

# SOCIAL CONNECTIONS

PROTECTIVE & PROMOTIVE FACTORS

People need people. Parents need people who care about them and their children, who can be good listeners, who they can turn to for well-informed advice and who they can call on for help in solving problems. Thus, the availability and quality of social connections are important considerations in the lives of parents. **Parents' constructive and supportive social connections—that is, relationships with family members, friends, neighbors, co-workers, community members and service providers—are valuable resources who provide:**

- *emotional support* (e.g., affirming parenting skills or being empathic and non-judgmental)
- *informational support* (e.g., providing parenting guidance or recommending a pediatric dentist)
- *instrumental support* (e.g., providing transportation, financial assistance or links to jobs)
- *spiritual support* (e.g., providing hope and encouragement)

When parents have a sense of connectedness they believe they have people who care about them as individuals and as parents; they feel secure and confident that they have others with whom they can share the joy, pain and uncertainties that come with the parenting role; they seek timely assistance from people they have learned to count on when faced with challenges; and they feel empowered to “give back” through satisfying, mutually beneficial relationships. **Several research studies have demonstrated that—for both mothers and fathers—high levels of emotional, informational, instrumental or spiritual support is associated with positive parental mood; positive perceptions of and responsiveness to one's children; parental satisfaction, well-being and sense of competence; and lower levels of anger, anxiety and depression.**

Conversely, inadequate, conflicting or dissatisfying social connections can be the source of parental stress, rather than a buffer. For example, maternal and paternal grandparents may be very willing sources of informational and instrumental support to new parents, but their advice and manner of caregiving may be at odds

with the new parents' beliefs and preferences. At the extreme end of the continuum of poor social connections are social isolation (i.e., the lack of available and quality relationships) and loneliness (i.e., feelings of disconnectedness from others). Social isolation is a risk factor consistently associated with disengaged parenting, maternal depression and increased likelihood of child maltreatment. Similarly, loneliness may be a major stressor that inhibits parents' ability to provide consistent, nurturing, responsive care to their children.

It may seem that increasing the number of people who could provide constructive social support to parents would be the “cure” for social isolation and loneliness. Providing opportunities for parents to create and strengthen sustainable, positive social connections is necessary but alone is not sufficient. Parents can feel lonely and isolated even when surrounded by others if relationships lack emotional depth and genuine acceptance. Thus, parents need opportunities to forge positive social connections with at least one other person that engender emotional, informational, instrumental or spiritual support so that meaningful interactions may occur in a context of mutual trust and respect.

Constructive and supportive social connections help buffer parents from stressors and support nurturing parenting behaviors that promote secure attachments in young children. Therefore, parents' high quality social connections are beneficial to both the adults and the children.

# 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
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parental Resilience</li> <li>• Social Connections</li> <li>• Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development</li> <li>• Concrete Support in Times of Need</li> <li>• Social-Emotional Competence of Children</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Youth Resilience</li> <li>• Social Connections</li> <li>• Knowledge of Adolescent Development</li> <li>• Concrete Support in Times of Need</li> <li>• Cognitive and Social-Emotional Competence in Youth</li> </ul>

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.