Chapter 2: Working With Families
Using the Protective Factors

Nurturing and Attachment

Juggling the demands of work, home, and other responsibilities leaves many parents feeling like they do not have nearly enough time with their children. But even small acts of kindness, protection, and caring—a hug, a smile, or loving words—make a big difference to children. Research shows that babies who receive affection and nurturing from their parents (a relational-level protective factor) have the best chance of developing into children, teens, and adults who are happy, healthy, and possess individual-level protective factors, such as 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 an increased ability to cope with stress later in life.

Infant brains develop best when a few stable caregivers work to understand and meet the infant’s need for love, affection, and stimulation. Conversely, neglectful and abusive parenting can have a negative effect on brain development. A lack of contact or interaction with a caregiver can change the infant’s body chemistry, resulting in a reduction in the growth hormones essential for brain and heart development. Furthermore, children who lack early emotional attachments will have a difficult time relating to peers.

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.

How Workers Can Help

- Suggest a family game night! Loan games for parents to play with their children, if possible, and remind them that even young children can play board games on an adult’s “team.”
- Offer parents materials for a simple craft that they can make with their child.
- Teach new parents basic infant massage. Encourage parents to make eye contact and name each body part as they rub lotion on their baby.

Words to live by: Strong families show how much they love each other.
How Programs Can Help

- Use parent education strategies (workshops, lending libraries) as opportunities to share information about how a strong parent-child bond enhances brain development and supports positive behavior in young children.
- Share resources available from your agency and throughout the community on how parents can nurture and connect with their children at every age.
- Engage and include all important adults in a child’s life, including fathers, grandparents, and extended family, as part of a child’s “nurturing network.”
- Acknowledge cultural differences in how parents and children show affection.
- Recognize that when a child consistently does not show a positive response to the parent (for example, due to an emotional, developmental, or behavioral disability), the parent may need additional support.

CBCAP State Example: Wisconsin Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention Board

The Wisconsin Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention Board selected and funded a small number of evidence-informed and evidence-based parent education programs to enhance parenting skills, strengthen families, and enhance child maltreatment prevention. All of the parent education programs selected are rooted in the protective factors.

Participating agencies were required to implement at least one level of Triple P (a research-based parenting intervention), along with one other evidence-informed parent education program, such as the Effective Black Parenting Program or Nurturing Parenting™. Families who participated in Nurturing Parenting completed the Adult-Adolescent Parenting Inventory, which assesses parenting and child-rearing attitudes, both before and after receiving services. The results showed that parents demonstrated improvements in empathy, which includes parents’ nurturing and encouragement skills and their ability to recognize and understand children’s feelings. Families also demonstrated increased belief in the value of alternatives to corporal punishment.

For more information:

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