

# BRING UP Nebraska

Raising strong, stable kids is a job  
for all of us.



Supported by the Nebraska Child Abuse  
Prevention Fund Board

## WHAT ARE PROTECTIVE FACTORS?

We've all heard of risk factors that contribute to problems within families. Protective Factors are the positive counterpoint to risk factors. Protective Factors help families stay safe, healthy and strong.

According to research, when multiple risk factors are present in a family, there's a greater likelihood of negative outcomes, including child maltreatment. But when multiple Protective Factors are present and supported, we see a greater probability in positive outcomes for children, families and communities.

Protective Factors are critical for all children, youth, families and communities. They are the difference between families and communities that not only survive, but thrive. Each of us has a role to play to help strengthen Protective Factors in our community and the families around us.

[NebraskaPinwheels.org](http://NebraskaPinwheels.org) is dedicated to helping visitors discover basic characteristics and resources all families need to thrive and what you can do to develop as a parent, caregiver, teacher, service provider or other community member.

## NURTURING AND ATTACHMENT

Research shows that babies who received affection and nurturing from their parents have the best chance of developing into children, teens and adults who are happy, healthy and have relational, self-regulation and problem-solving skills. Research also shows that a consistent relationship with caring adults in the early years of life is associated with better grades, healthier behaviors, more positive peer interactions and increased ability to cope with stress later in life.

As children grow, nurturing by parents and other caregivers remains important for healthy physical and emotional development. Parents nurture their older children by making time to listen to them, being involved and interested in the child's school and other activities, staying aware of the child or teen's interests and friends, and being willing to advocate for the child when necessary.

## KNOWLEDGE OF PARENTING/CHILD DEVELOPMENT

Parents who understand the usual course of child development are more likely to be able to provide their children with respectful communication, consistent rules and expectations, developmentally appropriate limits and opportunities that promote independence. But no parent can be an expert on all aspects of infant, child and teenage development or on the most effective ways to support a child at each stage. When parents are not aware of normal developmental milestones, interpret their child's behaviors in a negative way or do not know how to respond to and effectively manage a child's behavior, they can become frustrated and may resort to harsh discipline.

As children grow, parents need to continue to foster their parenting competencies by learning about and responding to children's emerging needs. Information about child development and parenting may come from many sources, including extended families, cultural practices, media, formal parent education classes or a positive school environment that supports parents. Interacting with other children of similar ages also helps parents better understand their own child. Observing other caregivers who use positive techniques for managing children's behavior provides an opportunity for parents to learn healthy alternatives.

Parenting styles need to be adjusted for each child's unique temperament and circumstances. Parents of children with special needs may benefit from additional coaching and support to reduce frustration and help them become the parents their children need.

## PARENTAL RESILIENCE

Parents who can cope with the stresses of everyday life, as well as an occasional crisis, have resilience—the flexibility and inner strength to bounce back when things are not going well. Parents with resilience also know how to seek help in times of trouble. Their ability to deal with life's ups and downs serves as a model of coping behavior for their children. This can help children learn critical self-regulation and problem-solving skills.

Multiple life stressors, such as a family history of abuse or neglect, physical and mental health problems, marital conflict, substance abuse and domestic or community violence—and financial stressors such as unemployment, financial insecurity and homelessness—can reduce a parent's capacity to cope effectively with the typical day-to-day stresses of raising children. Conversely, community-level protective factors—such as a positive community environment and economic opportunities—enhance parental resilience.

All parents have inner strengths or resources that can serve as a foundation for building their resilience. These may include faith, flexibility, humor, communication skills, problem-solving skills, mutually supportive caring relationships or the ability to identify and access outside resources and services when needed. All of these qualities strengthen their capacity to parent effectively, and they can be nurtured and developed through concrete skill-building activities or through supportive interactions with others.

## SOCIAL CONNECTIONS

Parents with a network of emotionally supportive friends, family and neighbors often find that it is easier to care for their children and themselves. Most parents need people they can call on once in a while when they need a sympathetic listener, advice or concrete support such as transportation or occasional child care. In other words, a positive community environment—and the parent’s ability to participate effectively in his or her community—is an important protective factor. On the other hand, research has shown that parents who are isolated and have few social connections are at higher risk for child abuse and neglect.

Social connections support children in multiple ways. A parent’s positive relationships give children access to other caring adults, a relationship-level protective factor that may include extended family members, mentors or other members of the family’s community. Parents’ social interactions also model important relational skills for children and increase the likelihood that children will benefit from involvement in positive activities (individual-level factors). As children grow older, positive friendships and support from peers provide another important source of social connection.

Being new to a community, recently divorced or a first-time parent makes a support network even more important. It may require extra effort for these families to build the new relationships they need. Some parents may need to develop self-confidence and social skills to expand their social networks. In the meantime, social connections can come from other caring adults such as service providers, teachers or advocates. Helping parents identify resources and/or providing opportunities for them to make connections within their neighborhoods or communities may encourage isolated parents to reach out. Often, opportunities exist within faith-based organizations, schools, hospitals, community centers and other places where support groups or social groups meet.

## CONCRETE SUPPORTS FOR FAMILIES

Families whose basic needs (food, clothing, housing and transportation) are met have more time and energy to devote to their children’s safety and well-being. When parents do not have steady financial resources, lack a stable living situation, lack health insurance or face a family crisis (such as a natural disaster or the incarceration of a parent), their ability to support their children’s healthy development may be at risk. Families whose economic opportunities are limited may need assistance connecting to social service supports such as housing, alcohol and drug treatment, domestic violence counseling or public benefits.

Partnering with parents to identify and access resources may help prevent the stress that sometimes precipitates child maltreatment. Offering concrete supports also may help prevent the unintended neglect that sometimes occurs when parents are unable to provide for their children.

## SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL COMPETENCE OF CHILDREN

Children’s emerging ability to form bonds and interact positively with others, self-regulate their emotions and behavior, communicate their feelings, and solve problems effectively has a positive impact on their relationships with their family, other adults and peers. Parents and caregivers grow more responsive to children’s needs—and less likely to feel stressed or frustrated—as children learn to tell parents what they need and how parental actions make them feel, rather than “acting out” difficult feelings.

On the other hand, children’s challenging behaviors or delays in social-emotional development create extra stress for families. Parenting is more challenging when children do not or cannot respond positively to their parents’ nurturing and affection. These children may be at greater risk for abuse. Identifying and working with children early to keep their development on track helps keep them safe and helps their parents facilitate their healthy development.