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**FAMILY
ENGAGEMENT**

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WHAT IS IT AND WHAT
DOES IT LOOK LIKE?

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FAMILIES EXPERIENCING
HOMELESSNESS

18 BRAIN-BUILDING
MOMENTS ARE
EVERYWHERE



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Cailin O'Connor is a Senior Associate at the Center for the Study of Social Policy, where she works to promote better outcomes for young children and their families, with a focus on promoting the protective factors that children, families, and communities need to thrive. She coordinates the Strengthening Families National Network of 35 states using CSSP's Strengthening Families Protective Factors Framework, and supports communities in their work to build innovative early childhood systems through the Early Childhood Learning and Innovation Network for Communities (Early Childhood-LINC). With roots in the field of family support and child abuse and neglect prevention, Cailin's work has addressed a wide range of issues, including adverse childhood experiences, cross-systems coordination, effective prevention strategies, and evidence-informed program improvement. She is a graduate of Macalester College, and holds a master's degree in Human Development and Family Studies and a graduate certificate in Prevention and Intervention Science from the University of Wisconsin-Madison.



Supporting Families in Stressful Times with a Protective Factors Approach

The Strengthening Families Protective Factors Framework offers strategies that might be helpful to a parent or family under stress. The protective factors identified in the framework are characteristics that all families need in order to promote optimal development of their children and reduce the likelihood of child abuse and neglect. These protective factors become even more critical when a family is going through a divorce, experiencing serious illness or death of a family member, having legal or financial trouble, living in fear of deportation of family members, or going through another stressful time.

All families need support at different times in their lives to build and reinforce these protective factors. Depending on the circumstances for any given family going through a hard time, there are things you can do to help them build one or more of their protective factors to help them weather the storm.

Parental Resilience



Managing stress and functioning well when faced with challenges, adversity and trauma:

If you have a trusting relationship with a parent who is going through a difficult time, and they are open to conversation, some questions you might want to ask are:

- What are some strategies you've used to get through difficult times in your life? (Prompt them to remember their own strengths and that hard times come and go – and build their confidence that they can get through this.)
- What can you do to take care of yourself this week? (You might need to remind them that it doesn't have to take a lot of time or any money, but can make a big difference. For example, exercise, time in nature, rest, and talking with a friend all can be restorative.)
- What are you looking forward to once you get through this challenging time? (Help them see the light at the end of the tunnel and cultivate hope.)

Point out the positive things they are doing as a parent, the positive decisions you observe them making, and the love you see between the parent and child.

Social Connections



Positive relationships that provide emotional, informational, instrumental, and spiritual support.

- Offer to help a parent connect with another parent in the program who could pick their child up on certain days, or have the child over for a playdate on the weekend, giving the parent needed time to deal with a crisis or just some time to herself.
- With permission from the family, arrange a meal train to give the other families in the program a way to help the family under stress.

Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development



Understanding child development and parenting strategies that support physical, cognitive, language, social, and emotional development:

- Help parents to understand that their children's behavior might regress to an earlier developmental stage in response to stress, and give them some tips to manage behavioral challenges.
- Talk with parents about how they can buffer their children from the stress the family is experiencing, such as maintaining routines around bedtimes and mealtimes, and reducing the children's exposure to disagreements or tense discussions between adults.
- For older children, encourage parents to talk calmly with them about the stress the family is going through, to reassure them that family problems are not their fault, and to answer any questions they have.

Concrete Support in Times of Need



Access to concrete support and services that address a family's needs and help minimize stress caused by challenges:

- If a family is in need of support from another service provider (such as mental health or substance abuse counseling, housing assistance, or a food pantry), make a "warm hand-off" to the other provider. This means not just giving the parent information and hoping they will follow through, but making a phone call with them, handing them off to someone by name in the other organization when possible, or even going with them to access a service for the first time.

Social and Emotional Competence of Children



Family and child interactions that help children develop the ability to communicate clearly, recognize and regulate their emotions, and establish and maintain relationships:

- Maintain the child's routines within your program as much as possible.
- Remember that consistent, loving responses are more important than ever when children and their families are going through stressful times.
- When parents are receptive to it, model productive ways to respond to children's challenging behaviors, such as separation anxiety at drop-off or refusal to put on a coat when it's time to leave. ■