



Beyond Services: Why Early Childhood Advocates Should Work to Make Communities Safe

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Center
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The Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) works to secure equal opportunities and better futures for all children and families, especially those most often left behind. Underlying all of the work is a vision of a child, family and community well-being and a commitment to equity, which serve as a unifying framework for the many policy, systems reform and community change activities in which CSSP engages.

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The Role of Neighborhoods in Early Childhood Development

Across the nation early childhood advocates are working hard to improve the health, education and well-being of our youngest children. They are focused on increasing access to and affordability of high quality services, engaging parents in all aspects of their child's development and building families' protective factors while also reducing risk factors such as economic stress. When unsafe situations threaten children's overall health and well-being, early childhood advocates seek to change negative life circumstances for children and their families and help them heal and grow. There is a growing interest among cities and counties across the country to anchor opportunities, interventions and services in communities through place-based initiatives. As they build local partnerships with residents and providers, there is shared recognition of how crucial it is that the communities where children and their families live are safe from fear and violence. There is significant opportunity for advocates to broaden their reach and impact to improve outcomes for children and families by working locally to ensure safe, thriving communities.

This brief provides information for early childhood advocates to use in addressing community safety as part of a comprehensive early childhood agenda. It provides information about how safe communities can support healthy child development, how community violence can create roadblocks to healthy development and beginning steps advocates can take to address the long-term, cross-sector issues that impact families. The brief also acknowledges that there are historical and systemic disparities within communities that impact community conditions and the opportunities that exist for families and children.

This brief incorporates research from the Cradle to Community fact sheet [*The imperative of safety: How community safety supports optimal early childhood development*](#). This fact sheet highlights the research on the impact of violence and safety on early childhood development, underscoring the importance of taking action to promote community safety in support of optimal early child development.

Here's why early childhood advocates should work to make communities safe: High-quality services and supports are crucial, but they can only do part of the job to improve outcomes for young children and their families, particularly when families live in unsafe neighborhoods with inequitable access to even basic resources such as transportation, quality schools, affordable and safe housing and healthy food outlets. The community surrounding young children and their families matters in multiple ways and one key factor is safety.

As defined in this brief, community safety incorporates not only an environment free of violent crime, but the social, cultural, economic and physical factors that allow families to feel safe and thrive. A growing body of science has helped us better understand early brain development, learning and behavior in childhood, and the relationship between early childhood environments and experiences and later physical and emotional health into adulthood. Research on the interactive nature of the environment and human development has shown how experiences in early childhood – both positive/protective and negative/risk factors – can influence physical and mental health outcomes for young people and adults. Children thrive when they are surrounded by a network of responsive, nurturing relationships of their parents, extended family, neighbors and childcare providers. In communities, families need opportunities for children to play and learn, jobs, health care, safe and stable housing, environments free of environmental hazards, and access to critical resources such as grocery stores which provide fresh, healthy food. Nurturing environments and opportunities for families and caregivers also support healthy development for young children.

To truly improve outcomes for all young children, early childhood advocates must take into account significant differences across the population in exposure to community violence and to other factors that make communities unsafe. Both historic and current policies, as well as other systemic forces, have resulted in uneven and inequitable investments in public infrastructure, school systems and services, as well as reduced private investment in the form of banking, home loans and even grocery stores, that have left many communities – particularly those with high numbers of residents of color – without the resources needed to ensure safe, supportive environments. This disinvestment has led to areas of concentrated poverty and related problems, such as high unemployment rates, health disparities, inadequate early care and education and struggling schools. Urban communities of color and communities with concentrated poverty are disproportionately impacted by community violence.¹ The imbalance in opportunity is closely connected with the disproportionate exposure to community violence for children and families of color – as crime has emerged as a symptom of disinvestment in some neighborhoods – and must be addressed to ensure that all children and families live in supportive communities where they can thrive.

¹KDavid-Ferdon, C., Vivolo-Kantor, A. M., Dahlberg, L. L., Marshall, K. J., Rainford, N. & Hall, J. E. (2016). A Comprehensive Technical Package for the Prevention of Youth Violence and Associated Risk Behaviors. Atlanta, GA: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Safety and Positive Early Child Development

Safety in a community directly and indirectly impacts the essential opportunities, systems and environments young children and their families require to promote their health and overall well-being.

Safe communities help children thrive

Safe public places to play are neighborhood or community-based resources that contribute to children's physical health, development of gross motor skills and socialization with peers.² Children receive both mental and physical health benefits from unstructured outdoor activities, but need safe and easily accessible outdoor areas to fully benefit.^{3,4} A sense of safety in communities encourages outdoor play and physical activity for children, and opportunities for their families and caregivers to socialize. This is important for developing social skills as well as preventing obesity and other health problems. Conversely, families' fears for their children's safety can keep children and families from having these opportunities.^{5,6} In neighborhoods of concentrated disadvantage, a lack of access to safe public places to play can contribute to disparate health and other developmental outcomes.

Inviting public spaces promote community connections and social cohesion

In addition to supportive institutions in the community like libraries, parks and recreational spaces, informal relationships that promote social networks and community cohesion positively impact young children and their families. The physical or built environment can be made more inviting and promote social gatherings and mutual support among residents, contributing to community safety. It's particularly important to consider how public spaces can be made inviting and accessible to families who may otherwise be marginalized within the community, including families with members who are immigrants and refugees, people with disabilities and people who identify as LGBTQ.

Community safety positively influences families' financial stability and other capabilities to support young children's healthy development⁷

A safe community – particularly one without community violence – encourages formation of businesses, other public and private investments, and community-based resources that may provide families with better jobs and opportunities for economic stability and mobility. Higher rates of gun violence in communities have been associated with the opening of fewer retail and service businesses and reduced job creation in that community.⁸ Limited access to jobs and education for parents that allow them to provide for their families can in turn impact children's development. In addition to meeting a child's physical needs, families play a crucial role in the continued development of their children's brain architecture, which requires ongoing nurturance, stimulation and interaction. For parents, having their own needs met and greatly reducing their stressors contributes to their ability to support a child's development and reduce children's exposure to stress. These include basic needs, such as nutritious food, safe and affordable housing, and access to transportation and good employment opportunities (which provide the means to meet material needs). When the needs of parents and caregivers are met, they are better able to meet the needs of their children.⁹

Access to quality services plays a crucial role in healthy physical, mental and social-emotional development. Healthcare for parents, expectant parents and children, and quality, affordable early childcare and education are foundational resources that allow parents to shape safe, nurturing environments for their children and access jobs and education. Education, training and workforce development programs promote new opportunity and economic mobility for parents, and access to parenting education can help parents and caregivers engage in more positive and consistent parenting of their children.

Each of these essential elements may be absent in a community that is not considered safe. When a neighborhood or community does not offer necessary opportunities and resources and when neighborhood crime and violence intrude, the capabilities of parents and caregivers to respond, protect and buffer their children are diminished; high levels of stress and vicarious trauma may

² Christian H, Zubrick SR, Foster S, et al. The influence of the neighborhood physical environment on early child health and development: A review and call for research. *Health Place*. 2015;33:25-36.

³ McCurdy, Leyla E., Winterbottom, K., Mehta, S., Roberts, J. Using nature and outdoor activity to improve children's health. *Current Problems in Pediatric and Adolescent Health Care*. 2010;40:5, 102 – 117.

⁴ Christian H, Zubrick SR, Foster S, et al. The influence of the neighborhood physical environment on early child health and development: A review and call for research. *Health Place*. 2015;33:25-36.

⁵ Brown B, Weitzman M, Bzostek S, et al. Early child development in social context: A chartbook. New York, NY: The Commonwealth Fund; 2004. http://www.commonwealthfund.org/usr_doc/ChildDevChartbk.pdf. Accessed January 13, 2016.

⁶ Evans G, Ferguson K. Built environment and mental health. In: Jerome ON, ed. *Encyclopedia of Environmental Health*. Burlington, Vt: Elsevier; 2011:446-449.

⁷ Maggi S, Irwin LJ, Siddiqi A, Hertzman C. The social determinants of early child development: an overview. *J Paediatr Child Health*. 2010;46(11):627-35.

⁸ Irvin-Erickson, Y., Lynch, M., Gurvis, A., Mohr, E., and Bai, B. (2017, June). *Gun Violence Affects the Economic Health of Communities*. Washington DC: The Urban Institute.

⁹ Harper Browne, C. (2014, September). *The Strengthening Families Approach and Protective Factors Framework: Branching out and reaching deeper*. Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Social Policy.

emerge, and both prenatal and early childhood experiences can be negatively impacted.^{10, 11} Because early childhood is such a critical developmental stage and early experiences can have enduring effects, disparate outcomes can emerge among children who are disproportionately exposed to neighborhood crime and violence. Therefore, it's essential to ensure that parents have access to the resources and opportunities they need to create safe and supportive environments for their children.

Community violence directly impacts children and families

An unsafe neighborhood, whether by perception or reality, can be a stressful and damaging environmental influence on families with young children. Fear of bodily harm, witnessing or experiencing violence - including hearing gunshots or other forms of violence - can elicit excessive or prolonged activation of stress response systems in the body and brain. This stress, which differs from normal, everyday stress, can reach toxic levels and may have damaging effects on learning, behavior and health across the lifespan.¹² For expectant parents and parents of young children, coping with community violence can challenge their ability to provide for their own and their children's basic and developmental needs, negatively impacting health and well-being.¹³ There are a number of studies that illustrate specific negative results. Both the behaviors of preschoolers and their performance on assessments have been found to be negatively affected by homicide in the young child's neighborhood, at least in the short-term.¹⁴ Stable and supportive caregivers can buffer and protect children from the effects of traumatic stress of community violence.^{15, 16}

Take Action to Promote Safe Communities

A commitment to the well-being of young children and their families demands bringing attention and powerful actions to the issue of community safety on local, state and national levels, in both policy and practice. Along with families and other community members, early childhood advocates need to be part of a larger community helping to fully support positive early childhood development and equitable access to opportunity for children facing the greatest barriers on multiple levels. They can expand the

reach of their efforts by joining in with cross-sector partners to achieve safety and increase access to opportunities. Early childhood advocates can bring a welcomed voice and perspective to community tables, bringing new insights to the problem and solutions to promote community safety.

Starting points for conversation and action

- Engage in dialogue with parents and community members – the people most affected – about their experiences, priorities and ideas and partner with them as key decision makers from the beginning.
- Identify the root causes and structural factors that influence outcomes for children, families and neighborhoods by considering how the environment and the impact of historical and present discriminatory policies and practices impact behavior, experiences and access to opportunities.
- Recognize the impact that structural and institutional oppression – including racism – have had on communities and place equity at the center of strategies and solutions.
- Leverage existing services to integrate strategies to prevent violence and address trauma.
- Provide community members with information and education about the role of community safety in early childhood development.
- Partner with existing coalitions and networks that are addressing community violence or working to improve community conditions to bring an early childhood development perspective to those efforts.
- Support practices, policies and legislation that strengthen communities and promote equitable access to services, supports and opportunities for children and families.
- Learn about steps other communities are taking as reported in a companion brief from CSSP: Early Childhood Development and Community Safety: Mobilizing Communities for Action.

¹⁰ Middlebrooks JS, Audage NC. The effects of childhood stress on health across the lifespan. Atlanta, GA: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control; 2008.

¹¹ National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2010). Persistent Fear and Anxiety Can Affect Young Children's Learning and Development: Working Paper No. 9. Retrieved from www.developingchild.harvard.edu

¹² Harper Browne, C. (2014, September). The Strengthening Families Approach and Protective Factors Framework: Branching out and reaching deeper. Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Social Policy.

¹³ Kenney, M.K. Child, family, and neighborhood associations with parents and peer interactive place during early childhood. *Journal of Maternal Child Health*. 2012 Apr;16 Suppl 1:S88-101

¹⁴ Sharkey, Patrick T. Tirado-Strayer, Nicole, et al. The effect of local violence on children's attention and impulse control. *American Journal of Public Health*. 2012;102:12:2287-2293.

¹⁵ Harper Browne, C. (2014, September). The Strengthening Families Approach and Protective Factors Framework: Branching out and reaching deeper. Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Social Policy.

¹⁶ Bellis, M.A., Hardcastle, K, Ford, K. Hughes, K, et al. Does continuous trusted support in childhood impart life-course resilience against adverse childhood experiences – a retrospective study on adult health-harming behaviours and well-being. *BMC Psychiatry*. 2017 Mar 23;17(1):110.

The bottom line

Advocates and policymakers across the political spectrum agree that early childhood is the optimal period of life to prevent inequities in health and learning and to develop a foundation of relational skills that promote lifelong advantages.^{17,18} Safe communities provide the essential environment for positive early childhood development and strong families by offering inviting public spaces and excellent educational opportunities, promoting community connectedness and encouraging investments that provide families with better jobs and opportunities for economic and social mobility. Building and sustaining communities

that support strong families and thriving children requires a coordinated and sustained effort among the multiple sectors that can shape infrastructure, policies and practices working together in partnership with parents and community leaders.”

¹⁷ Walker SP, Wachs TD, Grantham-McGregor S, et al. Inequality in early childhood: risk and protective factors for early child development. *The Lancet*. 2011;378(9799):1325-1338.

¹⁸ Heckman JJ. *The Economics of Inequality: The Value of Early Childhood Education*. *American Educator*. 2011;35(1):31.



