Center for the Study of Social Policy

SOCIAL CONNECTIONS

PROTECTIVE & PROMOTIVE FACTORS

In their search for identity, purpose and direction, youth need to feel connected to someone or something in order to thrive. Youth need people, inside and outside of their family, who care about them; who can be non-judgmental listeners; who they can turn to for well-informed guidance and advice; who they can call on for help in solving problems; who encourage them and promote high expectations; and who set developmentally appropriate limits, rules and monitoring.

Youth also need to be constructively engaged in social institutions—like schools, religious communities and recreational facilities—that are safe, stable and equitable. Social institutions provide support for youths' intellectual, social, emotional, moral and physical development, and provide opportunities to participate in organized activities like academic enrichment, sports, social clubs, support groups, volunteering and the labor force. Social institutions also offer opportunities for youth to "give back" to their community.

Social connections—people and institutions—help youth increase their knowledge and develop their skills, have a sense of belonging and find meaning in their lives. Thus, the availability and quality of social connections are important considerations in the lives of all youth because they are anchoring forces that provide:

- *emotional support* (e.g., affirming good problem-solving skills or being empathic)
- *informational support* (e.g., providing guidance about changes from puberty, applying to college or entering the workforce)
- *instrumental support* (e.g., providing transportation or financial assistance)
- *spiritual support* (e.g., providing affirmation, hope and encouragement)

When youth have a **sense of connectedness** to peers and adults they feel loved, wanted and valued; they have people who care about them as individuals *now* and who care what happens to them in the *future*; they feel secure and confident that they can share the joy, pain and uncertainties that come with being an adolescent; and they tend to seek timely assistance and resources from people they have learned to count on when faced with challenges.

Close peer relationships are extremely important for healthy development during adolescence. The adolescent peer group provides a context for youth to achieve two essential, related tasks: develop and express **independence** and develop their own **identity** differentiated from their family. Identity includes a youth's self-concept (i.e., beliefs about oneself), self-esteem (i.e., positive or negative feelings about oneself) and a sense of who one is (including gender, race, culture and socioeconomic status). A sense of independence includes:

- **emotional autonomy** - relinquishing primary dependence on parents and forging a more mature relationship with parents or other trusted adults
- **cognitive autonomy** - developing one's own values, opinions and beliefs
- **behavioral autonomy** - making and being responsible for personal decisions

Conversely, research shows a lack of close peer relationships is associated with a range of poor outcomes in adolescence and adulthood such as delinquency, poor academic performance, poor social skills and mental health problems. Also, in contrast to the commonly held belief that parents' influence is overshadowed by the adolescent peer group, **numerous research studies affirm the meaningful role that parents and other caring adults continue to play in the lives of young people; find that youth who feel close and attached to at least one caring adult are psychologically healthier than peers who feel detached; and demonstrate that being connected to a trusted adult serves as a buffer against many types of health risks including depression, early sexual activity, violence and alcohol and marijuana use.**

Studies have also found that in order for youth to have a sense of connectedness to a social institution, they must perceive the social institution as safe and believe that at least one adult associated with the institution is fair, cares about them both as a member of a group (e.g., student/team player/band member/ congregant) *and* as an individual, and wants them to succeed. Researchers found similar buffering effects from being connected to a social institution as being connected to other people. For example, the presence of and participation in an active, school-sanctioned support group was found to be correlated with lower rates of depression and suicide attempts in LGBT youth. Conversely, when young people feel isolated, socially excluded or disconnected from social institutions, they may experience a range of negative reactions from lack of self-confidence to increased likelihood of suicidal thoughts.

It may seem that increasing the number of people who could provide constructive social support to youth would be the "cure" for social isolation and feelings of disconnectedness. Providing opportunities for youth to create sustainable, positive social connections is necessary but alone is not sufficient. Youth can feel lonely and isolated even when surrounded by others if relationships lack emotional depth and genuine acceptance. What is essential is that these opportunities must support a sense of connectedness between the youth and at least one other person. New relationships should engender emotional, informational, instrumental or spiritual support so that meaningful discourse and healthy development may occur in a context of mutual trust and respect.

YOUTHRIVE

PROTECTIVE & PROMOTIVE FACTORS FOR HEALTHY DEVELOPMENT AND WELL-BEING

Center for the Study of Social Policy

CSSP'S PROTECTIVE AND PROMOTIVE FACTORS

The Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) works to create new ideas and promote public policies that produce equal opportunities and better futures for all children and families, especially those most often left behind. The foundation of all of CSSP's work is a child, family and community well-being framework that includes a focus on protective and promotive factors. Using an ecological perspective:

- **protective factors** are conditions or attributes of individuals, families, communities or the larger society that **mitigate or eliminate risk**
- **promotive factors** are conditions or attributes of individuals, families, communities or the larger society that **actively enhance well-being**

Taken together, protective and promotive factors increase the probability of positive, adaptive and healthy outcomes, even in the face of risk and adversity.

The **Strengthening Families™ and Youth Thrive™ frameworks** exemplify CSSP's commitment to identify, communicate and apply research-informed ideas that contribute to the healthy development and well-being of children, youth and families. As numerous studies affirm the importance of early childhood experiences in influencing adolescent and adult behavior, these frameworks provide a view of two interrelated phases of the lifespan developmental continuum: Strengthening Families focuses on families of young children (0-5 years old) and Youth Thrive on youth ages 11-26.

The Strengthening Families Protective Factors	The Youth Thrive Protective and Promotive Factors
• Parental Resilience	• Youth Resilience
• Social Connections	• Social Connections
• Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development	• Knowledge of Adolescent Development
• Concrete Support in Times of Need	• Concrete Support in Times of Need
• Social-Emotional Competence of Children	• Cognitive and Social-Emotional Competence in Youth

Parents, system administrators, program developers, service providers and policymakers can each benefit from learning about and using the Strengthening Families and Youth Thrive frameworks in their efforts to ensure that children, youth and families are on a path that leads to healthy development and well-being.