

The Economics of Child Abuse

A Study of California & its Counties

Community Protective Factors



Safe & Sound
June 2020

© 2020 Safe & Sound

What Are Community Protective Factors?

Much of the research on preventing child maltreatment thus far has been focused on risk factors, as well as the costs of child maltreatment to society. There are a multitude of programs designed to reduce and prevent child maltreatment by addressing risk factors, but protective factors have been given less attention. We define protective factors as community and family level characteristics that are linked to lower rates of child maltreatment. In other words, strengths of a family or a community that counterbalance (and ideally outweigh) risk factors that might make child maltreatment more likely. This builds upon the field-building research of the Center for the Study of Social Policy to identify the Strengthening Families Protective Factors Framework which identifies the following parent and family protective factors: parental resilience, social connections, knowledge of parenting and child development, concrete supports in times of need, and social and emotional competence of children.¹

This brief focuses on community and family level protective factors over individual protective factors, for both parents and children. The exercise of defining protective factors is designed to offer guidance to policy makers and practitioners on ways to focus funds and efforts. Protective factors represent an area that is ripe for expanded research, and we expect more community protective factors will be demonstrated in the future.

Why are community protective factors important? Experts suggest that supporting protective factors may be a more effective and efficient approach to prevention and intervention than focusing on risks.² Supporting protective factors may help to influence a virtuous cycle; children that grow up in safe, nurturing environments develop empathy, impulse control, anger management, and problem solving skills, all of which reduce their risk for violent interactions and behavior later in life, thus reducing or preventing community-level violence.³

As our Economics of Abuse research has shown, child maltreatment has profound societal costs, and preventing child maltreatment will have clear benefits across a community.⁴ This summary distinguishes between factors themselves and example interventions. The factors listed are well-supported by empirical evidence for their effectiveness in reducing or preventing child maltreatment. This report also highlights some interventions for which there is emerging evidence warranting further exploration.

Finally, it is crucial to remember that no protective factor exists in a vacuum. Much like risk factors for abuse, protective factors interact with one another and strengthen each other. In essence, their sum is greater than their parts.^{5,6}

Community and Family Protective Factors

As an overarching theme, **strong families and communities that nurture and support children and their relationships with their caregivers are the most influential factor in protecting a child from maltreatment.** In fact, strong family support has been demonstrated as a protective factor against nearly all forms of violence, including child maltreatment.⁷ The elements that work together to create strong families and communities are interdependent. The presence of any one protective factor is not sufficient, as it depends on the others for success.⁸

Strong communities don't happen in a vacuum. They are influenced by a number of aspects, including economic stability, sufficient childcare, supportive institutions and access to services, strong parenting skills, and healthy relationships between parents and children. Governmental policies that discourage child maltreatment and encourage intervention also have a positive influence on reducing and preventing child maltreatment.

Economic Supports

Economic stability has an important influence on strengthening and supporting communities and families. Policies that provide economic supports and help families develop some financial security are a protective factor against child maltreatment. It may not be surprising that neighborhoods with a higher concentration of affluent residents experience lower rates of child maltreatment referrals.⁹ Lower-income neighborhoods may be subject to more intense observation from police, social workers, and other mandated reporters. In addition, research suggests that economic tensions within a household are related to maltreatment rates. One study showed that low-income families who received \$105-\$180 in extra income in child support per month from Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) were 10% less likely than families that did not receive that extra income to have a report of child maltreatment.¹⁰

Indeed, a family's economic situation can enable or prevent the family from taking advantage of the other protective factors listed here, even if each of those protective factors are present in the community.¹¹ A family's economic situation may also enable them to move to a community where more protective factors exist. For example, housing vouchers that give families the ability to relocate to better resourced, higher income neighborhoods have been shown to reduce maltreatment rates.¹²

Parental Skills & Education

Parents that have the tools and knowledge that they need to parent effectively are less likely to draw on violence as a disciplinary method. There is an abundance of evidence that supports the efficacy of programs that develop parenting skills and help to facilitate relationship building between parents and their children.¹³ Some examples of effective programming in this area include the Strengthening Families program,¹⁴ Nurse Family Partnership,¹⁵ Triple P,¹⁶ and Parent Child Interaction Training.¹⁷

High Quality Childcare

High-quality and sufficiently available childcare is an essential protective factor against child maltreatment. In fact, states that meet demand for child care assistance (i.e. no waitlists) demonstrate decreased rates of child maltreatment.¹⁸ Parents that have the financial option to do so tend to make choices for higher quality childcare, and higher quality childcare is linked to reduced risk for child maltreatment and more nurturing and stable environments.^{19,20} Thus, support for parents to provide high quality care for their children is an important complement to the availability and quality of childcare in general.

Community Institutions & Services

Positive community environments and strong individual-level social connections are protective against child maltreatment.²¹ Furthermore, individual and community-level connections and institutions can influence and support one another.²² Communities are formed and maintained through institutions like schools, churches, and community centers that provide services, resources, and public spaces.^{23,24} Some of the institutions that contribute to the formation of individual and family-level social connectedness include early education programs, religious communities, volunteer opportunities, and parent-focused programs.²⁵ Social institutions serve similar roles to individuals at every stage in life in that they can provide emotional sustenance; counseling, advice, and guidance; access to information, services, and material resources; skills acquisition; and social monitoring and control.²⁶ Youths' sense of connectedness also promotes well-being and reduces vulnerability to negative outcomes.²⁷

Family Resource Centers (FRCs) are a category of community institutions that are effective in reducing child maltreatment.²⁸ FRCs seek to limit the impact of poverty on families and reduce risks for children by helping families strengthen their protective factors, including building on those that are already present. They serve as resource hubs, where families can gather to access concrete supports, be linked to other resources, and connect

with case managers. Some include treatment, educational, and training programming for families. In addition to these offerings, FRCs also serve as gathering places that help to develop community and positive social connections. In fact, involvement with FRCs is linked to increased safety for children and families, as well as improved self-sufficiency.²⁹

Community cohesion is a related aspect that combines with strong institutions to protect families against maltreatment. Consider the fact that communities with larger concentrations of immigrants tend to experience lower rates of child maltreatment, despite the fact that immigrants often face multiple risk factors for maltreatment.³⁰ Research shows that immigrant Latinx children are slightly underrepresented in child welfare systems when compared to the general population, and no significant differences are observed between immigrant children and U.S. born children with regard to substantiation patterns.³¹ This research suggests that immigrant families' culture, interconnectedness, and aspirations for their children are strengths that can in many cases outweigh any risk factors that are present.

Positive Social Norms & Interventions Against Violence

While family and community strengths are essential protective factors against maltreatment, it is also crucially important that there are overarching policies and prevention efforts that are available to quickly and effectively intervene when children are at risk. Policies that prohibit corporal punishment are linked to reduced rates of child maltreatment in a number of developed countries.³² When maltreatment does occur, intervention at schools or in physicians' offices can help to prevent further maltreatment.³³ Policies and educational campaigns can also influence changes in the social norms that perpetuate violence against children.^{34,35}

Emerging Evidence and Other Factors Considered

The above factors are supported by clear and rigorous evidence that connects their existence with lower rates of child maltreatment. However, several other community factors have shown promise in positively impacting families' general wellbeing. These represent opportunities for further research around what community protective factors exist and when each are most critical.

Affordable Housing

Emerging evidence suggests that affordable and stable housing could be an important protective factor against child maltreatment.³⁶ A randomized control trial in 2017 tracked child welfare-involved families randomly assigned to receive housing subsidies plus housing case management, and compared their outcomes to families that received housing case management only.³⁷ The study found that while treatment differences for minor assault and neglect approached significance, there were no statistically significant differences between these two treatment groups. That being said, researchers suggest that more evidence is needed to explore housing's effect on preventing maltreatment for families who have not yet been involved in the child welfare system.³⁸

Positive School Experiences

In addition, positive school environments with supportive and well-trained staff and teachers have been cited as a protective factor against maltreatment.³⁹ School environments provide several opportunities to prevent or reduce child maltreatment.⁴⁰ One of the primary ways in which this happens is identification of abuse or neglect. In fact, teachers and staff are often able to intervene when nobody else in the child's life has previously done so. Schools also allow for opportunities to engage with parents and strengthen community; strong communities being, of course, an essential protective factor. In these regards, schools often serve as a conduit for the other community

protective factors mentioned here (e.g., parenting education; positive social norms and policies and interventions against abuse; community institutions and access to services)

Racial Equity Initiatives

Finally, it is important to remember that institutional racism and systemic oppression over generations have prevented many families of color from accessing the social and economic factors listed above.⁴¹ While much research has been conducted exploring racial disparities in the child welfare system, little research has explored the connection between community racial equity and power-building initiatives and child maltreatment. However, such initiatives that promote racial equity and increase the equity of access to the factors listed will likely prove to be important community protective factors against maltreatment.

Key Takeaways

- Strengthening communities and families is one of the most effective ways to protect against child maltreatment.
- In order to strengthen families and communities, economic stability, high quality childcare, community institutions, and parental skills & education are all essential.
- In addition to supporting families and communities, policies and social norms that discourage child maltreatment and effectively intervene against it are important protective factors.
- Protective factors are interdependent and cannot be effective in isolation.
- Affordable housing, positive school experiences, and racial equity initiatives are potential protective factors that may likely be demonstrated through further research.

References

- ¹ Center for the Study of Social Policy. "About Strengthening Families and the Protective Factors," <https://cssp.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/About-Strengthening-Families.pdf>.
- ² Child Welfare Information Gateway. "Protective factors approaches in child welfare." U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau, 2014. <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/issue-briefs/protective-factors/>.
- ³ Wilkins, Natalie. "Connecting the Dots: An Overview of the Links Among Multiple Forms of Violence." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014. https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/connecting_the_dots-a.pdf.
- ⁴ Collier, Paul, Lauren Reid, and Katie Albright, "The Economics of Child Abuse: A Study of California," Safe & Sound, 2019. <https://safeandsound.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Safe-Sound-2019-CA-Report.pdf>
- ⁵ IOM (Institute of Medicine) and NRC (National Research Council). "New Directions in Child Abuse and Neglect Research," The National Academies Press, 2014. <https://doi.org/10.17226/18331>.
- ⁶ Cohen, Stephen D.. "3 Principles to Improve Outcomes for Children and Families." The Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2017. <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/three-early-childhood-development-principles-improve-child-family-outcomes/>.
- ⁷ Wilkins.
- ⁸ Fortson, Beverly L. et al. "Preventing Child Abuse and Neglect: A Technical Package for Policy, Norm, and Programmatic Activities," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2016. <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/CAN-Prevention-Technical-Package.pdf>.
- ⁹ Klein, Sacha. "The Availability of Neighborhood Early Care and Education Resources and the Maltreatment of Young Children," Child Maltreatment 2011, 16(4): 300-311. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077559511428801>.
- ¹⁰ Cancian, Maria, Mi-Youn Yang, and Kristen Shook Slack. "The Effect of Additional Child Support Income on the Risk of Child Maltreatment," Social Service Review 2013, 87(3): 417-437. <https://doi.org/10.1086/671929>.
- ¹¹ Milner, Jerry and David Kelly. "It's Time to Stop Confusing Poverty with Neglect," Children's Bureau Express 2019, 20(10): <https://cbexpress.acf.hhs.gov/index.cfm?event=website.viewArticles&issueid=212§ionid=2&articleid=5474>.
- ¹² Fortson et al., 2016.
- ¹³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴ Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2014.
- ¹⁵ World Health Organization. "Violence Prevention: The Evidence," Liverpool John Moores University Centre for Public Health, 2010. https://www.who.int/violence_injury_prevention/violence/4th_milestones_meeting/evidence_briefings_all.pdf.
- ¹⁶ Prinz, Ronald J et al. "Population-Based Prevention of Child Maltreatment: The U.S. Triple P System Population Trial," Prevention Science 2009, 10(1): 1-12.
- ¹⁷ Chaffin, Mark et al. "A Combined Motivation and Parent-Child Interaction Therapy Package Reduces Child Welfare Recidivism in a Randomized Dismantling Field Trial." Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology 2011, 79(1): 84-95. <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/5af6/d6eb4d6341ddf2ea5906a7065293da9f9a9d.pdf>.
- ¹⁸ Klevens, Joanne, et al. "Exploring Policies for the Reduction of Child Physical Abuse and Neglect," Child Abuse and Neglect 2015, 40: 1-11. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4689429/pdf/nihms-745422.pdf>.
- ¹⁹ Schnitzer, Patricia and Bernard G. Ewigman. "Child Deaths Resulting From Inflicted Injuries: Household Risk Factors and Perpetrator Characteristics," Pediatrics 2005, 116(5): e687-e693. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1360186/pdf/nihms7815.pdf>.
- ²⁰ Michalopoulos, Charles, Erika Lundquist, and Nina Castells. "The Effect of Childcare Subsidies for Moderate Income Families in Cook County, Illinois," U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2010. https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/cook_county.pdf.
- ²¹ Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2014.
- ²² Wilkins, 2014.
- ²³ Davis, Rachel, Danice Cook, and Larry Cohen. "A Community Resilience Approach to Reducing Ethnic and Racial Disparities in Health," American Journal of Public Health 2005, 95(12): 2168-2173. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1449502/pdf/0952168.pdf>.

-
- ²⁴ Pinderhughes, Howard , Rachel A. David, and Myesha Williams. "Adverse Community Experiences and Resilience:A Framework for Addressing and Preventing Community Trauma," Prevention Institute, 2015. <https://www.preventioninstitute.org/publications/adverse-community-experiences-and-resilience-framework-addressing-and-preventing>.
- ²⁵ Browne, Charlyn Harper. "The Strengthening Families Approach and Protective Factors Framework: Branching Out and Reaching Deeper," Center for the Study of Social Policy, 2014. <https://cssp.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Branching-Out-and-Reaching-Deeper.pdf>.
- ²⁶ Ibid.
- ²⁷ Ibid.
- ²⁸ "Do place-based programs, such as Family Resource Centers, reduce risk of child maltreatment and entry into foster care?" Casey Family Programs, 2019. <https://www.casey.org/family-resource-centers/>.
- ²⁹ Ibid.
- ³⁰ Dettlaff, Alan J. and Michelle A. Johnson. "Child maltreatment dynamics among immigrant and U.S. born Latino children: Findings from the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-being (NSCAW)," Children and Youth Services Review 2011, 33(6): 936-944. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2010.12.017>.
- ³¹ Ibid.
- ³² "The Positive Impact of Prohibition of Corporal Punishment on Children's Lives: Messages from Research," Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children, 2015. <http://endcorporalpunishment.org/wp-content/uploads/research/Summary-of-research-impact-of-prohibition.pdf>.
- ³³ Dubowitz, Howard, et al. "The SEEK Model of Pediatric Primary Care: Can Child Maltreatment Be Prevented in a Low-Risk Population?" Academy of Pediatrics 2012, 12(4): 259-268. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5482714/pdf/nihms865289.pdf>.
- ³⁴ Horsfall, Briony, Leah Bromfield, and Myfanwy McDonald. "Are Social Marketing Campaigns Effective in Preventing Child Abuse and Neglect?" NCPC Issues 32, 2010. https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/sites/default/files/publication-documents/issues32_0.pdf.
- ³⁵ "Promoting Positive Community Norms." National Center for Injury Prevention and Control - Division of Violence Prevention. <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/efc-promoting-positive-community-norms.pdf>.
- ³⁶ Dworsky, Amy. "Families at the Nexus of Housing and Child Welfare." State Policy Advocacy and Reform Center, 2014. <http://childwelfaresparc.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Families-at-the-Nexus-of-Housing-and-Child-Welfare.pdf>.
- ³⁷ Fowler, Patrick J. and Michael Shoeny. "Permanent housing for child welfare-involved families: Impact on child maltreatment." American Journal of Community Psychology 2017, 60(1-2): 91-102. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5610614/pdf/nihms879744.pdf>.
- ³⁸ Ibid.
- ³⁹ "Promoting Protective Factors for In-Risk Families and Youth: A Brief for Researchers," Children's Bureau. http://www.dsgonline.com/acyf/PF_Research_Brief.pdf.
- ⁴⁰ Child Welfare Information Gateway. "School-Based Child Maltreatment Programs: Synthesis of Lessons Learned," U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau, 2003. <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/schoolbased.pdf>.
- ⁴¹ Hill, Robert B.. "Institutional Racism in Child Welfare." Race and Society 2004, 7 (1): 17 - 33. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.racsoc.2004.11.004>.