Protective Factors & Incorporation into Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention Programming

The Relationship Between Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention and Protective Factors

Research has demonstrated that the following five protective factors reduce the incidence of child abuse and neglect by providing even stressed parents with what they need to parent effectively. By incorporating these protective factors into programming, programs build relationships with families. When these relationships are established, a program can learn to recognize the signs of stress and help build families’ protective factors in their time of need.

As a result, each proposed program must include at least one of the five protective factors described below.

THE PROTECTIVE FACTORS

The five protective factors are:

- Parental resilience
- Social connections
- Knowledge of parenting and child development
- Concrete support in times of need
- Children’s social and emotional development

Protective factors are the strengths and resources that families can draw upon when they encounter stressful situations and challenges. Taking those characteristics and building on them is a proven way to strengthen the entire family thereby decreasing the likelihood of maltreatment. Each of the protective factors is vital, but most important is what they do together to create stability in families.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Protective Factors(^1)</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Parental resilience:</strong> The ability to cope and bounce back from all types of challenges</td>
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<td><strong>Social connections:</strong> Friends, family members, neighbors and other members of a community who provide emotional support and concrete assistance to parents</td>
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<td><strong>Knowledge of parenting and child development:</strong> Accurate information about raising young children and appropriate expectations for their behavior</td>
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<td><strong>Concrete support in times of need:</strong> Financial security to cover day-to-day expenses and unexpected costs that come up from time to time, access to formal supports like TANF and Medicaid, and informal support from social networks</td>
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<td><strong>Children’s social and emotional development:</strong> A child’s ability to interact positively with others and communicate his or her emotions effectively</td>
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\(^1\) From the Center for the Study of Social Policy
**Parental Resilience**
Parents who are emotionally resilient are able to bounce back during tough times and are more able to maintain a positive attitude, solve problems creatively, rise to challenges in their lives effectively and avoid situations that compromise their child’s healthy development and overall welfare.

**Social Connections**
Parenting programs offer the important opportunity for parents to get to know other parents and make new friendships. Parents, especially parents of young children, can feel isolated and have a greater need for support from others. Friends can be an important source for relief in times of parenting stress, advice and information on parenting issues, and back-up support.

**Knowledge of Child Development**
Understanding child development is an important part of good parenting. Having realistic expectations of what children can and cannot do at certain ages helps a parent avoid frustration and understand their child better.

**Concrete Support In Times of Need**
It can be difficult at times for parents to get the help and advice they need. When parents or caregivers experience problems with housing, finances, illness, unemployment, or conflict in relationships, it can deplete their energy and take away the focus from their child. In addition, parents face challenges when trying to navigate their way around the systems they need in order to get help. Getting assistance when it’s needed helps a caregiver to be a better parent by making sure they can give their child what they need. Having the ability to give their child what he or she needs greatly reduces the stress and anxiety that can make a parent short-tempered and irritable with their child.

**Social and Emotional Development in Children**
As children grow, so do their emotions and ability to express themselves. And just like reading to children and playing with them can help their brains and bodies develop, there are many ways that parents can help their children learn to express and regulate their emotions. Social and emotional skills are the most important developmental skills that young children learn during their first years of life.

### Protective Factors & Incorporation into CAN Programming

**Parent Resilience**
Children of resilient parents are more likely to be prepared to be better skilled at meeting and making new friends and more likely to respond appropriately to stressful situations than children of less resilient parents.

**Parent Resilience and Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention**
- Research demonstrates that parental psychology plays an important role in both the causes and prevention of child abuse and neglect. Parents who are emotionally resilient are able to maintain a positive attitude, creatively solve problems, and effectively deal with challenges that may arise in their lives. Having these skills greatly reduces parental stress, a known risk factor for child maltreatment.

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2 *Strengthening Families through Early Childcare and Education (www.strengtheningfamilies.net)*
• By incorporating the parent resilience protective factor into programming, parents get to know and trust the staff. A parent who knows and trusts staff is more likely to reveal problems such as domestic violence or general feelings of frustration; more importantly, these parents are more likely to ask for help—thereby reducing or eliminating the risk for abuse and neglect.

**Examples of How to Incorporate the Parent Resilience Protective Factor Into CAN Programming:**
- Train staff on creating trusting relationships with families, and develop time within the program to provide opportunities for these relationships to flourish.
- Train staff to watch for early signs of child or family distress and respond with encouragement, support, and help in solving problems.

**Social Connections**
Programs for parents and caregivers offer the important opportunity for parents to get to know other parents and make new friendships. Parents, especially parents of young children, can feel isolated and have a greater need for support from others. Friends can be an important source for relief in times of parenting stress, advice and information on parenting issues, and back-up support.

**Social Connections and Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention**
- Helping parents build constructive friendships and other positive connections can reduce their isolation, which is a consistent risk factor in child abuse and neglect. Isolation is a particular problem for family members who are in crisis or need intensive help.
- Social connections enable parents to develop and reinforce community norms about behavior, such as violence. Norms against violence reduce the occurrence of child maltreatment.
- Through fostering social connections within your program, a parent or caregiver develops friendships that lead to mutual assistance in obtaining resources that all families need from time to time, such as transportation, respite child care, and other tangible assistance as well as emotional support.

**Examples of How to incorporate the Social Connections Protective Factor Into CAN Programming:**
- Provide special networking workshops after (or built into) a parent education class
- Help parents connect with organizations and resources outside the program
- Provide special outreach and activities for fathers, grandparents, and other extended family members

**Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development**
Understanding child development is an important part of good parenting. Having realistic expectations of what children can and cannot do at certain ages helps a parent avoid frustration and understand their child better.

**Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development and Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention**
- Parents who understand normal child development are less likely to grow frustrated and be abusive and are more likely to nurture their children’s healthy development. Additionally, observing other children helps parents understand their own children in context.
- Parents often need timely help from someone they trust in order to address children’s problem behaviors, such as biting or hitting, without resorting to harsh discipline techniques.
- When parents are educated about child development, they are more easily able to identify potential developmental delays, special needs and behavioral problems. Parents of children
with developmental or behavior problems or special needs require additional support and coaching in their parenting roles to reduce their frustration and provide the help their children need.

**Examples of How to incorporate Knowledge of Child Development into CAN Programming:**

- Hold informal interactions between parents and program staff on issues such as tantrums, biting, etc.
- Parent education classes can use various approaches, including presenting information on developmental stages, or identifying parents with children the same age.
- Create an observation space where parents can watch their child interact and learn new techniques from observing staff.

**Concrete Support**

It can be difficult at times for parents to get the help and advice they need. When parents or caregivers experiencing problems with housing, finances, illness, unemployment, or conflict in relationships, it can deplete their energy and take away the focus from their child. In addition, parents face challenges when trying to navigate their way around the systems they need in order to get help. Getting assistance when it's needed helps a caregiver to be a better parent by making sure they can give their child what they need. Having the ability to give their child what he or she needs greatly reduces the stress and anxiety that can make them short-tempered and irritable with their child.

**Concrete Support and Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention**

- It is a known fact that child neglect can be a consequence of family crisis, a parental condition (such mental health or addiction), or stresses associated with lack of resources.

**Examples of How to incorporate Concrete Support in Times of Need into CAN Programming:**

- Strive to serve the family as a whole, not just the individual child or parent in your program.
- When possible, give referrals to specific individuals at service agencies (not just the agencies themselves)
- Serving as an access point for health care, child care subsidies, and other services. Initiate the contact or invite conversation if staff suspects a family problem or emergency.
- Offering on-site food pantries and clothing closets is not only an easy way to assist families in need, but also identify those who may be experiencing crisis and in need of further assistance.

**Social and Emotional Development**

As children grow, so do their emotions and ability to express themselves. And just like reading to children and playing with them can help their brains and bodies develop, there are many ways that parents can help their children learn to express and regulate their emotions. Social and emotional skills are the most important developmental skills that young children learn during their first years of life.

Staff in your prevention program can work with children to help them learn about their emotions so that they can talk about and describe what they’re feeling. Staff can work with parents in a parenting program on how their response to their child’s emotions influences how children learn to understand and cope with feelings of anger, happiness and sadness that are a fundamental part of the human experience.
Social and Emotional Development in Children and Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention

- It is a well known fact that children with challenging behaviors are at greater risk for abuse. Identifying and working with children early to keep their development on track helps keep them safe.
- Helping children develop socially and emotionally impacts the way parents and children interact. As children learn to verbalize their emotions rather than act them out, they are more able to tell parents how they feel, what they need, and how their parents’ actions make them feel. This allows a parent to be more responsive to their children’s needs and reduces the probability to yell or hit.

Examples of How to incorporate Social and Emotional Development into CAN Programming:

- Host a parent café style dialogue for parent participants in the program
- In prevention programs for children, staff can incorporate time to teach children social skills, such as sharing and being respectful of others and emotional skills such as expressing feelings.
- Staff can be trained to notice possible signs of problems. When they are concerned about a child, they can respond quickly by asking another teacher or staff member to observe, or talk with the parent.
- Programs can offer an activity such as an art project that allow children to express themselves in ways other than words, many of which include a take-home component that involves parents.