



FAMILY RESOURCE CENTERS: Building Protective Factors

THE PROTECTIVE FACTORS STRENGTHEN FAMILIES

Research has identified five Protective Factors¹ that build family strength, promote the optimal development in children and reduce the risk of child abuse and neglect.² These Protective Factors are family attributes and assets that can be developed and bolstered by individuals, families and within communities. When present, these Protective Factors help to ensure that children have relationships and experiences with lasting, lifelong benefits and are more likely to grow into healthy, capable adults who are strong contributors to society.

1 Five Protective Factors: <https://cssp.org/our-work/project/strengthening-families/> and National Family Support Network: <https://www.nationalfamilysupportnetwork.org/>

2 Center for the Study of Social Policy, "About Strengthening Families™ and The Protective Factors Framework."

THE 5 PROTECTIVE FACTORS

- ▶ **Social and Emotional Competence of Children:** Helping children understand their own and others' emotions, build relationship skills and learn to problem-solve.
- ▶ **Social Connections:** Building a network of relationships that support oneself and one's family.
- ▶ **Concrete Support in Times of Need:** Seeking support in times of need and knowing where and how to find available help.
- ▶ **Parental Resilience:** Maintaining flexibility, problem-solving, taking care of oneself and sheltering one's children during times of stress.
- ▶ **Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development:** Learning how to support a child's growth at every age and stage.

THE PROTECTIVE FACTORS AND FAMILY RESOURCE CENTERS

Family Resource Centers (FRCs) are uniquely positioned to support families in strengthening their Protective Factors.

“Everything we do, historically and now, somehow relates to the Protective Factors.” Virginia, FRC Leadership

FRCs are grounded in the philosophy and science of prevention, dedicated to strengths-based practice and driven by a mission to prevent child maltreatment. When Protective Factors are embedded and interwoven into their programs and operations, the families served by FRCs develop a better understanding of their own protective factors. They also have opportunities to reflect upon and build these family strengths during their interactions with the FRCs.

FRCs have the capacity to address all five Protective Factors within their programming and services. Sometimes the focus is a single Protective Factor, but more often programming and services highlight and support multiple Protective Factors for families simultaneously.

Play groups, a mainstay of many FRCs, serve as an example of how the five Protective Factors can be promoted through programming. Play groups are attended by both child and caregiver and are hosted by FRC staff, usually following a set schedule. Parents are guided in supporting their children as they engage in structured, developmentally appropriate activities together. Play groups also typically include some unstructured time for caregivers

to socialize with one another while their children play.

Fig. 1: Example of Direct and Indirect Program and Protective Factors Connections: Play Groups

PLAY GROUPS	
Direct	Indirect
Social Connections	Concrete Support in Times of Need
Knowledge of Parenting & Child Development	Parental Resilience
Social & Emotional Competence of Children	

KNOWLEDGE OF PARENTING & CHILD DEVELOPMENT

Parent educators utilize play groups as an opportunity to increase families’ knowledge of parenting and child development. They provide intentional support and information, model parenting skills that support a child’s growth and development, while demonstrating positive child behavior management.

Play groups are only one way that FRC programs emphasize support for families in cultivating positive parenting skills and understanding their child’s development. Knowledge of parenting and child development is also promoted through individual and group parent education, welcome baby visits with new parents, home visiting and more.

“Parents are getting this much needed breath of air in that they are learning how to structure play for their children so that the child does not need them

to be hands-on eyes-on attention-on 24/7, with that child. They're learning, there's a way that they could structure developmental play for their child in their home without having to entertain the child so that that parent can focus on adult things and adult needs." Angela, FRC Leadership

Social Connections

The fact that play groups bring families with children in similar stages of development together at regularly schedule intervals, create opportunity for caregivers to build social connections over time. Families are encouraged to extend these relationships beyond the play group and to get together outside the FRC.

"When we hear parents say things like, 'Oh okay, let's meet tomorrow at the park,' as they're walking out of play group, how powerful is that? Those two parents probably didn't know each other a year ago or six months ago. Not only do they have that trusted relationship within the context of our programming, they've got it outside of our walls. We've been a part of them building their own support outside of that, happening outside of our programming. That's phenomenal."
Virginia, FRC Leadership

FRCs offer a number of services designed to provide opportunities to build relationships among families. In addition to play groups for parents and children, parent support programs focus on activities that allow caregivers to interact without their children. One popular format is Parent Cafés, where parents engage in structured conversations with peers about parenting and family life

while staff and volunteers care for children. Like play groups, Parent Cafés often occur on a recurrent basis, providing ongoing opportunities to develop and strengthen social connections. Parent education classes, which are frequently offered in a group format, can provide families with the opportunity to learn new parenting approaches together and from one another.

Social & Emotional Competence of Children

Through play groups, children have opportunities to interact with other children and adults regularly. Within the reassuring and safe proximity to their parent, they are comfortable practicing emotional regulation and social interaction skills. The educator is able to guide the development of children's social and emotional competence by facilitating interactions and modeling responses to and support for social and emotional needs to parents.



An Executive Director of an FRC in Western Wisconsin describes how she has observed this process unfold:

 *“When you see a child about to have a temper tantrum and you see the parent get like this because of the public shame he or she might have, and then the Parent Educator, who’s like, ‘Oh, I see what’s going on here,’ just calmly intervene, take the child and say, ‘Oh, show me where your coat is. Let’s go find your coat.’ Totally changes that dynamic for that parent. Every other parent’s watching and seeing that other parent is supported and not shamed and seeing a different way of doing things. That’s amazing work.”* Virginia, FRC Leadership

FRC staff also engage children directly within services, such as play groups, some types of parent education and home visiting, to encourage development of this protective factor. However, since social and emotional competence is learned through relationships, educators also model the process of supporting this protective factor for parents, as well as supporting families in their role as the main source of guidance and emotional support for their children.

When a parent is struggling with a developmental, behavioral, or social – emotional issue with their child, play groups provide contact and opportunities to develop trusting relationships so that a Parent Educator is able to address the immediate needs of parents. The educator can provide a tailored response designed to enhance the caregiver’s confidence, support the child’s social and emotional competence and help the family to move through a child rearing challenge to an appropriate resolution.

Concrete Support in Times of Need

Additionally, play groups create an environment of trust that can increase families’ comfort with requesting and accepting concrete support. In the context of a play group or other types of programming, Parent Educators can observe unmet needs and offer help in informal ways that can feel more comfortable and supportive.

Some FRCs offer a specific service or program aimed to connect families with tangible or financial resources. However, most FRCs also interweave family resource navigation throughout their services, connecting families to resources in real-time when a need arises. A referral may be made in the context of a home visit, after a parent education class or through a parenting warm line. Some FRCs engage families in programs specifically aimed at building skills and knowledge around navigating community resources. FRC staff spend time exploring the family’s strengths, needs and priorities and then take them through the appropriate referral processes based on the goals and desires of the family. The objective of FRCs is to support families with help for immediate needs and with skills for meeting future needs.

Many FRCs also offer tangible items directly to families. Often, but not exclusively, FRCs focus on the needs of families specific to young children, such as diapers, clothing, bassinets, pack and plays or car safety programs that provide families with a car seat. Some FRCs also provide financial assistance to help families stabilize during emergencies, crises, or tough times.

Parental Resilience

Attending play groups gives parents the opportunity to enjoy new environments,

take advantage of planned activities and entertainment for their children and experience stress relief, all which strength parental resilience.

FRCs seek to bolster parental resilience throughout their programs and services. They focus on opportunities to strengthen parent and caregiver confidence through positive reinforcement and validation. FRCs honor the autonomy and self-efficacy of parents and caregivers by following their lead and acknowledging their expertise on the needs of their own family. They encourage parents to take the time to meet their own needs so that they have more emotional resources for their family. This approach isn't specific to a single program but is embedded across programs.

THE PROTECTIVE FACTORS AND FRC OPERATIONS

There is opportunity to build Protective Factors within most FRC programs and services, as long as efforts are structured with intentionality. FRCs that embed the Protective Factors within their organizational cultural and use the Protective Factors Framework as standards that guide their programs and services can also measure family Protective Factors as outcomes which can demonstrate family change in response to services. Ultimately, Protective Factors are a resource that is beneficial both to FRCs and to the families they serve. ●



All of the information and quotes in this brief come from an electronic survey and extensive interviews of leadership within eight Wisconsin Family Resource Centers. The ninety-minute virtual, semi-structured interviews involved 11 FRC leadership members and were conducted by a three-person research team. A thematic analysis of the qualitative data was conducted by the contracted evaluator. The names attributed to the quotes are pseudonyms of FRC directors and staff.

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