



Promoting Protective Factors for Children Exposed to Domestic Violence: 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, importantly, may help individuals and families negotiate difficult circumstances and fare better in school, work, and life.

Why Focus on Protective Factors?

Children who are exposed to domestic violence are likely to be exposed to other conditions that put them *at risk* for negative outcomes. In addition, these children are considered to be *in risk* as a result of their experience with violence. Practitioners working with these children, youth, and families must both address their immediate safety and concrete needs while effectively building strengths at the individual, relationship, and community levels. Intervention and prevention efforts intended to reduce risk factor exposure can be effective, but they may also take longer to show evidence of impact.

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Building protective factors for children exposed to domestic violence can help increase resilience in the short term. It can also promote skills, personal characteristics, knowledge, relationships, and opportunities that offset risk factors and contribute to improved well-being and positive longer term outcomes.

Lessons From the Research Literature

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Children, Youth and Families (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 the foster care system, 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 exposed to domestic violence. Focusing on this in-risk population has spotlighted specific factors that carry moderate to strong association with improved well-being. 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. Also highlighted was the importance of working at multiple levels to increase individual skills and capacities, strengthen relationships, and build capacity within the community.¹

¹ Protective factors demonstrating evidence with general populations may also be protective for children exposed to domestic violence. Omission of a factor here does not mean it cannot be protective for these children; it primarily means that there is currently no strong or moderate evidence showing its protective nature for children exposed to domestic violence based on this literature review.

Protective Factors

The following presents the five protective factors with the strongest evidence to date for children exposed to domestic violence.

Individual Level

- Self-regulation skills
- Problem-solving skills

Relationship Level

- Parenting competencies
- Parent or caregiver well-being

Community Level

- Positive school environment

Using Protective Factors for Children Exposed to Domestic Violence

Which individual skills and capacities can improve the well-being of children exposed to domestic violence?

At the individual level, evidence is strongest for the protective nature of self-regulation skills and problem-solving skills for children exposed to domestic violence.

Self-regulation skills: These are defined and measured by investigators as emotional awareness, anger management, stress management, and cognitive coping skills. For children exposed to domestic violence, self-regulation skills were related to resiliency; having supportive friends; reductions in internalizing problems; better cognitive functioning; and decreases in posttraumatic stress disorder, anxiety, depression, and overall behavior problems.

Problem-solving skills: Skills such as adaptive functioning and the ability to solve problems were also found to be important protective factors for many children who are exposed to domestic violence and are primarily related to improved mental health.

How can parents, guardians, and other adults contribute to the well-being of children exposed to domestic violence?

For children exposed to domestic violence, there are two relationship-level factors with strong or moderate evidence of protection, both of which are related to their parents.

Parenting competencies: Defined as parental acceptance or responsiveness, maternal warmth, strong parent-child bonds, and emotional support, there is strong evidence linking parenting competencies to positive outcomes for children exposed to domestic violence. These outcomes include increases in self-esteem, lower risk of antisocial behavior, and a lower likelihood of running away and of teen pregnancy. Interventions aimed at improving parenting competencies have also had a positive impact on children exposed to violence. Many of these programs focus on increasing family management skills and nurturing abilities, meeting children's developmental and individual needs, strengthening family relationships, and improving relationships between children and mothers.

Parent or caregiver well-being: Children whose parents demonstrate positive psychological functioning (e.g., lower rates of depression and other mental health problems) have shown higher levels of resilient behavior and better mental health outcomes than other young people who are exposed to domestic violence. Interventions seeking to increase parental well-being are also associated with positive outcomes for children exposed to domestic violence. For example, parental involvement in Project Support, an instrumental and emotional support intervention for mothers who have experienced domestic violence, is related to lower rates of conduct problems and positive social relationships for child participants.

How can we create a community that supports the well-being of children exposed to domestic violence?

The community-level protective factor with the strongest evidence of protection for children exposed to domestic violence is a **positive school environment**. Evaluations of school-based interventions for youth exposed to domestic violence have found that these programs can help to reduce traumatic stress disorder symptoms, depression, psychosocial dysfunction, and physical dating violence.

Where to Go From Here?

Practitioners working with children exposed to domestic violence have an important role to play in using protective factors to maintain high-quality program strategies and in contributing to the evidence base for protective factors in this population. Practitioners can do the following:

- **At the individual level,** assess current strategies and practices to promote self-regulation and problem-solving skills for children and youth. Practitioners can also ensure that program components contribute to the development of these individual-level protective factors. Activities may include individual and/or group counseling specifically for children exposed to domestic violence, as well as general-population programs that engage these children and youth in strategies to build individual-level protective factors.
- **At the relationship level,** provide services and supports for parents of children exposed to domestic violence. Practitioners working with children exposed to domestic violence must take the needs of the parents (especially mothers) into consideration. While there are many programs focused on improving parenting competencies and parental well-being, an appropriate program will have the capacity to work with mothers who are victims of domestic violence and incorporate a culturally sensitive approach that focuses not only on parenting skills but also on their own psychological functioning.

- **At the community level**, connect children exposed to domestic violence to cognitive-behavioral interventions and violence prevention programs at school. For practitioners not currently engaged in school-based programs, this may require networking and collaboration.
- **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. Practitioners have a unique opportunity to contribute to the understanding of how to effectively promote protective factors and measure meaningful changes at the practice level. In developing the framework, it was clear that other factors may also be protective, but the evidence is not yet sufficient. In that sense, the framework and supporting evidence can also be seen as a guide to future research.
- **Engage in advocacy, policy development, and community engagement activities** to inform policymakers about the importance of investing in evidence-based protective factors for children exposed to domestic violence.

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 exposed to domestic violence.

It is vital that practitioners who work with children exposed to domestic violence 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/?hasBeenRedirected=1>

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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