

# Promoting Resilience for Systems-Impacted Families



Everyone needs access to important types of positive experiences for optimal health and well-being.

**HOPE** describes these key types of positive childhood experiences as the Four Building Blocks. The Building Blocks include secure relationships; safe, stable, equitable environments to live, learn, and play; opportunities for belonging through social and civic engagement; and opportunities for emotional growth.

**Strengthening Families** identifies five Protective Factors, or key strengths that families need to promote optimal child development and make child abuse and neglect less likely. The Protective Factors include parental resilience, social connections, concrete support, knowledge of parenting and child development, and social and emotional competence of children.

Connection to the Four Building Blocks of HOPE and enhancing of the Protective Factors of Strengthening Families creates opportunities for families to break intergenerational cycles of systems-involvement and increases the likelihood that children, youth, and families will thrive. Research shows us that building resilience through these positive and protective experiences results in better health, mental health, and social outcomes well into adulthood.

*So what does that look like? How can you promote access to these key experiences while working in the Child Welfare or Juvenile Justice space? It may look very different family to family, but we have a few suggestions below on where to start.*

## Relationships and Social Connections:

For systems-impacted families, connecting kids- and then keeping them connected - with safe and stable adults and peers can make a huge difference throughout the lifespan of that child. Often, people credit a single adult or friend who believed deeply in them from their childhood with helping them navigate challenging childhoods and growing up to be healthy and thriving adults.

- Ask children and youth to identify the important people in their lives. Find creative ways to get more of those people into the child's day to day life. This might not always be able to happen in person, so think outside the box! Provide a device for video chats, set up an email or messaging account, or provide materials and stamps for letter writing. When child are removed from home or their relationship with a caregiver is disrupted, consider important, non-parent adults as possible kinship or kin-like placements.
- Ask caregivers the same question. Who are their people? Who do they go to for support? Be familiar with local informal resources that might offer opportunities for healthy relationship building. For example, is there a family support group with other systems-impacted caregivers? What about a neighborhood book club or even a school carpool that caregivers can get connected to? It takes a village to raise a child, and helping caregivers develop that village is a win-win for everyone. Prioritize these caregiver relationships in case planning!



## Environment and Concrete Support:

Children and adults need safe spaces to live, learn, and play where they have access to their basic needs and feel physically and emotionally safe.

- Learn about resources in the community that help families meet basic needs, such as Housing Authority Services, food pantries, health clinics, and clothing closets. Help caregivers access these services to help them meet the needs of their families.
- Make a safety plan for guns, prescription medication, or unsafe substances in the home to increase safety in the children's place to live.
- Make sure children in out of home placement are familiar with who they can turn to should they feel unsafe or like their basic needs aren't being met. Help youth develop a 5-finger plan where they list one person per finger they can call if they need help. Ensure that at least one of them is a non-family member and the youth has access to phone numbers for all of them.
- Encourage caregivers and children to spend time outside playing in blue and green spaces.
- Provide caregivers with experiences that enable them to understand their rights in accessing services, gain knowledge of relevant services, and learn how to navigate through service systems. Do what you can to ensure that the support is provided in a way that decreases, rather than increases parental stress.

## Social and Civic Engagement and Social Connections:

This sense of mattering can look different from child to child and often changes as children age. Prior to starting kindergarten, children generally find that sense of mattering at home. As they age, they tend to seek this sense of belonging with peers outside of the home in after school activities, volunteering engagements, and youth groups. For some children, this sense of belonging may come from a peer group that, unfortunately, encourages behavior that gets the youth engaged with the juvenile justice system. For children and youth in the foster care or juvenile justice system, finding and maintaining prosocial and positive communities where youth find mattering can be especially challenging. As their placements change, youth often find themselves unexpectedly pulled away from extracurricular activities and community relationships.

- During times of transition, find ways to keep youth involved in their activities so they can still feel that sense of belonging despite change and turmoil. This may mean setting up after school rides or figuring out a way to have a child participate in a club via Zoom.
- Encourage both caregivers and the youth to reflect on their existing social connections and how they benefit or do not benefit from them. Together, develop a list of desired social connections and strategies for achieving them.
- Everyone deserves a sense of community. This often looks different for the adults and the children, and that is ok! Encourage opportunities for both the grownups and the youth to find meaning in contributing to the well-being of others. Encourage opportunities for community engagement and participation in community activities, even if that takes place in a locked facility.
- Ask early and often about loneliness and physical and emotional isolation, including lack of access to resources and supports. It's an important way to open the door to these conversations.

## Emotional Growth, Parental Resilience, Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development, Social and Emotional Competence of Children:

Being systems-impacted is incredibly stressful for every member of the family, regardless of how strengths-based and relational the caseworker or particular jurisdiction is. Emotions are often intense in times of crisis.

- Help the adults and the children make space to understand what those emotions feel like in their bodies, practice grounding exercises when big feelings are present, and find outlets for the confusion, frustration, fear, anxiety, anger, and sadness.
- Assist families in getting involved in evidence-based programs, such as Healthy Families America and Growing Great Kids. These programs focus on promoting social and emotional growth for children and their caregivers.
- Seek behavioral health and early intervention services when appropriate.



**In addition to supporting children and caregivers' emotions, there are many things that providers can do to help caregivers support the emotional growth of their children.** This includes:

- Normalizing that parenting is stressful and helping the parent plan proactively for stressful situations.
- Supporting the family as key decision-makers in their lives.
- Encouraging the caregiver to reflect on their own needs and connect to relevant mental health and social support.
- Making caregiver self-care a part of the case plan.
- Recognizing and discussing societal and community issues that negatively impact children, parents, and families (e.g., racism, discrimination).

**You can make a profound impact on the lives of those you work with by asking families how they currently access the Building Blocks and strengthen their Protective Factors. Once you understand how each family connects with these key factors for resilience, work to ensure that services don't inadvertently block access to any of these resources or opportunities.**

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