Promoting Protective Factors for Children and Youth in Foster Care: A Guide for Practitioners

Protective factors are conditions or attributes of individuals, families, communities, or the larger society that, when present, promote well-being and reduce the risk for negative outcomes. These factors may "buffer" the effect of risk exposure and help individuals and families negotiate difficult circumstances and fare better in school, work, and life.

Why Focus on Protective Factors?

Youth in foster care are often exposed to multiple risk factors, putting them *at risk* for negative outcomes. Intervention and prevention efforts intended to reduce risk factor exposure can be effective, but they may also take longer to show evidence of impact. At the same time, children and youth in foster care are considered to be already *in risk* given the conditions leading up to their placement in foster care. Practitioners working with these children, youth, and families can effectively work to build protective strengths at the individual, relationship, and community levels that will help them face and overcome trauma or adversity.

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Building the protective factors of children and youth in foster care can help increase their resilience in the short term. It can also help promote skills, personal characteristics, knowledge, relationships, and opportunities that offset risk factors and contribute to improved well-being and positive longer term outcomes. For example, the academic skills of youth in foster care are related to future earnings and employment. Instead of waiting to measure employment outcomes as an adult, practitioners can target and track academic improvements each quarter as an interim result contributing to future employment success.

Lessons From the Research Literature

To address the broad spectrum of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), Administration on Children, Youth and Families' (ACYF's) programs and populations, ACYF commissioned *Protective Factors for Populations Served by the Administration on Children, Youth and Families: A Literature Review and Theoretical Framework* (http://www.dsgonline.com/ACYF), a literature review and expert consultation effort that distilled findings on protective factors relevant to the five populations it serves: homeless and runaway youth, children exposed to domestic violence, victims of child abuse and neglect, youth in and aging out of foster care, and pregnant and parenting youth. As a result of that review, a general framework for organizing and applying protective factors was developed outlining the evidence for protective factors at the individual, relationship, and community levels.

The findings presented in this factsheet are based on a thorough review of current research linking protective factors to well-being for children and youth in and transitioning out of foster care.

Protective Factors

The following presents the nine protective factors with the strongest evidence to date for youth in and aging out of foster care.

Individual Level
Self-regulation skills
Relational skills
Academic skills

Relationship Level
Parenting competencies
Caring adults
Living with family member(s)

Community Level
Positive school environment
Stable living situation
Supports for independent living

Focusing on this in-risk population has spotlighted specific factors that carry moderate or strong association with improved well-being, which can complement broader protective factors reviews. This review also revealed the need to enhance the evidence base through further research and practice in order to better understand the measures for tracking progress and the policy context and strategies that contribute to effective interventions. The review highlights the importance of working at multiple levels to impact individual skills and knowledge, focus on nurturing relationships, and increase supports and opportunities available in the broader community.[1]

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[1] Protective factors demonstrating evidence with general populations may also be protective for ACYF-specific populations. Omission of a factor here does not mean it cannot be protective for these youth; it primarily means that there is currently no strong or moderate evidence showing its protective nature for children and youth in or transitioning out of foster care based on this literature review.

Using Protective Factors for Children and Youth in Foster Care

Which individual skills and capacities can improve the well-being of children and youth in foster care?

At the individual level, evidence is strongest for the protective nature of self-regulation skills, relational skills, and academic skills for children and youth in foster care.

Self-regulation skills refer to a youth's ability to manage or control emotions and behaviors, which can include self-mastery, anger management, long-term self-control, and emotional intelligence. Children and youth in foster care who effectively regulate or control their emotions have fewer placement disruptions and behavior problems and are more likely to find employment when they exit foster care.

Relational skills refer to a youth's ability to form positive bonds and connections (e.g., social competence, being caring, forming prosocial relationships) as well as his or her interpersonal skills (e.g., communication skills and conflict-resolution skills). In the existing research on youth in foster care, relational skills primarily refer to a youth's ability to positively interact with foster parents, teachers, and positive peers. These skills are related to positive outcomes such as stability and satisfaction with foster care placements, improved secure attachment, reductions in delinquency, and fewer disruptions in placement.

Academic skills refer to school conduct, educational status, and educational attainment. For youth in foster care, academic skills are related to greater stability in out-of-home placements as well as improvements in future earnings, employment, and wages.

How can parents, guardians, and other adults contribute to the well-being of children and youth in foster care?

At the relationship level, parents, extended family members, and other adults can be important sources of protection for children and youth in foster care.

Parenting competencies of both the birth and foster parents are very important for the well-being of children and youth in foster care. These parenting competencies include specific skills such as supervising and disciplining children and relational factors that promote bonds between children and parents. Today, numerous programmatic interventions focus on developing parenting competencies. These programs have found that improvements in parenting competencies are related to positive outcomes, such as reductions in child behavior problems, fewer disruptions in out-of-home placements, and increases in social skills and psychological adjustment. Improvements in parenting competencies have also been linked to the likelihood of children being reunited with their parents.

The *presence of a caring adult* is particularly important for teens and young adults in and aging out of foster care. These caring adults are usually not family members and may be mentors, advocates, teachers, or other adults. The presence of a caring adult is related to numerous positive outcomes for these young people including greater resilience, lower stress, less likelihood of arrest, reductions in homelessness, higher levels of employment, less delinquent conduct, favorable health, and less suicidal ideation.

Living with family members, often called kinship care, is another important relationship-level protective factor for children and youth in foster care. Research indicates that youth in kinship care placements experience fewer out-of-home placements, have lower rates of juvenile justice involvement, and exhibit less antisocial conduct than youth placed in traditional foster care or group home placements.

How can we create a community that supports the well-being of children and youth in foster care?

Research has linked three community-level factors to positive outcomes for children and youth in foster care:

A *positive school environment* offers an important source of protection for children and youth in foster care. Research has shown that supports such as educational liaisons for elementary and middle school students and programs for older adolescents transitioning from foster care to college are related to positive outcomes such as improved school performance, knowledge of college requirements, awareness of college life, and resilience.

A *stable living situation,* such as placement stability, permanency (i.e., reunification with birth family, a legally finalized adoption, or placement with a legal guardian), or aging out of foster care at a later age, is related to positive outcomes such as adaptability and success after leaving foster care.

Finally, *support for independent living* is important for youth transitioning out of foster care. Receiving support from independent living programs is associated with educational attainment, employment, housing, health, and a range of life skills.

Where to Go From Here?

Practitioners working with children and youth in and transitioning out of foster care have an important role to play in using protective factors as part of program strategies and in continuing to develop the evidence base for protective factors in this population. Practitioners can do the following:

▪ **Engage in advocacy, policy development, and community engagement activities** to inform policymakers about the importance of placement stability and permanency, and the benefits of aging out of foster care at a later age.

▪ **Include program components for children and youth in foster care that focus on building evidence-based individual factors (self-regulation skills, relational skills, and academic skills).** Components can include individual counseling, group counseling, and involving youth in foster care in programs for the general population that strengthen self-regulation, relational, and academic skills. Integrating youth in care into general population programs can help them connect with positive peers and build relationships with caring adults. They can also benefit from programs designed specifically for systems-involved youth as well as individual counseling that aim to strengthen these three important skills.

▪ **Include program components that build on protective factors at the relationship level.** Practitioners can ensure that both biological and foster parents are receiving the support they need to develop parenting competencies. While there are many programs addressing parenting competencies, an appropriate program will have the capacity to work with parents who are involved in foster care and to incorporate a culturally sensitive approach. Providing opportunities for older youth in foster care to connect with mentors or other caring adults is another important strategy at the relationship level. Finally, kinship care should be considered whenever possible.

▪ **Include program components for these children and youth at the community level.** This may include efforts to ensure that there are supports for youth in foster care at school and providing access to quality independent living programs.

▪ **Include an evaluation component** that will help build the evidence base for protective factors already showing some research support, as well as for those factors that have been useful in a practice context, but do not yet have evidence of impact.

Conclusion

No single program or initiative is likely to have the resources to address all pertinent factors, and it may not always be possible to incorporate protective factors at multiple levels. In such cases, the framework should be thought of as a guide to where collaboration might occur. If a program can work with one or two factors at the individual or relational levels, then this framework can help in selecting partners for collaboration who can address other evidence-based factors relevant to children and youth in foster care.

It is vital that practitioners who work with children and youth in foster care use evidence-based strategies whenever possible. It can sometimes be difficult to identify programs and strategies that are designed specifically for this in-risk population. However, by focusing on enhancing the aforementioned protective factors, we can help ensure these in-risk youth have a better chance to enjoy positive life outcomes.

Resources

Promoting Protective Factors Factsheets
(Development Services Group, Inc. [DSG], & Child Welfare Information Gateway)
This factsheet is part of a series of factsheets for practitioners developed by DGS for ACYF. The series explores the importance of protective factors in working with the following in-risk populations served by ACYF:

- *Promoting Protective Factors for Children Exposed to Domestic Violence*
  https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/guide-domesticviolence/
- *Promoting Protective Factors for Children and Youth in Foster Care*
  https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/guide-fostercare/
- *Promoting Protective Factors for In-Risk Families and Youth*
  https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/in-risk/

- *Promoting Protective Factors for Pregnant and Parenting Teens*
  https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/guide-teen/
- *Promoting Protective Factors for Victims of Child Abuse and Neglect*
  https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/victimscan/

Protective Factors for Populations Served by the Administration on Children, Youth, and Families: A Literature Review and Theoretical Framework
(ACYF & DSG)
ACYF contracted DSG to examine the research and develop a literature review on protective factors relevant to ACYF's target populations. Information and resources gleaned from this examination helped inform this factsheet and aid the development of graphic models and a brief for researchers. Access the Protective Factors Literature Review, graphic models, and brief for researchers on the DSG website.
http://www.dsgonline.com/ACYF

Protective Factors Approaches in Child Welfare
(Child Welfare Information Gateway)
This issue brief provides an 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.
https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/issue-briefs/protective-factors/

Prevention Resource Guide

(HHS's Children's Bureau, Office on Child Abuse and Neglect; Child Welfare Information Gateway; FRIENDS National Center for Community-Based Child Abuse Prevention; & Center for the Study of Social Policy—Strengthening Families)

This guide was created primarily to support community-based child abuse prevention professionals who work to prevent child maltreatment and promote well-being. Find information on protective factors approaches to promoting well-being, working with families using protective factors, engaging communities, and protecting children. The guide also includes tip sheets for parents and caregivers and activity calendars—in both Spanish and English. Access the guide through the National Child Abuse Prevention Month website.

https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/preventing/preventionmonth/resource-guide/

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