

FOCUS

on Early Childhood Mental Health



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Five Protective Factors

We all know that some children and families can bounce back from and cope well with difficult circumstances in their lives, while others have a really hard time. All too often, when families are unable to find healthy ways to cope with the stresses of daily living, bad things happen, like child abuse and neglect.

Child and family experts talk about the “protective factors” that help children and families cope with adversity and thrive despite their challenges. Protective factors are conditions in families and communities that increase the health and well-being of children and families and help to prevent family violence.

So what are these protective factors? A project called “Strengthening Families Through Early Care and Education” lists five protective factors that can prevent child abuse and neglect:

- **Parental resilience:** the ability to cope and bounce back from difficult circumstances
- **Social connections:** people in the community (friends, family members, neighbors, teachers, etc.) who can provide emotional support
- **Knowledge of parenting and child development:** accurate information about how children develop and what to expect, along with knowledge about appropriate discipline techniques
- **Concrete support in times of need:** financial security, formal support like Medical Assistance or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, and informal support from social networks
- **Children’s social and emotional competence:** a child’s ability to get along with others and communicate his or her emotions effectively

Pennsylvania is one of a number of states that are incorporating information about these protective factors into training and expectations for child care and early learning facilities. The idea is to make sure that parents are valued and families are supported by staff who are committed to building good relationships with them. Staff are trained to recognize the signs of stress that could lead to child abuse or neglect and be able to offer positive support to families.

More information about protective factors:

- Strengthening Families National Network: www.strengtheningfamilies.net
- Child Information Gateway: www.childwelfare.gov/can/factors/protective.cfm#n
- *Strengthening Families and Communities: 2010 Resources Guide*, published by the federal Administration on Children, Youth and Families: www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/res_guide_2010/guide.pdf