

# Targeting ACEs by Building Protective Factors

Knowledge to Action Brief

December, 2020

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), and the toxic stress they may cause, represent a public health crisis that is still largely unrecognized in our society today. For many children, these traumatic experiences can leave a negative, long-lasting impact on their physical and mental health as they develop into adolescence and adulthood. Some prevalent ACEs—such as loss of a parent or guardian through separation or divorce, witnessing domestic violence, or experiencing neglect—often create an unhealthy family environment and hinder the potential of a thriving community.

There are many ways to reduce and prevent ACEs within families, but the most effective and sustainable way is building protective factors in children, parents/caregivers, and communities. The Protective Factors Framework is a research-based approach to increase family strengths, boost child development, and decrease the likelihood of child abuse and neglect.<sup>1</sup>

Additional research<sup>2</sup> over the years has shown that a sixth protective factor, Nurturing and Attachment, could further help in the prevention of ACEs. Children who receive affection and nurturing from a consistent caregiver appear to have the best chance of growing up to be happy, healthy and productive. These children also do better academically, behaviorally, have more positive peer interactions, and have an increased ability to cope with stress.<sup>3</sup>

We can find more opportunities to strengthen protective factors by making sure families have access to resources, strong relationships and social connections for support. Caregivers who understand their child's development can safely nurture and be a strong advocate for their children and community.

Not only should we support and continue to build protective factors in parents, we should also work to build them within our society. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) developed an evidence-based resource for states and communities to continue their work to prevent ACEs titled, Preventing Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs): Leveraging the Best Available Evidence. They produced a “technical package” comprised of strategies focused on helping states and communities prioritize the prevention activities that would have the greatest impact. This resource is intended for states and communities to focus on implementation of their prevention strategies and to feel confident in taking action to help children and families.



1 Center for the Study of Social Policy. (n.d.). About strengthening families and the protective factors framework.

2 Child Welfare Information Gateway. Nurturing and attachment.

3 The Ounce of Prevention Fund of Florida. Six protective factors.

Aligned with the Protective Factors framework, the CDC suggests strategies shown in the infographic below. Some of the strategies listed include changing social norms to support parents and positive parenting and intervening to lessen harms and prevent future risk.



## TAKE ACTION

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**Strengthen economic supports to families**
  - Strengthening household financial security
  - Family-friendly work policies
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**Change social norms to support parents and positive parenting**
  - Public engagement and enhancement campaigns
  - Legislative approaches to reduce corporal punishment
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**Provide quality care and education early in life**
  - Preschool enrichment with family engagement
  - Improved quality of child care through licensing and accreditation
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**Enhance parenting skills to promote healthy child development**
  - Early childhood home visitation
  - Parenting skill and family relationship approaches
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**Intervene to lessen harms and prevent future risk**
  - Enhanced primary care
  - Behavioral parent training programs
  - Treatment to lessen harms of abuse and neglect exposure
  - Treatment to prevent problem behavior and later involvement in violence

Fortson, B. L., Klevens, J., Merrick, M. T., Gilbert, L. K., & Alexander, S. P. (2016). Preventing child abuse and neglect: A technical package for policy, norm, and programmatic activities. Atlanta, GA: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.



## RESOURCES

### *Sesame Street in Communities*

For parents/caregivers and providers: A comprehensive website with practical information on tough topics, searchable by age of child, providing downloadable worksheets, videos, and much more.

<https://sesamestreetincommunities.org/>

### *Preventing Adverse Childhood Experiences: Leveraging the Best Available Evidence.*

An ACEs prevention resource developed by the CDC that helps states and communities leverage the best available evidence to prevent ACEs from happening and lessen harm when ACEs do occur.

<https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/preventingACES.pdf>



**Continue to become more ACEs Aware** by learning about California's **ACEs Aware** Initiative and utilizing new resources that focus on concrete ways to help prevent ACEs in your community by visiting the CDC's website on **Violence Prevention**.



**Encourage** pediatric providers and family strengthening professionals to learn and understand how building protective factors in families can help buffer toxic stress, mitigate effects of ACEs or prevent future ACEs.



**Join** your local **ACEs Connection Community** to exchange feedback and resources.

