

CONNECTING THE DOTS: *CSSP's Strengthening Families and Youth Thrive Frameworks & ACYF's Literature Review on Protective Factors for In-Risk Children*

- The Administration on Children, Youth and Families (ACYF) recently completed a review of academic literature on protective factors for the five vulnerable populations it serves:
 - youth in or transitioning out of foster care
 - children/youth exposed to domestic violence
 - victims of child abuse and neglect
 - pregnant and parenting youth
 - runaway and homeless youth

The goal of this [literature review](#) was to better understand the evidence that supports the social and emotional well-being for these children and youth and, in turn, help establish the empirical foundation for understanding the overall importance of protective factors.

- Over the years, ACYF has focused on using protective factor frameworks to focus on and encourage prevention of abuse and neglect [namely the Center for the Study of Social Policy's Strengthening Families (families of children ages 0-5) and, more recently, Youth Thrive (youth ages 11-26)].
- The new literature review focuses specifically on ACYF's **in-risk** population and helps develop stronger evidence for why protective factors are critical for these children and youth.
- **Relationship to Strengthening Families:** A key finding in the ACYF literature review is the importance of self-regulation and relational skills for young children. The definitions and studies used to support this finding clearly link to the Strengthening Families focus on the social and emotional competence of young children. Parental competence is also emphasized. A more detailed examination of the ACYF literature review shows that each of the Strengthening Families protective factors is represented in the bundle of studies that were used to determine the importance of parental competence.
- **Relationship to Youth Thrive:** The ACYF literature review assessed many studies on adolescents which, taken together, show strong or moderate evidence for four of the five Youth Thrive protective factors: youth resilience, social connections, concrete support in times of need and cognitive and social-emotional competence in youth.
- Because the ACYF literature review focused on a social-ecological model, it highlights community and societal protective factors such as economic opportunities, positive school environments and positive community environments. In CSSP's Protective and Promotive Factors Framework, positive schools and community environments are considered part of the larger focus on social connections but not specifically identified as community level protective factors.
- **The bottom line:** there is striking alignment between the research findings from the ACYF literature review and the research that guides Strengthening Families and Youth Thrive, suggesting that the needs of the ACYF child and youth in-risk populations are not so different from those of all children and youth.

CSSP thanks our partners at ACYF and the Developmental Services Group for providing early copies of the reports for review and for their input and feedback on this document and the analyses that inform it.

SUMMARIZING THE ALIGNMENT IN RESEARCH FINDINGS

Strengthening Families Protective Factor	ACYF Findings
Parental Resilience	Lack of maternal depression, low maternal stress, maternal trust of others and positive parenting style all were connected with better child outcomes. ACYF studies also demonstrated that interventions focused on parental self-control, parental coping and ability of the parent to manage stress had positive impacts.
Social Connections	Greater social support was associated with positive outcomes including reduced child abuse potential, nurturing behavior, maternal attachment, higher birth weight and reduction of stress. Two exceptions to note: one study showed negative impacts when support was not reciprocal and another showed that teen mothers reporting negative childhood family contexts showed greater parental resilience when they had less contact with their own mothers or families of origin. This is consistent with Strengthening Families emphasis that the quality of social supports is important and that some social connections can have a negative impact.
Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development	Interventions designed to enhance parenting knowledge or skills demonstrated a range of impacts, including: increased cognitive competency of children; positive impact on parenting attitudes and beliefs; increased maternal responsiveness; reduced hospitalization and enhanced immunization for infants; reductions in child abuse potential scores; reductions in parental distress.
Concrete Support in Times of Need	There were few studies in this area, but those that were lifted up the impact of interventions that provided concrete supports to parents.
Social and Emotional Competence of Children	A review of more than 25 studies showed strong or moderate evidence in this area. Studies documented the positive impact of ego-resilience and ego-control, self-efficacy, adaptive functioning skills, self-regulation, emotional regulation and emotional awareness. Several showed the positive impacts of parental attributes that help nurture children's social-emotional development such as emotional support, maternal warmth, attachment bonds between child and parent and maternal responsiveness. Several interventions aimed at building the child's social-emotional skills or the parent's ability to nurture their child's social-emotional development were shown to have significant impact on children's well-being.
Youth Thrive Protective Factor	ACYF Findings
Youth Resilience	Variables associated with lower levels of stress, adolescent problem behaviors and psychopathology include: hopefulness, spirituality, positive view of self, overall positive attitude, interpersonal trust, sense of empowerment, self-efficacy, motivation, sense of purpose, positive future orientation and taking responsibility for oneself.
Social Connections	The following variables were identified as protective against alcohol use, tobacco use, drug use, sexual activity, antisocial behavior, suicide, purging and internalizing symptomatology and for promoting school success and helping others: perceived parental warmth/care, support from other trusted adults, positive and supportive peer group, parental and peer disapproval of antisocial behavior, faith, attendance at religious services, school engagement, participation in extracurricular activities and positive school climate.
Concrete Support in Times of Need	The ACYF studies focused on the importance of: having someone to turn to for guidance and encouragement; therapeutic mental health services; anger and stress management training; personal, social, academic, career, financial counseling and support services/programs that foster a sense of safety, promote positive experiences with service providers and focus on communication and interpersonal skills, relaxation training, cognitive coping strategies, problem-solving skills, economic self-sufficiency skills and life skills.
Cognitive and Social-Emotional Competence in Youth	ACYF studies identified several variables associated with low risk of mental health problems, delinquency, risky sexual behavior and with positive outcomes such as academic achievement, resistance to negative peer pressure and interpersonal skills and social competence. These variables included: perceived self-efficacy, future orientation, spirituality, religious beliefs, personal goals, self-esteem, thinking about consequences of one's behavior, learning to love oneself and personal strengths.