

Protective Factors Approaches in Child Welfare

Protective factors are conditions or attributes of individuals, families, communities, and the larger society that mitigate risk and promote the healthy development and well-being of children, youth, and families. Put simply, they are the strengths that help to buffer and support families. Examples of protective factors include community support, parenting competencies, and economic opportunities. Protective factors help ensure that children and youth function well at home, in school, at work, and in the community. They also can serve as safeguards, helping parents who otherwise might be at risk find resources, support, or coping strategies that allow them to parent effectively—even under stress.

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This issue brief provides an overview of national protective factors approaches to prevent child abuse and neglect. It is designed to help child welfare professionals, administrators, service providers, policymakers, and other interested individuals understand the concepts of protective and risk factors in families and communities and learn ways in which building protective factors can help lower the risk of child abuse and neglect now and in the future.

WHY IS A PROTECTIVE FACTORS APPROACH IMPORTANT?

In the past, child maltreatment prevention and intervention strategies focused on eliminating risk factors—conditions, events, or circumstances that increase a family's chances for poor outcomes, including child abuse and neglect. This emphasis on family risks (e.g., maternal depression, family violence, history of maltreatment) often left families feeling stigmatized or unfairly judged. In addition, focusing on risk factors does not always point the way toward solutions.

A protective factors approach to the prevention of child maltreatment focuses on positive ways to engage families by emphasizing their strengths and what parents and caregivers are doing well, as well as identifying areas where families have room to

grow with support. A protective factors approach can help agencies build capacity and collaborative partnerships with other service providers, such as early-childhood and youth-service systems, that are likely to enhance cross-systems collaboration to support children and families and promote their well-being (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2015). Protective factors approaches also help children, youth, and families build resilience and develop skills, characteristics, knowledge, and relationships that offset risk exposure and contribute to both short- and long-term positive outcomes.



Resilience

According to the American Psychological Association (n.d.), resilience is the ability to adapt to or cope with adversity (including trauma, tragedy, threats, and significant stress) in a positive way. It involves behaviors, thoughts, and actions that can be learned over time and nurtured through positive relationships with parents, caregivers, and other adults. Resilience in children, youth, and adults who have adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) enables them to thrive despite these experiences.

EXAMPLES OF PROTECTIVE FACTORS APPROACHES

What follows is an overview of some national protective factors approaches, including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC's) Social-Ecological Model, the Center for the Study of Social Policy's (CSSP's) Strengthening Families and Youth Thrive approaches, the CDC's Essentials for Childhood approach, and the Healthy Outcomes From Positive Experiences (HOPE) framework. Each approach is based on evidence or data; designed to affect policy; and involves practitioners, social or community connections, youth leaders, and parents. All the examples are driven by unique strategies developed to help families build protective factors, reduce risk factors, and prevent child abuse and neglect. For example, the Strengthening Families approach emphasizes ways to support parents, Youth Thrive concentrates primarily on strengthening adolescents and young adults, Essentials for Childhood promotes relationships and environments to help create neighborhoods and communities where children can flourish, and the HOPE framework stresses child well-being while working to reduce the effects of ACEs.

Child Welfare Information Gateway offers a two-part podcast series on protective factors that features guests from CSSP and the Arlington County, VA, Division of Child and Family Services:

- ["Prevention: Protective Factors Part 1"](#)
- ["Prevention: Protective Factors Part 2"](#)

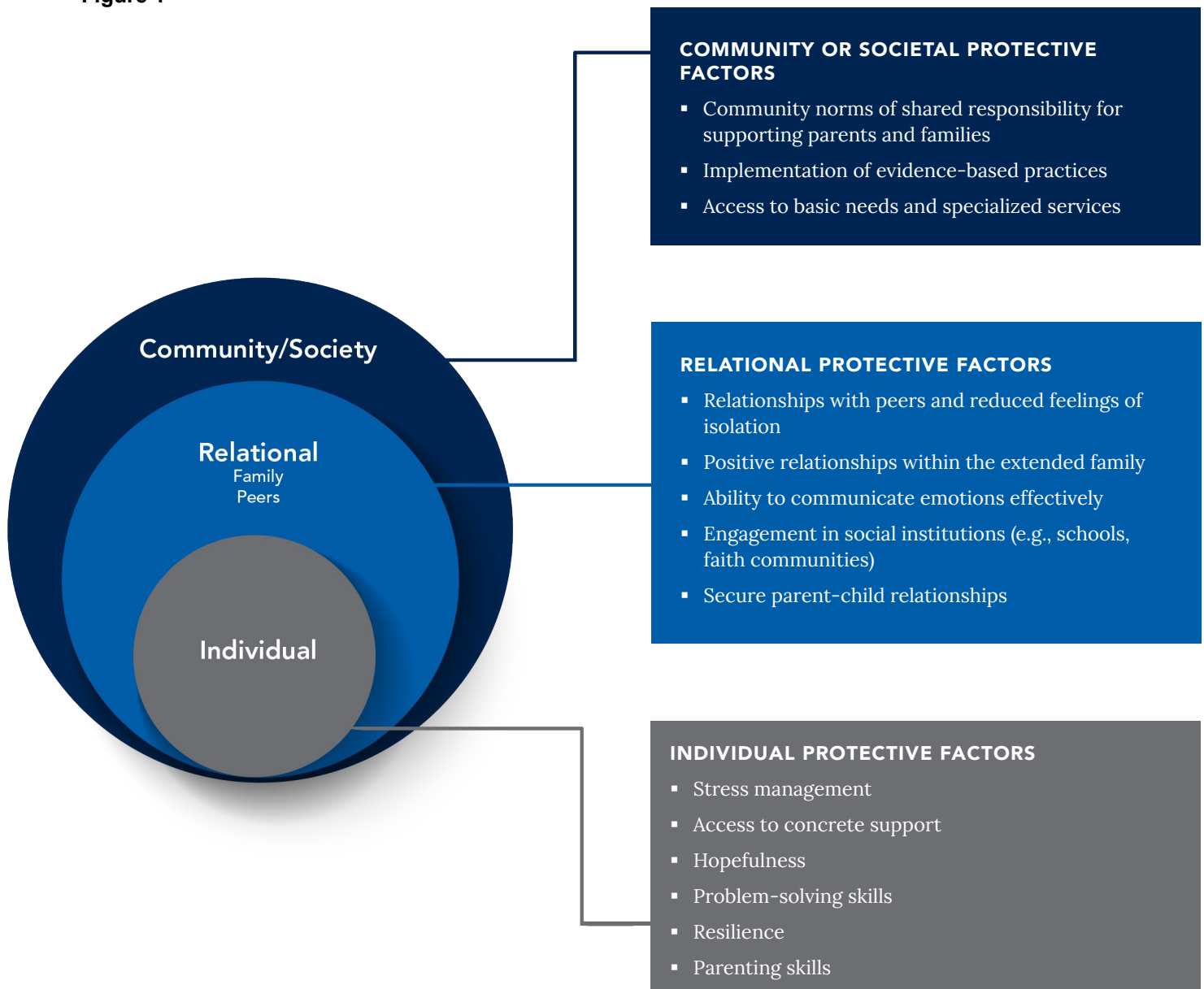
Information Gateway's podcasts cover a broad array of topics and are available via the [Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast Series webpage](#) or wherever you get your podcasts.

THE SOCIAL-ECOLOGICAL MODEL

Social-ecological theory examines how people exist within and are shaped by their individual characteristics, families and other relationships, communities, and society. Figure 1 demonstrates the interrelations among common protective factors and their respective levels of the social ecology. The overlapping rings of the graphic illustrate how protective factors at one level influence factors at other levels.

More information on the social-ecological model is available on the CDC webpage, [About Violence Prevention](#).

Figure 1



Prioritizing Protective Factors to Promote Child, Youth, and Family Well-Being

The Administration on Children, Youth and Families (ACYF), within the Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, commissioned a [literature review and expert consultation](#) project in 2012 to assist in building a protective factors approach to improve outcomes for its target populations. The project stressed the need to build protective factors in all domains of the social ecology—individual, family, and community/society—for these children, youth, and families to thrive. This effort was also meant to improve policies and programs that assist youth in or transitioning out of foster care; children and youth exposed to domestic violence; victims of child abuse and neglect; youth who are pregnant and parenting or runaway and homeless; and others supported by ACYF. One key finding was that the needs of extremely vulnerable children are similar to those of other children who are at risk, suggesting that the general literature on children and youth who are at risk might be helpful for identifying potential protective factors and interventions for extremely vulnerable children, youth, and families.

Refer to [Information Memorandum 18-05: Reshaping Child Welfare in the United States to Focus on Strengthening Families Through Primary Prevention of Child Maltreatment and Unnecessary Parent-Child Separation](#) for more information about ACYF's commitment to building family and community strengths using a protective factors approach.

STRENGTHENING FAMILIES

Strengthening Families, developed by CSSP, is an evidence-informed approach that builds on existing research to enhance program and worker practices. Since it is used by multiple programs and systems to help families build protective factors within various contexts, Strengthening Families also aims to develop methods and tools to support diverse applications and adaptive implementations of their framework (CSSP, n.d.-a, n.d.-b). The Strengthening Families approach focuses on building the following five protective factors in parents and caregivers that are associated with lower rates of child abuse and neglect and with optimal child development (CSSP, 2015a):

1. **Parental resilience:** Manages stress and functions well when faced with challenges, adversity, and trauma
2. **Social connections:** Builds positive relationships that provide emotional, informational, instrumental, and spiritual support
3. **Knowledge of parenting and child development:** Understands child development and parenting strategies that support physical, cognitive, language, social, and emotional development

4. **Concrete support in times of need:** Has access to support and/or services (e.g., healthy food; a safe environment; specialized medical, mental health, social, educational, and legal services, as needed) that address a family's needs and help minimize stress caused by challenges
5. **Social-emotional competence of children:** Encourages family and child interactions that help children develop the ability to communicate clearly, recognize and regulate their emotions, and establish and maintain relationships

Thirty-five States have active, statewide Strengthening Families efforts (C. O'Connor, personal communication, August 16, 2019). Most States use this approach for child abuse and neglect prevention programming, but the approach is also used in other sectors, including child welfare services, family support, early care and education programs, prevention activities at State children's trust funds, and home visiting. More information on Strengthening Families is available on the CSSP webpage [Strengthening Families: Increasing Positive Outcomes for Children and Families](#).

Parent Cafés

Parent leaders from Strengthening Families Illinois developed the Parent Café model in 2007 as a parent-to-parent way to bring the Strengthening Families protective factors to families. Parent Cafés are physically and emotionally safe spaces where parents and caregivers can talk about the successes and challenges of raising a family. Through personal self-reflection and peer-to-peer learning, participants explore their strengths, learn about protective factors, and create strategies to help strengthen their families. Parent Cafés are highly sustainable with training reinforcement, institutional support, and a commitment to an approach that engages and affirms parents as leaders.

Be Strong Families provides training and support for organizations hosting Parent Cafés, as well as the following variations on the original model:

- **Dads Cafés** give fathers a safe space to talk with one another about their roles and goals as fathers and provides them with the social support they need to help them accomplish those goals.
- **A More Perfect Union Parent Cafés** allow parents to explore the broader context for parenting. Using cards and questions, conversations revolve around parenting and social justice issues, such as housing rights, as well as talking with children about difficult issues.
- **Vitality Cafés** provide an opportunity to discuss how parents can take care of themselves across six domains: physical, mental and emotional, spiritual, social, financial, and environmental.

For general information about the Parent Café model, visit the Be Strong webpage on [Parent Cafés](#). To learn about evaluation efforts and the evidence base for Parent Cafés, visit the Be Strong Families' [Evidence & Evaluation webpage](#).

For more information on engaging parents directly in building protective factors for themselves, read [Using Café Conversations to Build Protective and Promotive Factors](#).

YOUTH THRIVE

CSSP's Youth Thrive protective and promotive factors¹ approach focuses on older children, adolescents, and young adults (ages 9 through 26), particularly youth who are involved in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems. Youth Thrive is a research-informed framework that identifies protective and promotive factors shown to enhance youth well-being and healthy development. Child welfare and juvenile justice agencies can use the framework to examine and revise policies, practices, and staff training to be more consistent with research findings and responsive to the dynamic changes that older children, youth, and young adults experience.

Working in partnership with six jurisdictions and a variety of national partners, Youth Thrive is redefining how policymakers, practitioners, community-based programs, advocates, families, and other caring adults can advance healthy development and well-being for youth. The Youth Thrive Framework includes five protective and promotive factors in adolescents and young adults (CSSP, 2015b):

1. **Youth resilience:** Helps youth manage stress and function well when faced with challenges, adversity, or trauma
2. **Social connections:** Helps youth build trusting, healthy relationships with peers and adults who support and encourage them to be engaged in the community and social institutions (e.g., school, recreational facilities)
3. **Knowledge of adolescent development:** Encourages parents or caregivers, youth-serving professionals, and youth themselves to learn more about adolescent development, including information on brain development and changes that occur during puberty
4. **Concrete support in times of need:** Encourages youth to seek help when needed and ensures they receive basic necessities and specialized services (e.g., medical, mental health, legal)
5. **Cognitive and social-emotional competence:** Helps youth develop executive-function skills (e.g., considering consequences of actions), character strengths (e.g., persistence, integrity, joy), and self-awareness

To view a variety of tools, resources, and information on training related to Youth Thrive, visit the CSSP webpage [Youth Thrive: Opportunities Into Action](#). The [Youth Thrive Survey](#) (scroll down to Survey Instrument), a valid, web-based self-assessment instrument, measures the strength and growth of protective/promotive factors in youth. The survey was designed with input from youth and young adults and takes less than 15 minutes to complete.

¹ The term "promotive factors" tends to be used more in the youth development field than in the child welfare field. Promotive factors make positive outcomes more likely across the board, regardless of risk. Protective factors make positive outcomes more likely in the face of risk. The term "protective factors" tends to be used as shorthand or an umbrella term to mean both of those concepts.

ESSENTIALS FOR CHILDHOOD

The CDC's National Center for Injury Prevention and Control defines three critical qualities of relationships and environments that can reduce the occurrence and negative effects of child maltreatment and other ACEs (CDC, 2019):

1. **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
2. **Stability:** The degree of predictability and consistency in a child's social, emotional, and physical environment
3. **Nurturing:** The extent to which children's physical, emotional, and developmental needs are sensitively and consistently met

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

Goal 1: Raise awareness and commitment to promote safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments for all children

Goal 2: Use data to inform actions

Goal 3: Create the context for healthy children and families by changing norms and programs

Goal 4: Create the context for healthy children and families through policies

While each individual goal is important, meeting the four goals together is more likely to build a comprehensive foundation of safe, stable, and nurturing relationships and environments for children. CDC has funded seven State health departments to implement the four goals.

For additional information on Essentials for Childhood, refer to the following:

- [Essentials for Childhood Framework: Steps to Create Safe, Stable, Nurturing Relationships and Environments](#) [webpage]
- [Preventing Child Abuse and Neglect: A Technical Package for Policy, Norm, and Programmatic Activities](#)
- ["Essentials for Childhood: Promoting Safe, Stable, Nurturing Relationships and Environments"](#) [special issue of *International Journal on Child Maltreatment: Research, Policy and Practice*]

THE HOPE FRAMEWORK

The emerging HOPE framework focuses on the power of positive day-to-day experiences to promote child well-being and mitigate the effects of ACEs (Sege et al., 2017). The HOPE framework includes protective and promotive factors while incorporating other positive factors that decrease the effects of childhood adversity and increase the opportunities for children to develop resilience and recovery skills. Factors such as equitable environments in which to develop, play, and learn have led to positive health outcomes for children as they grow and reach adulthood (Sege & Browne, 2017). Survey results demonstrate that the presence of positive childhood experiences can mitigate the effects of ACEs, decreasing the likelihood of depression or poor mental health in those with four or more ACEs by 72 percent (Bethell et al., 2019).

HOPE identifies positive childhood experiences in the following four areas:

- 1. Nurturing and supportive relationships:** Secure attachments to parents or caregivers who are affectionate and responsive, as well as positive relationships with peers
- 2. Safe and stable environments:** Places to live, grow, play, and learn that offer stable housing, adequate nutrition, quality learning opportunities, and physical activities to benefit children's health and development
- 3. Social engagement and a sense of connectedness:** Engagement in social institutions and environments (e.g., schools, recreational facilities, faith communities) where children feel loved, valued, secure, and confident
- 4. Social and emotional competencies:** Ability to express feelings in appropriate ways, understand others' emotional states, and manage challenging experiences effectively

For more information about the HOPE framework, including new and promising evidence that shows the importance of positive childhood experiences for healthy child development despite adversity, listen to the September 2019 Community-Based Child Abuse Prevention (CBCAP) peer learning call, "[HOPE Conquers ACEs](#)," and read [Balancing ACEs With Hope: The Role of Positive Experiences in Child Development](#). Evolving information and resources are available from the [HOPE website](#).

What Are Caregiver Protective Capacities?

Caregiver protective capacities complement protective factors (Child Welfare Information Gateway & FRIENDS National Center for Community-Based Child Abuse Prevention, 2019). Both are used to assess and serve families, but the focus and scope of each are slightly different. Prevention practitioners use protective factors to assess and strengthen families (with a focus on *prevention*), while protection professionals use caregiver protective capacities to assess child safety and risk (with a focus on *protecting* children once child abuse or neglect has occurred) (Capacity Building Center for States, 2016).

Protective capacities are expressed, understood, or felt by individuals and result in parents and caregivers with increased abilities to care for their children and keep them safe in circumstances that are potentially dangerous.

Protective capacities and characteristics include the following (Capacity Building Center for States, 2016; ACTION for Child Protection, 2010):

CAREGIVER PROTECTIVE CAPACITIES

Behavioral: Actions and performance that result in protection against danger (e.g., a parent controls his or her impulses in parenting situations and sets aside his or her own needs to care for his or her child[ren])

Cognitive: Knowledge, understanding, and perceptions that result in protection against danger (e.g., a parent recognizes his or her child's needs and when the child's safety is threatened)

Emotional: Feelings, attitudes, and identification with a child that result in protection against danger (e.g., a parent shows love toward his or her child[ren] and has secure attachments with the child[ren])

PUTTING PROTECTIVE FACTORS INTO PRACTICE

Many jurisdictions across the United States are already applying protective factors approaches. The following examples illustrate a variety of ways to incorporate the national protective factors approaches to support children, youth, families, and communities:

- The Utah Division of Child and Family Services (DCFS) incorporates the Strengthening Families and Youth Thrive approaches into HomeWorks, an evidence-based in-home services program. The program is intended to support parents as they deal with the issues that brought their families to the attention of the child welfare system while helping children remain safely at home. HomeWorks provides caseworkers with skills and tools, such as the Utah Family and Children Engagement Tool (UFACET) and the Transition to Adult Living UFACET. Both tools are modified Child and Adolescent Needs and Strengths (CANS) assessment intake forms that include a protective factors component focused, in part, on the family's perception of its strengths. Because the forms are part of CANS, DCFS can track the effects of the tools on casework practice. Utah DCFS also provides its staff with training and coaching opportunities. Supplemental training resources include the following:
 - [*HomeWorks: A Family Guide to DCFS In-Home Service*](#)
- The Arlington County, VA, DCFS collaborated with CSSP to implement a protective factors-based approach at all agency levels. Supervisors; mid-level managers; caseworkers; frontline workers; and staff from a variety of disciplines, including child welfare, behavioral and mental health, child care, and parent-infant education, received training on protective factors and how to incorporate them into their day-to-day work with children and families. DCFS launched a toolkit to help supervisors talk about and reinforce the importance of protective factors in individual supervision sessions and team meetings. Supervisors received tip sheets to help them coach workers in supporting and planning with families to address their strengths and diverse needs.

To learn more about how the Arlington County DCFS trained staff, how professionals can help parents build skills that improve protective factors, and lessons agency leadership learned about communicating with staff to embrace the shift toward protective factors, listen to Information Gateway's podcast, "Protective Factors Part 2" (see page 3 in this publication).

- New Jersey's Department of Children and Families (DCF) has a longstanding commitment to implementing strategies that identify and build on protective factors for children, youth, and families using both the Strengthening Families and Youth Thrive approaches. For example, New Jersey adapted the 3-day Youth Thrive training curriculum to its specific policies, procedures, and local youths' circumstances. They developed in-State capacity to reduce child abuse and neglect and, in 2016, began to provide the training several times a year, reaching both child welfare staff and service providers. For younger children and their families, DCF has used the Strengthening Families protective factors framework to support child and family safety and well-being. In 2015, DCF worked with the Children's Trust Fund Alliance (formerly the National Alliance of Children's

Trust and Prevention Funds) to launch the organization's training curriculum, [Bringing the Protective Factors Framework to Life in Your Work](#). They expanded it in 2018 to include plans of safe care, focusing on engaging families with substance-exposed infants. In addition, DCF's implementation of the John H. Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood is based on the Youth Thrive protective and promotive factors approach to promoting the healthy development and well-being of youth. DCF formed the Task Force on Helping Youth Thrive in Placement and published a report with recommendations to help children in foster care remain connected to their friends and communities. Resources on DCF's application of protective factors approaches include the following:

- [Strengthening Families](#)
- [Helping Youth Thrive in Placement](#)
- [New Jersey DCF Plans of Safe Care training video](#)

For more than 30 years, the Children's Bureau's CBCAP program has been developing programs and activities to prevent child abuse and neglect. Managed by a State lead agency in all 50 States; Washington, DC; and Puerto Rico, CBCAP supports the collaboration and coordination of resources and activities to better strengthen and support families to reduce the likelihood of child maltreatment. This work has included and continues to include implementing and evaluating programs with a protective factors approach.

As part of the CBCAP grants, California's Community Engagement Advisory Committees (CEACs) and Youth Action Councils (YACs) use the Strengthening Families protective factors approach to build strong communities as well as social supports, social and emotional competencies, and resilience in children and youth. Supported by family resource centers operating throughout Orange County, CEACs include neighborhood residents (e.g., parents, grandparents, community members) and stakeholders from businesses, nonprofits, and faith communities. In partnership with family resource centers, CEACs and YACs are designed to play an active role in developing social connections and influencing positive community change. Community youth involved in the CEACs build social competence as they take on roles of decision-makers and problem-solvers. This experience, in turn, helps build resilience. The resilience of parents, grandparents, and community members is also strengthened as they work together to support their local family resource centers. As all participants become engaged, social supports are strengthened as well.

Resources on Orange County family resource centers include the following:

- [Orange County Families and Communities Together: 2017-2018 Annual Report: Building a Brighter Future for Orange County's Children](#)
- [Orange County Families and Communities Together family resource center services](#)

For more information about CBCAP, including child maltreatment prevention activities authorized under this program, visit the FRIENDS webpage [What Is CBCAP?](#).

Building Capacity to Evaluate Community Collaborations to Strengthen and Preserve Families

In 2018 and 2019, the Children's Bureau funded grants to States, communities, and Tribes to develop, implement, and evaluate proactive strategies that build on the strengths of families, including families at high risk of child maltreatment. The Building Capacity to Evaluate Child Welfare Community Collaborations to Strengthen and Preserve Families grants support community-level mobilization around the development of multisystem collaboratives. They provide a continuum of activities and services designed to support families and strengthen protective factors. Each grantee is developing and evaluating practices and methods to reduce new referrals to public child welfare agencies; reduce unnecessary removals of children from their homes; reduce entry into foster care; and improve cross-systems, primary prevention of child abuse and neglect.

As one project example, the Nebraska Children and Families Foundation developed the [Community Collaborative Toolkit](#) to help communities assess readiness for change, build capacity, develop sustainability plans, and identify policy goals to improve the impact and long-term outcomes for children, youth, and families.

It also has a [protective factors webpage](#) that describes its approach to supporting children and families.

For more information about this project, visit the Children's Bureau webpage [Building Capacity to Evaluate Child Welfare Community Collaborations to Strengthen and Preserve Families](#).

CONCLUSION

A protective factors approach to prevent child abuse and neglect provides support to children and families at risk of maltreatment. Evidence- and data-based approaches can help build capacity and enhance partnerships across disciplines to strengthen families and promote their well-being. Protective factors such as concrete supports and social connections help parents build safe, stable, and nurturing relationships and environments for their children. Families, communities, practitioners, and advocates may help foster social and emotional competencies at the individual, family, and community levels. Such strategies may lead children who experience adversity to develop resilience and skills. ACEs may be mitigated by positive childhood experiences, and more children may have equitable environments in which to play, learn, and grow into mentally, emotionally, and physically healthy adults.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The following resources provide additional information about protective factors approaches in child welfare:

CHILDREN'S BUREAU RESOURCES

Child Welfare Information Gateway Resources

The [Prevention web section](#) provides resources to learn more about prevention in child welfare.

[Protective Factors Conversation Guides](#) [webpage] help service providers engage caregivers in personalized conversations about protective factors.

The Children's Bureau Learning and Coordination Center Resources (CBLCC) Resources

[Preventing Child Neglect](#) is a training series developed by CBLCC and the Children's Trust Fund Alliance. Training 3 specifically explores how protective factors can shield individuals and families from the risk factors for neglect.

["The X-Y Factor: Engaging Dads Using the Protective Factors"](#) is a Digital Dialogue hosted by CBLCC with the National Fatherhood Initiative. The resources are designed to help practitioners engage fathers and encourage them to build the five protective factors of Strengthening Families.

FRIENDS National Center for Community-Based Child Abuse Prevention Resource

[Protective factors surveys](#) are designed for use with parents and caregivers involved in child maltreatment prevention and family support services.

OTHER RELEVANT RESOURCES

[Parents' Assessment of Protective Factors](#) is a strengths-based tool to assess the presence, strength, and growth of parents' self-reported beliefs, feelings, and behaviors that are regarded as indicators of the Strengthening Families protective factors.

[Youth Thrive Survey](#) is a strengths-based tool to assess the presence and growth of protective and promotive factors in youth and young adults.

[Parent Need 2 Know Resources](#) [webpage] are created to help parents and/or those who work with them in building protective factors using the Strengthening Families approach.

[Protective Factors](#) [webpage] includes information on *Bringing the Protective Factors Framework to Life in Your Work: A Resource for Action*, a protective factors in-person or online training.

[What Parents Say About...Building a 21st Century Community-Based Approach to Strengthening Families](#) focuses on strategies to improve the child welfare system in promoting earlier and more preventative supports for families.

[Preventing Child Neglect](#) [webpage] builds on extensive work to promote the protective factors framework, key informant interviews, research findings from the literature, and other strategies for identifying what works to prevent child neglect.

[The Pathway to Improved Outcomes for Children and Families: Defining the Five Protective Factors](#) provides definitions of the five protective factors in Strengthening Families.

The [Community Toolkit to Prevent Child Neglect](#) includes research, infographics, and factsheets for communities to prevent child neglect.

[Community Cafés](#) offer tools and local examples to prepare and train caregivers from the community to host conversations in partnership with organizations.

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