

Dear Social Service Practitioners,

We often hear about working together for the well-being of children and also about the strengths-based approach in doing this. What might be the goal in any of such efforts? Is the end goal to support families or to prevent and reduce child abuse and neglect?

Protective Factors

1
2

When we work with families, we work from the perspective of focusing on protective factors. What are some of these protective factors that we should invest time in? The Centre for Study of Social Policy in the US¹ summarises these factors into 5 main ones.

- **Parental Resilience:** This refers to the ability of parents to form nurturing relationships and respond to stressful situations in productive ways. Building parents' capacity to respond to stressful situations in productive ways is an important part of helping them parent effectively. Checking in on parents' mental health - particularly post-partum depression - and encouraging the use of positive coping strategies can help to ease stress and in extreme cases, prevent child abuse and neglect.
- **Knowledge of parenting and child development:** This refers to a parent's understanding of how children develop and the role families play in fostering development. Parents who understand child development have more realistic expectations of their children based on their developmental stage. Those in contact with families can play a role in sharing this knowledge with parents and thereby empowering them to better meet their children's physical and developmental needs. This also enables parents to more quickly identify when their children's development is off track, so that support can be given by a helping professional.
- **Social Connections:** This refers to the many positive relationships that families need for emotional and concrete support. Parents who are engaged in positive social relationships receive emotional and practical support that can help them deal with the daily stresses of parenting, health crises and responding to their children's social and health needs. The grassroots and community partners can provide parenting groups and other opportunities for parents to form connections with others who are raising children of the same age.
- **Concrete Support in Times of Need:** This refers to a family's ability to access help and resources when needed, from informal and/or formal support networks. Parents often require help in accessing the resources they need to build a healthy environment for their children. Helping to build parents' awareness of available resources and providing support as they navigate the service sector can help families to be more informed and empowered.
- **Social-Emotional Competence of Children:** This refers to the children's ability to express and control their emotions in a developmentally appropriate way. Social-emotional competence is critical to a child's overall development. The community partners' role can be to help parents understand the importance of attachment and social-emotional development, provide resources to help parents nurture that development and raise a red flag when there are concerns about a child's development of these foundational skills.

¹ Case for the Study of Social Policy. Core Meanings of the Strengthening Families Protective Factors. *Protective Factors Framework*. Retrieved from <http://www.cssp.org/reform/strengtheningfamilies/2015/Core-Meanings-of-the-SF-Protective-Factors-2015.pdf>

Sharing a common framework



We should increasingly adopt this common framework in working with families to develop a shared reference for advancing our services and programs. As many of our practitioners work with families, they can influence, guide and share expertise with them, and also help to recognize when things are off track.

Social service practitioners, when working with volunteers, grassroots and community partners, have the opportunity to see patterns of behaviour change and recognise when additional services may be needed. Community partners can play an important role in helping parents and caregivers learn to care for themselves as an important part of caring for their children. Sometimes, the provision of anticipatory guidance is sufficient. If it is inadequate, they can steer families towards further support.

Earlier Intervention for Child Development

Parents are important partners in nurturing the health and well-being of children. However, they may sometimes need support and help in building their own capacity to care for their children. The support is particularly needed by those who seem to be overwhelmed by parenting, feel isolated or are struggling to understand and respond to their children's needs. Trauma, which stems from the mismanagement of behaviours, neglect or abuse, can be averted by identifying families who may need support and providing them with help early. When children experience trauma, it can adversely impact their development. Severe trauma that are prolonged, repeated or unrelieved by a caring adult, can potentially impact brain structure and function.



Practical ways of working together to support parents

How can community partners and social service practitioners work collaboratively to support families? It begins with building effective partnerships. Such a partnership requires a common understanding of the shared outcome that both parties want, as well as the gaps, and methods to arrive at the outcome. It requires a relationship of trust and a clear understanding of how to work together based on the various roles and responsibilities.

Linking families to help: Care giving, challenging behaviours and other circumstances can cause family stress. Volunteers can connect families to support that can help them deal with these issues. To do this appropriately, volunteers and community groups need to be familiar with community resources and help agencies. It is useful to ask questions not just about the child's health, but also about the parent's experience and how they are coping with health or developmental issues that are coming up. Where appropriate, it is good to share information and materials about child development and parenting as part of anticipatory guidance for parents.

When connecting families with help, it is necessary to involve the families by asking their views about how they might want to be linked up and discuss the process instead of assuming that they are comfortable with the approach. As much as possible, avoid making families feel that their family space is violated without their permission. The families should be encouraged to accept support and help for themselves and the children. While sharing information with families is helpful, we should exercise care in how this is done. Having materials such as brochures, items and practical gifts can help to pave the way to constructively explaining the help that the families require. In making referrals, it is necessary to take extra care when it is a referral to child protection services.

Looking for signs of distress: In some cases, a child may directly report having seen or experienced violence or other traumatic experiences. In other cases, a child may show characteristics that come from exposure to trauma such as developmental regression, changes in behaviour at home or school, a variety of functional somatic complaints and/or bruising or injuries that are unexplained or where the explanation does not match. These should only be used as an indication of possible trauma and as a prompt for a person to ask appropriate questions about experiences and living situations to determine what, if any, actions should be taken.

Journeying with families



For many of the families who are referred for help to social service agencies, it is the start of a journey that can be complemented by befrienders as many of these families do not have the social networks that enrich their well-being. Individuals and families often open up when they experience these qualities in those who are helping them: warmth, respect, trust, reliability, non-judgmental acceptance of them, being able to listen to them, treating others with equality and having good information about how they could be helped. Community partners and social service practitioners should continue to work collaboratively as they journey with the families receiving help.

Most families want to care for their children. They however vary widely in their capacity and capability to do so. The role of community partners is to identify those who may need help by engaging those who are struggling in order to understand their challenges and dilemmas. Community partners can play a key role in journeying with these families to draw upon and further build on the strengths and resources within.

Ang Bee Lian
Director of Social Welfare, MSF
21 Mar 2016

Other References:

Center for the Study of Social Policy. (n.d.). *Promoting Children's Health and Resiliency: A Strengthening Families Approach*. Retrieved from https://www.aap.org/en-us/Documents/resilience_messaging-at-the-intersections.pdf