.
- Link families to services and opportunities. Provide referrals for job training, education, health care, mental health and other essential services in the community.
- Value and support parents. The relationship between parents and staff is essential to a program's ability to connect with parents. The support, training and supervision of staff are essential to help them do this effectively.
- Facilitate children's social and emotional development. Some programs use curriculums that specifically focus on helping children articulate their feelings and get along with others. When children bring home what they learn in the classroom, parents benefit as well.
- Observe and respond to early warning signs of child abuse or neglect. Train staff to observe children carefully and respond at the first sign of difficulty. Early intervention can help ensure children are safe and parents get the support and services they need.

Adapted from Doris Duke Charitable Foundation and Center for the Study of Social Policy, Strengthening families through early care and education.

Safe Children and Healthy Families are a Shared Responsibility
<http://nccanch.acf.hhs.gov/topics/prevention/index.cfm>

