



Protective Factors Approaches in Child Welfare

This issue brief provides a succinct overview of protective factors approaches to the prevention and treatment of child abuse and neglect. It is designed to help policymakers, administrators, child welfare and related professionals, service providers, advocates, and other interested individuals understand the concepts of risk and protective factors in families and communities and learn ways in which building protective factors can help to lessen risks for child abuse and neglect.

What Are Risk and Protective Factors?

Risk factors refer to the stressful conditions, events, or circumstances (e.g., maternal depression, substance abuse, family violence, persistent poverty) that increase a family’s chances for poor outcomes, including child abuse and neglect. Protective factors are conditions or attributes of individuals, families, communities, or the larger society that mitigate risk and promote healthy development and well-being. Put simply, they are the strengths that help to buffer and support families at risk.

WHAT’S INSIDE

What are risk and protective factors?

Why is a protective factors approach important?

Using protective factors in child maltreatment

Mapping connections across protective factors approaches

Individual protective factors

Relational protective factors

Societal or community protective factors

Putting protective factors into practice

Conclusion

Resources

Why Is a Protective Factors Approach Important?

Traditionally, child maltreatment prevention and intervention strategies have focused exclusively on risk factors and their elimination. We now know that changing the balance between risk and protective factors so that protective factors outweigh risk factors is a more effective prevention and intervention strategy. Helping children and families build resilience and develop skills, characteristics, knowledge, and relationships that offset risk exposure can contribute to both short- and long-term positive outcomes.

Using a protective factors approach can be a positive way to engage families because it focuses on families' strengths and what they are doing right. Focusing exclusively on risk factors with families can leave families feeling stigmatized or unfairly judged. Also, a protective factors approach can provide a strong platform for building collaborative partnerships with other service providers—like child care—that are not as familiar or comfortable with a risk paradigm as a basis for engaging families.

Using Protective Factors in Child Maltreatment

The emphasis on protective factors continues to grow, and today they are used by practitioners, policymakers, and researchers to improve child, family, and community well-being. Currently, there are several key protective factors approaches in use, including the following:

- Strengthening Families™ and Youth Thrive™ were developed by the Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP).
- Essentials for Childhood is an approach developed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).
- The Administration on Children, Youth and Families (ACYF), Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) is currently working on an approach that identifies protective factors specifically relevant across the populations served by ACYF.

This brief aligns and interconnects the information across these protective factors approaches.

Strengthening Families

Strengthening Families is focused on building five protective factors that are associated in the research literature with lower rates of child abuse and neglect and with optimal child development:

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

Strengthening Families is the most well-established and broadly used protective factors approach in the field of child abuse and neglect prevention. In addition to the research literature, the development of the Strengthening Families approach was supported by:¹

- A national study of exemplary practice
- A 2-year, seven-State pilot study
- Structured learning from a national network of implementers
- Learning from four research studies being conducted under the ACYF-funded National Quality Improvement Center on Early Childhood

More than 40 States have initiated statewide Strengthening Families efforts, and a majority of all States are using Strengthening Families for child abuse and neglect prevention programming. It is also being used in multiple other sectors, including early childhood, child welfare services, family support, and home visiting, to name a few. Because of its longstanding application in the field, Strengthening Families is also supported by a wide range of implementation tools and materials, as well as active learning communities of implementers. More information on Strengthening Families can be found at <http://www.StrengtheningFamilies.net>.

¹ More information on this work can be found at the following link: <http://www.cssp.org/reform/strengthening-families/resources/Research-Behind-Strengthening-Families-2012.pptx>

Youth Thrive

The Youth Thrive protective factors approach focuses on adolescents, with a particular focus on youth receiving child welfare services. This approach describes how youth can be supported by parents and practitioners in ways that advance healthy development and well-being and reduce the impact of negative life experiences. There are five protective factors in the Youth Thrive framework:

- Youth Resilience
- Social Connections
- Knowledge of Adolescent Development
- Concrete Support in Times of Need
- Cognitive and Social-Emotional Competence

A national study of exemplary practice is underway to learn from programs that are building the Youth Thrive protective factors into their practice with youth facing challenging circumstances. New Jersey is piloting the application of Youth Thrive to the youth services provided for youth involved with child welfare. More Youth Thrive implementation tools will be available to the field in coming years.

Essentials for Childhood

The CDC's National Center for Injury Prevention and Control has defined three critical qualities of relationships and environments that can reduce the occurrence and negative effects of child maltreatment and other adverse childhood experiences:

- **Safety:** The extent to which a child is free from fear and secure from physical or psychological harm within his or her social and physical environment
- **Stability:** The degree of predictability and consistency in a child's social, emotional, and physical environment
- **Nurturing:** The extent to which a parent or caregiver is available and able to sensitively and consistently respond to and meet the needs of his or her child

CDC's Essentials for Childhood focuses on four goals that are critical for creating the context for safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments:

- Raise awareness and commitment to promote safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments and prevent child maltreatment
- Use data to inform actions
- Create the context for healthy children and families though norms change and programs
- Create the context for healthy children and families through policies

While each individual goal is important, the four goals together are more likely to build the comprehensive foundation of safe, stable, and nurturing relationships and environments for children. CDC has funded five State health departments to implement the Essentials for Childhood framework. The work of these grantees should provide additional implementation tools and resources for those interested in comprehensive strategies to promote safe, stable, and nurturing relationships and environments for all children. More information on Essentials for Childhood can be found here: <http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/childmaltreatment/essentials/>

ACYF Literature Review on Protective Factors

The Children's Bureau, within ACYF, has long supported a focus on protective factors. Through its work to support programs, research, and monitoring systems that prevent child abuse and neglect, the Children's Bureau has integrated key elements of Strengthening Families' protective factors framework into its ongoing prevention work through the Office on Child Abuse and Neglect. Based on feedback from the field, the Children's Bureau also incorporated a sixth protective factor—nurturing and attachment—for prevention efforts and has been infusing this protective factor in its work.² (A child's early experience of being nurtured and developing a bond with a caring adult affects all aspects of behavior and development.)

Broadening this approach, in 2012, ACYF commissioned a literature review and expert consultation project to

² For example, see work from the FRIENDS National Resource Center on the Protective Factors Survey at <http://friendsnrc.org/protective-factors-survey>.

understand the strength of evidence that exists for protective factors for the 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, and runaway and homeless youth. One key finding from the 2012 review was the lack of available research on protective factors for a number of ACYF target populations. Other key findings showed that the needs of extremely vulnerable children are not so very different from those of other at-risk children, suggesting that the general literature on at-risk populations might be a good place to identify potential protective factors and interventions for ACYF populations. In addition, protective factors need to be built into all domains of the social ecology—individual, family, and community/society—in order for these children, youth, and families to thrive (see below).

ACYF identified 10 protective factors,³ with the strongest level of evidence, across these domains:

- Self-Regulation
- Relational Skills
- Problem-Solving Skills
- Involvement in Positive Activities
- Parenting Competencies
- Caring Adults
- Positive Peers
- Positive Community
- Positive School Environments
- Economic Opportunities

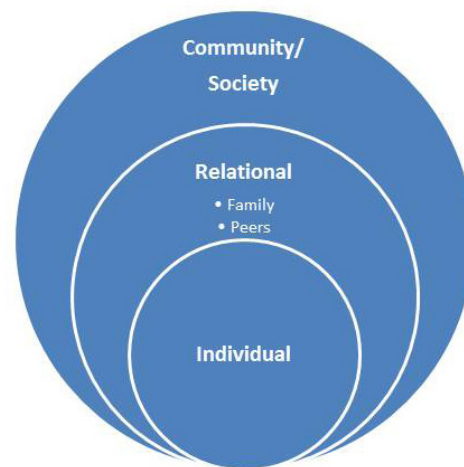
The full literature review and more detailed information about protective factors for each of the specific populations is available at <http://www.dsgonline.com/ACYF>.

³ These 10 factors apply to all the populations served by ACYF. The full literature review includes a separate list of relevant factors that are specific to each ACYF population (i.e., youth in or transitioning out of foster care, children/youth exposed to domestic violence, victims of child abuse and neglect, pregnant and parenting youth, and runaway and homeless youth).

Mapping Connections Across Protective Factors Approaches

Each of the described approaches synthesizes a broad range of existing literature in order to identify a discrete set of protective factors. In the process, they align and group research findings that are linked to the definition of the protective factor. Often, definitions overlap so that a certain study, for example, might be cited in one approach to support the importance of social-emotional competence in children and in another approach to support the importance of self-regulation in children.

This section of the brief compares the definitional language used by each approach in order to better understand the overlap and alignment. The social ecological framework is used to organize this comparison. Each approach's protective factors are placed in individual, relational, and social/community domains.



What Is Social Ecological Theory?

Social ecological theory examines how the experiences of individuals are shaped and interact with the structures and systems around them. Most social ecological theory uses concentric rings to illustrate how individuals are shaped by the environments closest to them.

Individual Protective Factors

The ACYF review, Youth Thrive, and Strengthening Families each address individual protective factors. Overall, there is good agreement among these approaches that children and youth’s internal skills provide a strong platform for their overall well-being and positive outcomes. The internal skills associated with positive outcomes include:

- Regulation of emotion and action
- Ability to connect and interact effectively with others
- Ability to proactively respond to challenging circumstances and plan for life in ways that head off adversity

The chart below digs deeper into how the protective factors under each approach connect.

ACYF	Strengthening Families	Youth Thrive
<p>Self-Regulation: a youth’s ability to manage or control emotions and behaviors</p> <p>Relational Skills: (1) a youth’s ability to form positive bonds and connections and (2) interpersonal skills such as communication, conflict resolution, and self-efficacy in conflict situations</p>	<p>Social-Emotional Competence in Young Children: the ability of the children to recognize their own and others’ emotions, take the perspective of others, and use their emerging cognitive skills to think about appropriate and inappropriate ways of acting</p>	<p>Social, Emotional, and Cognitive Competence of Youth: the interrelated components of cognitive and social-emotional competence, including self-regulation, future orientation, planning, positive self-concept, self-esteem, self-efficacy, self-compassion, personal responsibility, character strengths, and positive emotions</p>
<p>Problem-Solving Skills: a youth’s adaptive functioning skills and ability to solve problems, including general problem-solving skills, self-efficacy in conflict situations, higher daily living scores, decision-making skills, planning skills, adaptive functioning skills, and task-oriented coping skills</p>		<p>Youth Resilience: the ability of youth to call forth their inner strength to positively meet challenges, manage adversities, heal the effects of trauma, and thrive, given their unique characteristics, goals, and circumstances</p>
<p>Involvement in Positive Activities: engagement in and/or achievement in school, extracurricular activities, employment, training, apprenticeships, or the military</p>		<p>Social Connections: the need for youth to be constructively engaged in social institutions—like schools, religious communities and recreational facilities—that are safe, stable, and equitable</p>
		<p>Concrete Supports in Times of Need: helping youth to identify, find, and receive concrete supports to help ensure they receive the basic necessities everyone deserves in order to grow and thrive</p>
		<p>Knowledge of Youth Development: the benefit that young people themselves can gain from increasing their knowledge and understanding about adolescent development</p>

Relational Protective Factors

All four of the protective factors approaches address relational protective factors. Essentials for Childhood, developed by the CDC, puts the development of safe, stable, and nurturing relationships with the caregiving and broader environment at the heart of its protective factors. Strengthening Families focuses largely on the importance of the parental relationship and the building of parental protective factors as a pathway to optimal development and lower rates of child abuse and neglect for young children. Youth Thrive looks at the importance of social connections as an important protective factor for youth. The results of ACYF’s literature review point to the importance of nurturing by parents and other adults as well as positive peer relationships. Overall, the following conclusions can be drawn:

- Relationships matter.
- It is the quality of these relationships that matter.
- The parental relationship is particularly important, and investments that build parents’ skills, capacity, and ability to nurture are an important pathway to positive child outcomes.

Table 2: Relational Protective Factors

ACYF	CDC	Strengthening Families	Youth Thrive
<p>Parenting Competencies: parenting skills (e.g., parental monitoring and discipline, prenatal care, and setting clear standards and developmentally appropriate limits)</p>	<p>Create the context for healthy children and families through norms change and programs: implement evidence-based programs for parents that support development of skills to provide safe, stable, and nurturing relationships for their children; promote positive community norms about parenting programs and acceptable parenting behaviors; make it easy for parents and caregivers to participate in parenting programs</p>	<p>Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development: parent’s willingness to seek and ability to apply knowledge of parenting and child development</p>	<p>Knowledge of Youth Development: parents and other adults work to increase their knowledge and understanding about adolescent development</p>
<p>Parenting Competencies: positive parent-child interactions (e.g., close relationship between parent and child, sensitive parenting, support, caring)</p>		<p>Social Emotional Competence of Children: a parent’s ability to nurture children’s social emotional skills</p> <p>Parental Resilience: the capacity of parents to maintain stability, be calm, and provide nurturing support, despite difficult or challenging circumstances</p>	

Table 2: Relational Protective Factors			
ACYF	CDC	Strengthening Families	Youth Thrive
<p>Caring Adults: refers to caring adults beyond the nuclear family, such as mentors, home visitors (especially for pregnant and parenting teens), older extended family members, or individuals in the community</p>	<p>Promote the community norm that we all share responsibility for the well-being of children</p>		<p>Youth Resilience: this is aided by a trusting relationship with a caring, encouraging, and competent adult who provides positive guidance and promotes high expectations</p> <p>Social Connections: the need that youth have for people inside and outside of their family who care about them; who can be nonjudgmental listeners; to whom they can turn for well-informed guidance and advice; who encourage them and promote high expectations; and who set developmentally appropriate limits, rules, and monitoring</p>
<p>Positive Peers: friendships with peers, support from friends, or positive peer norms</p>			<p>Social Connections: youth’s peer relationships that provide social, emotional, and instrumental support</p>
		<p>Concrete Supports in Times of Need: access for parents to concrete supports and services (e.g., housing, food, transportation) that address needs and help to minimize the stress caused by very difficult challenges and adversity</p>	

Societal or Community Protective Factors

While the ACYF approach is the only one that looks specifically at community-level protective factors, the other three explicitly address questions about the type of systemic, societal, and community-level changes that are needed in order to support their protective factors approaches. In general, all three approaches agree that,

- To more broadly ensure that all children and families have opportunities to build protective factors not only requires changes in services, but also broader societal shifts that will impact both communities and institutions.

Table 3: Societal or Community Protective Factors

ACYF	CDC	Strengthening Families	Youth Thrive
<p>Positive Community: neighborhood advantage or quality, religious service attendance, living in a safe and higher quality environment, a caring community, social cohesion, and positive community norms</p>	<p>Raise awareness and commitment to support safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments: adopt the vision of ensuring this for every child, raise awareness in support of the vision, partner with others to unite behind the vision</p> <p>Create the context for healthy children and families through norms change and programs: promote the community norm that we all share the responsibility for the well-being of children; promote positive community norms about parenting programs and acceptable parenting behaviors</p> <p>Create the context for healthy children and families through policies: Identify and assess which organizational and regulatory policies, laws, and ordinances may positively impact the lives of children and families; provide decision makers and community leaders with information on the benefits of evidence-based strategies and rigorous evaluation</p>	<p>Parents’ constructive and supportive social connections—that is, relationships with family members, friends, neighbors, co-workers, community members and service providers.</p>	<p>Social Connections: the need for youth to be constructively engaged in social institutions—like schools, religious communities, and recreational facilities—that are safe, stable and equitable</p>
<p>Positive School Environments: the existence of supportive programming in schools</p>			

Table 3: Societal or Community Protective Factors

ACYF	CDC	Strengthening Families	Youth Thrive
<p>Economic Opportunities: household income and socioeconomic status; a youth’s self-perceived resources; employment, apprenticeship, coursework, and/or military involvement; and placement in a foster care setting (from a poor setting)</p>			

Putting Protective Factors Into Practice

A number of jurisdictions are already applying protective factors approaches. The following are some examples:

- Since 2009, the Idaho Children’s Trust Fund has required all child abuse and neglect prevention grantees to demonstrate how they are building protective factors into their work. Grantees are also asked to use the Protective Factors Survey developed by the FRIENDS National Resource Center to evaluate their programs to establish consistent measurement of outcomes related to protective factors. The Idaho Children’s Trust provides ongoing training and technical assistance to all grantees, including a Strengthening Families Training Institute that brings in best practices from around the country. <http://idahochildrenstrustfund.idaho.gov/neglect.asp>
- In Kansas, Sedgwick and Marion Counties have used a protective factors framework to organize local planning and to guide collaboration. The protective factors have allowed local partnerships to expand to include representation from law enforcement, hospitals, faith-based organizations, and the business community. The process has led to development of strategic plans, a focus on data-driven decision-making, implementation of new programming—such as the Period of PURPLE Crying—and increased public awareness, including community positive parenting calendars. <http://www.cssp.org/reform/strengthening-families/national-network/2012-state-profiles/Kansas-2012.pdf>

In 2012, New Jersey created the Task Force on Helping Youth Thrive in Placement (HYTIP). The task force has been charged with completing a comprehensive and critical analysis of current practice and policies surrounding adolescents and youth in out-of-home care settings using the protective and promotive factors outlined in the Youth Thrive Framework. This analysis will be used to inform specific changes in policies and practices. <http://www.state.nj.us/dcf/providers/notices/nonprofit/youth.html>

In Philadelphia, the adoption of a protective factors approach is one part of Improving Outcomes for Children (IOC), a comprehensive restructuring of the approach to serving children and families when abuse and neglect has occurred. The IOC is building new partnerships between the Department of Human Services (DHS), which will continue to maintain oversight and investigative responsibilities, and community umbrella agencies (CUAs) that will be responsible for the day-to-day casework with families. A protective factors approach will provide a common framework for practice for both CUA and DHS staff.

- Training:** All staff in direct contact with children and families will receive training on Strengthening Families. In addition, Charting the Course, the 10-module foundation training for all individuals who will be holding a child welfare caseload is being adapted so workers can clearly see how to build

protective factors through their existing practice with families.

- **Practice Guidelines:** Practice guidelines for the CUAs have the protective factors approach integrated into them.
- **Staffing:** Each CUA will have two dedicated staff positions that will be responsible for helping to connect families to resources, activities, and supports that will enhance their protective factors. In addition, supervisory materials and tools are being developed to help supervisors coach workers on how to work with families using a protective factors approach.
- **Resources for Parents:** Capacity is being built within each CUA to host parent cafés—parent-to-parent conversations around protective factors. <http://dynamicsights.com/dhs/ioc/>

Conclusion

The growing recognition of protective factors as a critical aspect of all work for and with children and families is long overdue. The strong consistency and overlap between this established, ongoing, and new work also underscores the salience of this strength-based approach across many disciplines. There is a powerful synergy between what research demonstrates children need in order to thrive and avoid bad outcomes and what the family support and child maltreatment prevention practice community has been working toward for many years. More work still needs to be done, including the following:

- Continue to expand the research base on protective factors and ensure that new research continues to inform the approaches being used in the field.
- Develop more valid and reliable tools and instruments to measure protective factor capacities in individuals, families, and communities.

- Continue to develop the body of implementation resources that support the ability of those that work with children and families to take these ideas and incorporate them into everyday practice.
- Promote the widespread adoption, implementation, and sustainability of protective factors approaches into the systems and services that support children and families.

Resources

- Strengthening Families information is available on the CSSP website: <http://www.cssp.org/reform/strengthening-families> (State-specific information can be found at <http://www.cssp.org/reform/strengthening-families/around-the-nation/states>.)
- Youth Thrive information is available on the CSSP website: <http://www.cssp.org/reform/child-welfare/youth-thrive>
- Essentials for Childhood information is available on the CDC website: <http://www.cdc.gov/ViolencePrevention/childmaltreatment/essentials/index.html>
- Information on the ACYF protective factors, as it becomes available, can be found on the Child Welfare Information Gateway web section on Preventing Child Abuse and Neglect: <https://www.childwelfare.gov/preventing/>

Suggested citation:

Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2014). *Protective factors approaches in child welfare*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.



U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Administration for Children and Families
Administration on Children, Youth and Families
Children's Bureau

