

Making Small but Significant Shifts in Practice



**Center for the
Study of Social Policy**
Ideas into Action

CENTER FOR THE STUDY
OF SOCIAL POLICY'S

strengthening families™
A PROTECTIVE FACTORS FRAMEWORK



STRENGTHENING FAMILIES™ AND CORE PRACTICE SKILLS

	Practice Skills	Strengthening Families Contribution
Engaging	The process of developing and maintaining a mutually beneficial relationship (whether short or long-term) that is built on respect, trust and genuineness. Engagement requires creating an environment where willingness to plan and act together is the goal. Active listening skills are critical.	Strengthening Families™ serves as a concrete platform for strengths-based family engagement.
Assessing	A dynamic process of gathering, analyzing and organizing information in support of understanding and decision-making that continues throughout the life of a case.	Assessment tools and processes include information on protective factors. Information is collected on existing protective factors that can serve as building blocks for addressing issues that brought the family to the attention of the system. Protective factors are used as an organizing lens and for family goal setting.
Decision-Making / Teaming	A deliberate and structured approach to involving youth and families in decision-making through facilitated meetings of family, their identified supports and professionals working with the family.	Protective factors are discussed during teaming conversations and are used to inform decisions about who will attend teaming meetings.
Services and Supports Planning	Engaging parents, caregivers and youth in identifying services and supports that can assist them in achieving jointly developed goals. This process can also serve as an opportunity to assist the parent, caregiver and youth in recognizing and understanding developmental needs.	Case plans include specific elements to build protective factors focused on services the system can implement, actions by the parent/ youth and actions of the case worker.
Intervening	Use of self as an active change agent with the family by engaging in purposeful interactions, capturing “just in time” moments to transfer information, gain understanding, take action and adjust plans based on the outcomes of these actions. Observation, active listening and influencing skills are necessary. Actions in this arena are dependent on the worker’s ability to continuously assess and intervene in a timely and constructive manner, based on ongoing assessment and furthered by understandings of family situations. Appropriate adjustments are made over time to family goals, resources and supports.	Case workers have the knowledge related to child and development and the skills and capacities needed to use every interaction with families as an opportunity to support the family in building protective factors.
Monitoring and Case Closure	Creating clarity with families about the conditions for case closure, decision making around closure, preparation for transitioning from system involvement and consolidation/continued strengths development.	Protective factors are integrated into the case closing decision-making matrix. Families leave system involvement with an active plan for continuing to build their protective factors. Warm handoffs are made to community partners that can continue to support families.



USING PROTECTIVE FACTORS TO HELP IDENTIFY RELEVANT STRENGTHS

Parental Resilience

- Caregiver exhibits self-awareness around issues that lead to stress, anger, depression or other emotional states that might impair his/her caregiving abilities
- Caregiver has self-awareness around aspects of the relationship/interactions with the child that he/she finds challenging
- Caregiver has effective self-care strategies already in place for when life feels overwhelming or stressful
- Caregiver is able to clearly articulate things he/she enjoys most about each child and about caregiving
- Caregiver is willing to engage in structured activities that enhance feelings of connection with the child
- Caregiver utilizes proactive self-care strategies to address triggering situations

Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development

- Caregiver has a trustworthy source for parenting information that he/she is comfortable turning to when parenting feels overwhelming
- Caregiver has interest and curiosity around learning more about parenting and about his/her child as an individual
- Caregiver is interested in and willing to try out new parenting strategies

Social Connections

- Caregiver has a friend or family member who he/she trusts as a confidante or ally and who is willing to play a specific role in supporting the caregiver
- Caregiver has a trusted friend or family member who can take an active supporting role and is willing to play a specific role in maintaining the child's safety
- Caregiver is active in community organizations or social groups that:
 - Provide alternatives to behavior(s) that may be contributing to child welfare issues
 - Connect families to community supports that help address the issue(s) that originally brought the family into contact with the child welfare system

Concrete Support in Times of Need

- Caregiver knows how to access services or supports
- Caregiver is connected to friends or other individuals who can support his/her service navigation
- Caregiver is comfortable advocating for him/herself and the child
- Caregiver is able to articulate concrete needs

Social and Emotional Competence of Children

- Caregiver provides warm and consistent responses to the child
- Caregiver engages in activities with the child that support social emotional development
- Child exhibits age-appropriate ability to express emotions
- Child has a strong bond with the caregiver
- Child has a strong bond with another adult
- Child has a strong bond with siblings or other children



WORKSHEET: USING PROTECTIVE FACTORS TO HELP IDENTIFY RELEVANT STRENGTHS

Worker name _____

Family name _____

Date last updated _____

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



USING PROTECTIVE FACTORS TO DEVELOP CASE PLAN TASKS AND ACTIVITIES

Protective Factor	Sample Objective	Sample Tasks / Activities
Parental Resilience	The mother will consistently identify and meet her own physical and emotional care needs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Mother will call her sister when feeling overwhelmed.• Mother will take a positive self-care action every day, such as walking for 20 minutes, taking a hot bath, listening to favorite music, talking with her sister, etc.• Mother will create a self-calming routine and follow it when she feels frustrated, angry or out-of-control.
Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development	Both parents will work together to demonstrate expectations for their four-year-old child which are consistent with the child's age and developmental stage.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Both parents will enroll in a parenting education class.• Both parents will practice a new parenting strategy learned in the parenting class and write down the outcome.• Both parents will fill out the "Ages and Stages Questionnaire" and identify any subsequent questions or concerns.• Both parents will meet with the child's preschool teacher or pediatrician to discuss the results of the "Ages and Stages Questionnaire."
Social Connections	The mother will identify and engage in positive peer relationships that serve as a source of support.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Mother will ask her neighbor to care for her child and make use of this support if she does not feel able to do so in a safe way.• Mother will invite another mother from her child's school to go to the movies or other recreational activity.• Mother will talk to her counselor about the barriers she has identified that interfere with her ability to engage socially.• Mother will engage in reciprocal support with friends (e.g., ride sharing, making meals together, babysitting trade).• Mother will join a church group and participate in social activities.
Concrete Support in Times of Need	The parents and caseworker will work together to address issues contributing to stress in the family.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Parents and caseworker will identify an agreed-upon list of issues contributing to stress in the family and an agreed-upon action plan to address those issues.• Parents and caseworker will identify and select an agreed-upon service provider.• Caseworker will provide bus tokens and parents will attend scheduled appointments with the service provider.• Caseworker and parents will work together to complete applications for benefits and/or services.
Social and Emotional Competence of Children	The father and mother will provide for the twelve-year-old child's social and emotional development.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Father and mother will talk with their child's teacher and basketball coach about additional supports the child needs to work through the trauma experienced.• Father and mother will schedule counseling appointments and bring the child to the appointments.• Father and mother will schedule and jointly participate in interactive recreational activities (e.g., hiking, bowling, sports events) with their child at least one time per month.• Father and mother will encourage their child to invite friends to the home for a movie night or other fun activity.



Worker name _____

Family name _____

Date last updated _____

Protective Factor	Objective	Tasks / Activities
Parental Resilience		
Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development		
Social Connections		
Concrete Support in Times of Need		
Social and Emotional Competence of Children		



ALIGNING STRENGTHENING FAMILIES™ AND TEAMING

Protective factor	Definition	How teaming builds it
Parental Resilience	Caregivers maintain a positive attitude and have the ability to cope with, creatively solve, recover and grow from challenges in their personal life and parenting experiences.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Treating families in an empathetic and respectful way that conveys that they are valued• Engaging the families as primary decision-makers in creating a safety plan• Focusing on identifying and developing families' existing strengths• Making resiliency building strategies part of the teaming discussion
Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development	Caregivers understand what to expect at different stages of child development, effective parenting skills and ways of finding help with specific developmental or behavioral problems.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Helping caregivers identify new ways to parent that can address safety issues• Identifying specific parenting stresses and developing plans for resolving them• Helping caregivers better understand their children and how to parent more effectively
Social Connections	Caregivers have a network of people, agencies and organizations that provide emotional support and concrete assistance and the skills and tools to develop and maintain social networks.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Asking families about who in their social network can contribute to their safety plan• Encouraging families to invite key individuals in their support system to teaming discussions
Concrete Support in Times of Need	Caregivers have the skills and tools to access formal and informal services and supports from social networks in times of family crisis.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Inviting community partners to participate in team meetings• Helping caregivers identify community resources to help them meet case plan goals
Children's Social and Emotional Development	Caregivers work with children to help them learn to interact positively with others, communicate their emotions and feel good about themselves.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Inviting children to participate when appropriate• Ensuring that children's experience of trauma is recognized and a plan to address the trauma is developed as part of teaming conversations



INCLUDING A STRENGTHENING FAMILIES PERSPECTIVE IN FAMILY CONFERENCES

Protective factors	Developmental needs	Caregiver decision making
Safety Conference		
<p>What protective capacities have been identified as needing to be strengthened?</p> <p>Can specific protective factors support the protective capacities?</p>	<p>Does the child have critical developmental needs requiring urgent attention?</p>	<p>Does the caregiver understand the safety concerns and threats?</p> <p>Has the caregiver been engaged in thinking about how to respond to these concerns and threats?</p>
Family Support Conference		
<p>Have caregiver protective factors been assessed?</p> <p>Has an action plan been developed to support building protective factors that will contribute to needed protective capacities or goals under the single case plan?</p> <p>Are individuals who can support the caregiver's protective factors engaged in the conference?</p>	<p>Has the child's developmental status been assessed?</p> <p>Does the single case plan:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure that the child is linked to quality developmental supports? • Support continuity with existing caregivers and care settings whenever possible? • Help the child transition when continuity is not possible? 	<p>Has the caregiver identified areas of their parenting that are strong or need strengthening in order to respond to the needs of their child?</p> <p>If the child has been placed, does the caregiver have a clear understanding of the expectations to achieve reunification?</p>
Placement Stability Conference		
<p>Can the existing placement be supported by a focus on building the caregiver's protective factors?</p>	<p>Does the placement plan:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure that the child is linked to quality developmental supports? • Support continuity with existing caregivers and care settings whenever possible? • Help the child transition when continuity is not possible? 	<p>Is the caregiver involved in thinking through the new placement decision and how their knowledge of the child can help inform the placement decision?</p> <p>Has the impact of the new placement on the caregiver's ability to visit and stay connected to the child been considered?</p>
Permanency Conference		
<p>Has the caregiver met goals around building protective factors?</p> <p>Does the caregiver have a continuing protective factors plan in place?</p> <p>Is the caregiver connected to needed supports for continuing to build protective factors?</p> <p>Does the caregiver understand how the permanency decision will impact his/her protective factors and know how to stay strong in the face of the permanency decision?</p>	<p>Does the permanency plan:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure that the child is linked to quality developmental supports? • Support continuity with existing caregivers and care settings whenever possible? • Help the child transition when continuity is not possible? 	<p>Has the caregiver been engaged in permanency decisions?</p> <p>Has the caregiver been supported in thinking about how to keep from re-entering the child welfare system?</p>



USING FAMILY PARTNERSHIP MEETINGS TO CHECK IN ON FAMILY PROGRESS

Worker name _____

Family name _____

Date last updated _____

Protective Factor	Objective	Progress and Concerns
Parental Resilience		
Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development		
Social Connections		
Concrete Support in Times of Need		
Social and Emotional Competence of Children		



BUILDING PROTECTIVE FACTORS DURING CASEWORK VISITS

Casework visits are opportunities to engage with caregivers and children in ways that both support the family and build protective factors. Your interactions with the caregiver and child are small interventions that can help the family move toward meeting goals in their case plan. Visits allow you to observe and reinforce what is going right, while also gently providing support, advice and encouragement when caregivers or children are struggling. The following tips can help caseworkers build protective factors among the families they serve.

Parental Resilience

- Project a positive and strengths-based approach to the family.
- Encourage the caregiver to talk about stresses or challenges they are experiencing (either in caring for the child or in life in general). Provide empathetic support and help the caregiver to problem solve around these challenges.
- Validate and support good decisions.
- Ask what the caregiver enjoys doing with the child and emphasize opportunities to build these activities into regular routines.
- Support the family as key decision-makers throughout the case planning process.
- Encourage the caregiver to explore his or her own past experiences of trauma and to address how those experiences might impact them in the present.
- Normalize the fact that parenting is stressful and help the caregiver plan out responses to stressful parenting situations.
- Encourage self-care strategies.

Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development

- Observe parent-child interactions and provide positive coaching around supporting child development, nurturing the child or behavior management strategies.
- Model nurturing behavior in your interactions with the child.
- Model appropriate expectations for the child.
- When the caregiver's expectations are not in line with the child's developmental stage, engage the caregiver in a conversation about how to provide more developmentally appropriate responses.
- Ask the caregiver about his or her parenting challenges and recommend resources that can be used to address those challenges.
- Connect the caregiver to parenting education classes or resources as part of case planning.
- Help the caregiver to value the caregiving role by underlining the positive impact that nurturing care has on a child.
- Provide "just in time" parenting education (i.e., information a caregiver needs when new parenting issues arise). Provide and discuss tip sheets related to issues the child or caregiver is dealing with.
- Help the caregiver identify trusted informants who can provide parenting information.



Social Connections

- Model good relational behavior and use the case management process to help the caregiver strengthen relational skills.
- Help the caregiver reflect on the dynamics in his or her existing relationships and identify supporters who contribute positively.
- Encourage the caregiver to expand or deepen his or her social network.
- Encourage the caregiver to address personal or family issues (e.g., anxiety, depression) that serve as barriers to developing healthy social connections.

Concrete Support in Times of Need

- Help the caregiver to identify concrete needs that are causing stress in the family and connect the caregiver with resources to address those needs.
- Encourage help seeking behavior.
- Work with the family to understand any past experience with service systems and any stigma they attach to certain services.
- Help the family to navigate complex systems by explaining eligibility requirements, helping to fill out forms or making a warm handoff to someone who can help the family access the services they need.
- Help caregivers understand their role as an advocate for themselves and their children.

Social Emotional Competence of Children

- Provide warm and consistent support to the child.
- Look for signs of trauma in the child. When a child exhibits signs of trauma, connect the child and caregiver to mental health resources and help the caregiver to understand and interpret the behavior as stemming from trauma.
- Increase the caregiver's awareness of the importance of early relationships.
- Help the caregiver fully understand the importance of their role in nurturing the child's social-emotional development.
- Provide the caregiver with concrete tips and resources to help build the child's social and emotional competence.
- Encourage family play by bringing play supplies (e.g., a board game, crayons) to the visit.
- Connect the family to resources that support the child's social-emotional development.
- Help the caregiver address the child's attachment issues and/or challenging behaviors.
- Teach and model social skills, such as sharing, taking turns and positive conflict resolution.



WORKSHEET: USING PROTECTIVE FACTORS AS A LENS TO MONITOR PROGRESS TOWARD CASE CLOSURE

Worker name _____

Family name _____

Date last updated _____

Just as we monitor other aspects of case progress, we also want to stay attuned to changes in the family's protective factors. In the end, as families transition out of their engagement with the child welfare system, we want to be able to demonstrate that:

- The family made progress on their own protective factors goals
- The family can reliably draw upon their protective factors in ways that help prevent a repeat of the issues that brought them in contact with the system
- The family has a plan in place for continuing to build their protective factors once they are no longer involved with the system

The chart below can be used in multiple ways, including:

- In early engagement with caregivers to discuss and agree on the type of growth in protective factors that could be used to indicate progress
- In family team meetings or other conversations with partners who are also supporting the family
- To help staff in documenting growth in family strengths for court reports and other case progress reports
- To support decisions about case closure

The form below includes possible indicators of family progress, with room for your notes.

Questions to ask	Indicators of change as framed by protective factors
Has caregiver functioning acceptably improved?	Strengthened Parental Resilience <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Improved problem solving skills <input type="checkbox"/> Better able to cope with stress/does not allow stress to impact parenting <input type="checkbox"/> Self-care strategies in place
	Social and Emotional Competence of Children <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Caregiver is emotionally responsive to the child(ren) <input type="checkbox"/> Caregiver has created an environment in which the child(ren) demonstrates a sense of safety to express his/her emotions <input type="checkbox"/> Caregiver separates emotions from actions <input type="checkbox"/> Caregiver provokes age-appropriate social-emotional responses and encourages/reinforces social skills <input type="checkbox"/> Caregiver creates opportunities for the child(ren) to explore and solve problems
	Other Indicators and Notes



Questions to ask	Indicators of change as framed by protective factors
<p>Has caregiver's willingness and ability to reach out to others in times of need changed?</p>	<p>Strengthened Parental Resilience</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Improved help-seeking behavior <input type="checkbox"/> Receiving mental health or substance abuse services as needed <p>Enhanced Social Connections</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Caregiver has supportive relationships <input type="checkbox"/> Caregiver has a network he/she can turn to for help <input type="checkbox"/> Caregiver has relationship-building skills <p>Concrete Supports</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Caregiver is open to accessing and using services <input type="checkbox"/> Caregiver has enhanced skills in accessing supports when needed <p>Other Indicators and Notes</p>
<p>Does the caregiver have realistic expectations for the child(ren)?</p>	<p>Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Caregiver is more confident in his/her parenting skills <input type="checkbox"/> Caregiver has a new appreciation for his/her nurturing role <input type="checkbox"/> Caregiver has developed a balance between parenting and self-care <input type="checkbox"/> Caregiver better understands/encourages healthy development <input type="checkbox"/> Caregiver better understands/employs age-appropriate responses to the child(ren)'s behaviors <input type="checkbox"/> Child(ren) responds more positively to the caregiver's approach <input type="checkbox"/> Caregiver is effectively linked to early childhood resources <input type="checkbox"/> Caregiver is involved in the child(ren)'s early childhood activities <input type="checkbox"/> Caregiver understands the child(ren)'s special needs and how best to meet those needs <p>Social and Emotional Competence of Children</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Caregivers sets clear and age-appropriate expectations/limits <input type="checkbox"/> Caregiver has created an environment in which the child(ren) can safely express his or her emotions <input type="checkbox"/> Caregiver is emotionally responsive to the child(ren) <p>Other Indicators and Notes</p>



TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF

Putting Protective Factors into Play for Yourself

Child welfare work is hard. When you spend all day working with families who need a lot of support, it can be difficult to focus on your own well-being. One of the best things about the Protective Factors Framework is that it applies to everyone – including you and your family! Thinking about how to put protective factors into play in your own life can help you keep going in the face of the daily challenges of doing child welfare work.

Personal Resilience

What do you do to take care of yourself? Try to plan ahead of time so that when you are having a bad day you can:

- Do something that helps you to relax, feel calm and take your mind off of the stress you are experiencing.
- Take a break if you need it (this can be as simple as asking your partner to make dinner or a friend to take care of the kids, or taking a personal day from work).
- Remind yourself of why you do this work. Reflect on what drew you to social work as a career and what you want to achieve for children and families in your community through your work.
- Take time to remember the impact you have made in the lives of others – through your work, in your extended family, in your neighborhood or in your community.
- Get help from a supervisor or a coworker if you need it.
- Find a way on an ongoing basis to release the emotional stress related to the work. Allow yourself physical & emotional enhancers. Take care of yourself by eating well, getting rest, creating separation from work. Identify actions that help you to decompress.
- Recognize your own humanness and learn ways to separate who you are as a person from what the job requires you to do.

Social Connections

Are there people in your life who can support you during rough times and help you recharge outside of work? Make sure that you benefit from positive relationships with others:

- Cultivate a supportive environment at work so that you and your coworkers have time to get to know each other and can turn to each other for support when needed.
- Spend time with family, spiritual groups, clubs, hobbies, sports, recreation or any other activity that removes you from the stress of work. Look into joining groups or organizations as a way to meet new people. Book clubs, school organizations, religious communities or clubs focused on a hobby you enjoy can be great places to start.
- When you're having a tough day due to backlog on cases or a particularly challenging family, don't hesitate to reach out to colleagues.
- Use unit meetings as an opportunity to do a staffing of a challenging case to obtain different perspective.
- Reach out to friends and loved ones for help and support. And when they're having a bad day, make sure that you do your best to help them in return.



Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development

If you are a parent yourself, the challenges faced by children in the child welfare system can hit especially close to home. It can be difficult to keep a healthy perspective on your children's development and your own parenting when you come home. Even if you are not a parent, or don't have children living at home, it is important to check your assumptions and understanding about parenting and child development through your interactions with families that are struggling.

- Just as parents can catch their children being good, we can all support each other as parents by "catching" good parenting in action. Recognize and pat yourself on the back when you have kept your cool during a stressful situation.
- Remember that parenting is part learned and part natural and that goes for you as well even though you are a "professional." Take time to find out more about child development and effective parenting. Try out the information in your own home and make it part of the knowledge base you bring to families.
- Take time to think about beliefs you hold about parenting and parent/child relationships and how it impacts your child welfare work. Are there things in your own experience that may be coloring your response to families?

Concrete Support in Times of Need

Everyone needs support at different times in their lives. As a child welfare worker, you are probably more attuned than many community members to the resources available in your community. What do you do when you need support yourself? Some ways to shore up your concrete supports include:

- Stay aware of community resources available to help with issues that can come up for any family, such as substance abuse, mental health issues, domestic violence and material needs. Those can be valuable connections in a time of crisis not just for the families you work with but for yourself, a friend or a member of your extended family.
- If you've had a very difficult case that has not ended well, don't hesitate to ask your supervisor or agency administrator for counseling assistance for yourself and others within your unit.
- Put money into savings when things are going well. An emergency fund that can cover 2-3 months of living expenses is ideal, in case you should face illness, unemployment or unexpected expenses.
- Talk to friends, neighbors and family members to be sure you have people lined up who can pick up your child from school when you aren't able to or give you a ride to work if your car breaks down. You can do the same for them, and know you can count on each other when you're in a pinch.

Social and Emotional Competence of Children

Many of us get into child welfare because we care about children. Take time in your work to connect with the children in your caseload – and remember the importance of your work and the effect you have on them and their lives.