SOCIAL CONNECTIONS & SOCIAL CAPITAL:
What They Mean for Families

THE THREAT OF SOCIAL ISOLATION

Parents' experience of social isolation is a shared concern among Family Resource Center (FRC) leadership in Wisconsin. Social isolation is characterized by "a lack of integration into social networks, low levels of contact and communication with others, and a prolonged absence of intimate ties" (Horton, 2003, p. 11). At Carla's rural Wisconsin FRC practical matters of transportation and childcare are everyday barriers to social connection for parents. According to Brenda, whose FRC serves both urban and rural communities, most of the families they serve are isolated, with little family and few other connections they can call on for support. While she acknowledges the need for social connections among families is not new, FRC Director, Virginia, anticipates these needs growing considerably with the COVID-19 pandemic, an impact she doesn't think we've yet come to fully understand.

Research has demonstrated that indicators of limited social connection, for example minimal adult interaction or a lack of instrumental supports such as having someone to take care of a child from time to time, are associated with a higher likelihood of child maltreatment (Horton, 2003). Ongoing social isolation also has negative impacts on the physical health of adults. It is associated with higher rates of illness and disease (Cacioppo et al., 2015) and a risk of mortality similar to well-known risk factors, like obesity or substance abuse (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015).

BENEFITS OF SOCIAL CONNECTIONS & SOCIAL CAPITAL

Social connections refer to the ties between people, whether among friends, family, neighbors, co-workers, or others. According to research, social connections is one of five

Protective Factors that strengthen families and help to prevent child maltreatment (Browne, 2014). FRCs often adopt, either implicitly or explicitly, objectives related to increasing social connections among parents and caregivers. The protective nature of social connections is leveraged when these ties are strengthened in quality, expanded in quantity, or extended in reach. Increased reach provides corresponding opportunity for increased social capital. The concept of social capital broadly refers to "the resources people derived directly from their social ties" (Small, 2009, p. 8) that can be mobilized as needed. A variety of types of support can be derived from social connections and from social capital including (Center for the Study of Social Policy, 2021):

A parent who builds social connections and derives social capital may also be bolstering other Protective Factors. When a parent receives informational support, they may also receive access and encouragement to use a

concrete resource, like unemployment insurance or food assistance. Strong social ties also boost parental resilience because healthy relationships are a source of emotional and spiritual care that nourishes inner strength. Angela, an Assistant Director of a Wisconsin FRC, recognizes this in her center's work:

Emotional Support
when one parent commiserates with another about the difficulties of parenting

Informational Support
sending or receiving a job posting

Instrumental Support
parents encouraging one another as they work toward earning a degree while managing parenting demands

Spiritual Support
parents encouraging one another as they work toward earning a degree while managing parenting demands

"We talk about self-efficacy and parental autonomy and that sense of, 'I can figure this out. I can cope. I can make it'. That's all developed through relationship, whether that be through relationship with a Parent Educator who is warm and trusting and unconditional, or whether it's developed through that affirmation from other parents who are in that same situation."

Research also indicates that social capital has economic advantages (Domínguez & Watkins, 2003) for securing employment and encouraging job and career-related growth. Increased social capital enhances the potential to foster stability and opportunity for families.

STRONG VERSUS WEAK SOCIAL CONNECTIONS

The strength of social connections varies, and the social capital accessed and mobilized via these connections differs based on type. Social ties are generally categorized as strong or weak, with each offering unique advantages. The strength of a social connection depends upon characteristics such as time commitment, emotional demands, intimacy levels, and the extent of reciprocity in exchanges (Granovetter, 1973; Small, 2009).

Parents' strongest ties are most likely to be with their closest family and friends, those in their most proximate circle (Levine, 2013). These social connections are more likely to be clustered, meaning that families and friend groups have ties across multiple members (Small, 2009). These ties are associated with bonding social capital, where social connections offer emotional and instrumental support (Small, 2009).

In contrast, parents' weaker ties tend to be with more distant acquaintances, whose social networks are likely to differ from the parents'. These weaker ties can still offer a valuable form of social capital, known as bridging social capital

(Levine, 2013). These more distal connections provide a bridge between social networks. They expand the reach of a parent's contacts and are more likely to provide new or previously inaccessible resources and informational support (Granovetter, 1973; Small, 2009).

THE IMPORTANCE OF TRUST AND RECIPROCITY

Trust and reciprocity are critical for building social capital (Sander & Lowney, 2006). Gauging a person's trustworthiness is an inherent early step in the process of making social connections. Once a person is deemed trustworthy, then the social relationship can progress. Trust also serves as the foundation for reciprocity. Strong relationships depend upon the trust that, over time, exchanges of support will be bidirectional (Sander & Lowney, 2006). For example, two parents seek to mobilize their social capital by trading off preschool drop off responsibilities. They have to trust that the other will not forget, refuse to follow the agreement when it is their turn, or fail to safeguard their child.

INEQUITIES IN SOCIAL CAPITAL

Unfortunately, socioeconomic status, gender, race, and ethnicity often contribute to inequities in families' social capital (Lin, 2000). These inequities are, in part, due to the continued persistence of historical stratification. (Lin, 2000). As a matter of biology and survival, people are more inclined to associate with others who are like them. While this does not necessarily limit the number of social connections, it does increase the likelihood that individuals are more likely to have similar levels and types of resources as those with whom they have strong social ties (Lin, 2000). There are potentially negative aspects of social capital. It can be exclusionary in terms of who

may access it, restrictive in how people must act to access or mobilize it, and demanding in terms of what people must give in order to receive or benefit from social capital (Portes, 1998).

Families with both bonding and bridging social capital have many more resources to draw upon. FRCs are skilled at supporting families in building the Protective Factors, including social connections. They are also adept at supporting families as they create and strengthen social ties that result in increased social capital. Drawing upon the core services that FRCs have in place, these community-based organizations can take steps to reduce the barriers parents face in making social connections and integrate high quality strategies into their existing programming to help build social capital.

Note: In January 2021, we interviewed the leadership of eight Family Resource Centers serving diverse communities and representing different regions of the state of Wisconsin. The content of these interviews informed this brief.

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