

CONCRETE SUPPORT IN TIMES OF NEED

PROTECTIVE & PROMOTIVE FACTORS

All youth need help sometimes—help with homework, with figuring out the dynamics of interpersonal relationships, with considering their next steps after high school. But when youth are faced with very trying circumstances such as foster care, homelessness, substance abuse or trauma, they need access to concrete support and services that address their needs and help to minimize the stress caused by very difficult challenges and adversity. **Assisting youth to identify, find and receive concrete support in times of need helps to ensure they receive the basic necessities everyone deserves in order to grow and thrive (e.g., healthy food, a safe and protective environment), as well as specialized academic, psychoeducational, health, mental health, social, legal or employment services.**

When youth are faced with overwhelmingly stressful conditions they need to seek help, but for some youth asking for help is not an easy thing to do. It may be embarrassing because the services needed have a stigma associated with them such as special education programs, domestic violence shelters, homeless shelters or mental health clinics. Other youth may believe they do not have the right to ask for help, or that asking for help is a childish act, will put others in control of their lives or will cause more problems. Thus, youth-serving programs must clearly communicate that seeking help is not a shameful or immature act, nor does it mean completely relinquishing control. On the contrary. Asking for help is a form of **self-advocacy**; that is, speaking-up and taking responsibility for oneself and one's needs. Self-advocacy is a key characteristic of becoming an adult. **Seeking help, then, is a step toward improving one's circumstances and learning to better manage stress and function well—even when faced with challenges, adversity and trauma.** When youth ask for help and receive guidance about navigating the complex web of medical, mental health and social service systems, these are steps toward building resilience.

Given the recent advances in the fields of neuroscience and developmental psychology, service providers must be aware of and take into account the neurological, biological, social, emotional and psychological transitions that take place during the adolescent developmental period. In addition, service providers must be able to sensitively and competently address some of the “hard topics” associated with this developmental period such as gender identity and becoming sexually active.

Furthermore, when youth receive help, it should be provided in a manner that does not increase stress. Support and services should be coordinated, respectful, caring and strengths-based. Strengths-based practice with youth is grounded in the beliefs that:

- It is essential to forge a trusting relationship between youth and service providers so that youth feel physically and emotionally safe
- Regardless of the number or level of adverse conditions youth are experiencing, they have assets within and around them, their family or their community that can be called upon to help mitigate the impact of stressful conditions and to create needed change
- Youth have unrealized resources and competencies that must be identified, mobilized and appreciated
- Youth must be active participants in the change process and not passive recipients of services

In addition to addressing each youth's individual difficulties, strengths-based practitioners must understand—and work to change—the structural inequities and conditions that contribute to the young person's difficulties

Youth who experience a strengths-based approach when they seek help feel valued because they are acknowledged as knowledgeable and competent. They develop a sense of independence, self-confidence and self-efficacy because they have opportunities to build their skills, experience success and strive to reach their full potential. Thus, access to concrete support in times of need must be accompanied by a quality of service coordination and delivery that is designed to preserve youths' dignity; provide opportunities for skill development; and promote healthy development, resilience and the ability to advocate for and receive needed services and resources.

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

- Parental Resilience
- Social Connections
- Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development
- Concrete Support in Times of Need
- Social-Emotional Competence of Children

The Youth Thrive Protective and Promotive Factors

- Youth Resilience
- Social Connections
- Knowledge of Adolescent Development
- Concrete Support in Times of Need
- 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.