

Strengthening Families: Social Connections¹

Larry F. Forthun, Samantha Carannante, and David C. Diehl²

Parenting is a tremendous responsibility full of many moments of joy. But sometimes the rapid rate of a young child's growth and development can leave parents feeling a little overwhelmed. This Strengthening Families Series highlights six factors that promote positive parenting and protect against stressors and frustrations that can lead to harsh parenting: Parental Resilience, **Social Connections**, Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development, Concrete Support, Social and Emotional Competence, and Nurturing and Attachment. Each of these protective factors offers families and children some defense against distress. However, together they combine to create a solid foundation of knowledge, parenting skills, and support that can help families thrive during everyday circumstances as well as persevere during times of stress or crisis (1).



Overview

One of the most powerful protective factors is maintaining social connections with others. Social connections refer to the relationships with other adults who form your circle of support (2). Social connections are important for everyone regardless of age or life stage. For parents, social connections are essential. Parenting can consume much of a parents' time and energy, which can make it more challenging for parents to work on either developing their social connections or maintaining existing connections. However, these connections are important and should be a priority because caring relationships with other adults help to reduce isolation and loneliness (3). Having someone to talk to, or someone you can lean on in times of need, can help to reduce stress and improve the ability to cope with challenges and frustrations (4). Ultimately, caring relationships with other adults will improve parenting and promote a stronger parent-child relationship.

Social connections can come from many sources: family, friends, other parents, neighbors, daycare providers, teachers, or clergy. Any of these sources can be valuable. However, social connections are most valuable when they provide both emotional support and practical assistance (4). Emotional support sustains you when a caring adult listens to your feelings and frustrations, understands them, and offers comfort. Caring adults demonstrate practical assistance when they offer to care for your children, help you around the house, or provide transportation. The most beneficial connections are with people who serve as positive role models of good parenting.

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2. Larry F. Forthun, assistant professor, Samantha Carannante, graduate student, David C. Diehl, assistant professor; Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences; Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences; University of Florida; Gainesville, FL 32611.

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What You Can Do

Creating New Social Connections

If new connections need to be established, there are many ways to increase your social connections and meet others in the community (5):

- Look for opportunities in your community to meet new people.
- Organize events in your neighborhood.
- Meet other parents at your child's childcare center or school.
- Attend a parent education class or support group.
- Join a parent co-op group.
- Carpool with others to bring your child/children to school.
- Volunteer in the PTA, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, or other youth-adult partnerships.
- Volunteer at a local community center, such as the YMCA or the Boys and Girls Club.
- Call 2-1-1 to find information about parent support groups, Mom's Clubs, etc.

Improving Existing Social Connections

If caring relationships have already been established, here are some tips for further increasing connections (6):

- Organize a social gathering to welcome a new neighbor.

- Ask a new person to join a group for a dinner or an evening activity.
- Exercise together or take walks with friends or family.
- See if your neighbor needs anything when you run to the store.
- When inspired, write personal notes to friends and neighbors.
- Play cards or other games with friends or neighbors.
- Organize or participate in a sports league.
- Ask neighbors for help and reciprocate.
- Attend home parties when invited.
- Start a fix-it group with friends willing to help each other clean, paint, garden, etc.
- Plan a vacation with friends or family.

Social connections are essential to strengthening families. Whether it is family members, neighbors, friends, or coworkers, it is vital that parents have people in their lives that can provide social support. Parents need friends and people that care about them just as children do. Having these encouraging friendships and connections not only will help to protect against the stresses and frustrations that can lead to harsh parenting, but also they will promote happy and healthy relationships with children.

Resources and Information

- **Love Is Not Enough** – Love Is Not Enough is an initiative of Strengthening Families Illinois that provides parents information on the six protective factors. <http://www.keepyourfamilystrong.org/>
- **Child Welfare Information Gateway: Protective Factors** – This site presents an overview of protective factors and serves as a clearinghouse for related resources. <http://www.childwelfare.gov/can/factors/protective.cfm>
- **2-1-1** – By dialing 2-1-1, you can access your local resource and referral system, which can help you identify local parenting programs and resources. Learn more at <http://211us.org/>.

Endnotes

(1) This work is based on the framework developed by the Center for the Study of Social Policy, with more information available online at <http://www.cssp.org/reform/strengthening-families>.

(2) Center for the Study of Social Policy. (2011). *The Protective Factors Framework*. Retrieved from <http://www.cssp.org/reform/strengthening-families/the-basics/protective-factors>.

(3) Horton, C. (2003). *Protective factors literature review: Early education and education programs and the prevention of child abuse and neglect*. Washington, D.C.: Center for the Study of Social Policy. p. 1–52.

(4) Armstrong, M.I., Birnie-Lefcovitch, S. & Ungar, M.T. (2005). Pathways between social support, family well-being, quality of parenting, and child resilience: What we know. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 14(2), 269–281.

(5) United Way of Southern Cameron County (2009). *Resource Directory for Strengthening Families*.

(6) Better Together. (n.d.). *what to do: 150 THINGS YOU CAN DO TO BUILD SOCIAL CAPITAL*. Retrieved from <http://www.bettertogether.org/150ways.htm>.