



## Unit 7

## Protective Factors for Child Maltreatment

### Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit the learner will be able to:

- ✓ Discuss protective factors for the maltreatment of children with disabilities
- ✓ Understand the extent to which disabled children are more susceptible to abuse
- ✓ Outline the steps that can be taken to help children better protect themselves

## Unit 7

### Protective Factors for Child Maltreatment

What can we do to prevent child maltreatment and neglect? One method is to boost protective factors. Protective factors are conditions in families and communities that, when present, improve children's and families' health and well-being. These characteristics act as buffers, assisting parents in locating resources, support, or coping strategies that enable them to parent effectively even when they are stressed. Protective factors have been linked to a lower incidence of child abuse and neglect, according to research.

#### Nurturing and Attachment

Many parents feel they don't have nearly enough time with their children due to the demands of work, home, and other responsibilities. Small acts of kindness, protection, and caring, such as a hug, a smile, or loving words, can make a big difference in the lives of children. According to research, babies who receive affection and nurturing from their parents have the best chance of growing up to be happy, healthy, and competent children, teens, and adults. A consistent relationship with a caring adult in the early years has also been linked to improved grades, healthier behaviors, more positive peer interactions, and a greater ability to cope with stress later in life, according to research.

When a few stable caregivers work together to understand and meet the infant's needs for love, affection, and stimulation, the infant's brain develops at its best. Neglectful and abusive parenting, on the other hand, can harm a child's brain development. A lack of contact or interaction with a caregiver can alter an infant's body chemistry, resulting in a decrease in growth hormones that are necessary for brain and heart development. Furthermore, children who do not form early emotional attachments will struggle to relate to their peers.

Parental and other caregiver nurturing is essential for a child's healthy physical and emotional development as they grow older. Making time to listen to their older children, being involved and interested in the child's school and other activities, staying aware of the child or teen's interests and friends, and being willing to advocate for the child when necessary are all ways that parents nurture their older children.

#### How Can Practitioners Help?

A child values even a few minutes of quality time in the car, at the store, or while cooking dinner. As a parent's partner, your job is to model and acknowledge nurturing behaviors as parents form bonds with their baby, child, or adolescent. To reinforce behavior, you can also point out instances of positive interaction between the parent and the child.

“Our family shows how much we love each other,” some parents have chosen to communicate the importance of nurturing and attachment in this way.

### Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development

Respectful communication, consistent rules and expectations, and opportunities to promote independence are more likely to be provided by parents who understand the typical course of child development. However, no parent can be an expert on every aspect of a child's development from birth to adolescence, or on the best ways to support a child at each stage. When parents are unaware of normal developmental milestones, misinterpret their child's behaviors, or don't know how to respond to and effectively manage their child's behavior, they can become frustrated and resort to harsh discipline.

Parents must continue to learn and adapt their responses to their children's needs as they grow and mature. Extensive families, cultural practices, media, formal parent education classes, and a parent's own experiences can all provide information about child development and parenting. Parents can gain a better understanding of their own child by interacting with other children of similar ages.

Parents can learn healthy alternatives by observing other caregivers who use positive techniques for managing their children's behavior. Parenting styles must be tailored to the temperament and circumstances of each child. Additional coaching and support for parents of children with special needs may be beneficial in reducing frustration and assisting them in becoming the parents their children require.

#### How Can Practitioners Help?

All parents have concerns about raising their children, and they require prompt answers as well as support from someone they can rely on. One way to put it is to acknowledge that "parenting is part natural and part learned."

Parents may feel more at ease expressing their concerns and seeking solutions if providers:

- Focus on the parents' own hopes and goals for their children
- Help parents identify and build on their strengths in parenting
- Model nurturing behavior by acknowledging frustrations and recognizing the parents' efforts

#### The Resilience of Parents

Parents with resilience—the flexibility and inner strength to bounce back when things aren't going well—can cope with the stresses of everyday life as well as the occasional crisis. Parents who are resilient know how to seek help when they are in need. Their ability to deal with life's ups and downs serves as a role model for their children in terms of coping behavior.

Multiple life stressors, such as a family history of child abuse or neglect, physical and mental health problems, marital conflict, substance abuse, and domestic or community violence, as well as financial stressors like unemployment, financial insecurity, and homelessness, can reduce a parent's ability to cope effectively with the typical day-to-day stresses of child rearing.

Every parent has inner strengths or resources that can be used to help them build resilience. Faith, flexibility, humor, communication skills, problem-solving skills, mutually supportive caring relationships, or the ability to identify and access outside resources and services when necessary are just a few examples. All of these qualities help them be better parents, and they can be nurtured and developed through concrete skill-building activities or supportive interactions with others.

### **How Can Practitioners Help?**

All parents will not be familiar with the term "resilience." Consider other ways to talk about these abilities, such as using an affirmation like:

"I am courageous when faced with adversity or a crisis."

You can help parents identify factors that contribute to their stress, as well as successful coping strategies and personal, family, and community resources, by collaborating with them.

### **Social Connections**

It is often easier for parents to care for their children and themselves when they have a network of emotionally supportive friends, family, and neighbors. Most parents require support from time to time, whether it is in the form of a sympathetic ear, advice, or tangible assistance such as transportation or child care. Children learn positive social interactions from their parents' supportive relationships, and they have access to other supportive adults. Parents who are isolated and have few social connections, on the other hand, are more likely to abuse and neglect their children, according to research.

A support network is even more important when you're new to a community, recently divorced, or a first-time parent. These families may need to put in extra effort to form the new relationships they require. To expand their social networks, some parents may need to improve their self-confidence and social skills. Helping isolated parents find resources and/or providing opportunities for them to connect with others in their neighborhood or community may encourage them to reach out. Faith-based organizations, schools, hospitals, community centers, and other places where support groups or social groups meet frequently provide opportunities.

### **How Can Practitioners Help?**

Identifying and enhancing parents' current or potential social connections, skills, abilities, and interests can be an excellent way to collaborate with them as they expand their social networks.

Your discussion may assist parents who are having trouble forming and maintaining social connections in identifying what is preventing them from doing so.

Encourage parents to state their social goals in their own words, such as "I have friends and know at least one person who supports my parenting."

### Concrete Supports for Parents

Families who are able to meet their basic needs (food, clothing, housing, and transportation) have more time and energy to devote to their children's safety and well-being.

When parents lack consistent financial resources, health insurance, or are dealing with a family crisis (such as a natural disaster or a parent's incarceration), their ability to support their children's healthy development may be jeopardized. Some families may also require assistance in obtaining social services such as drug and alcohol treatment, domestic violence counseling, or public assistance.

Working with parents to identify and access community resources may help to prevent the stress that can lead to child maltreatment. Concrete supports may also help to prevent unintentional neglect, which can occur when parents are unable to provide for their children.

#### How Can Practitioners Help?

The words "concrete supports" are unlikely to be used or associated with most parents. Instead, they might state a goal like, "My family can get help when we need it."

Working with parents to identify their most basic needs and find concrete supports helps to keep the focus on family-driven solutions. As a family partner, your job may be as simple as making referrals to the critical services, supports, and resources that parents say they require.

#### Children's Social and Emotional Competence

The ability of children to positively interact with others, self-regulate their behavior, and effectively communicate their feelings has a positive impact on their relationships with their family, other adults, and peers. Children learn to tell parents what they need and how parental actions make them feel, rather than "acting out" difficult feelings, and as a result, parents and caregivers become more responsive to their children's needs—and less likely to feel stressed or frustrated.

Children's challenging behaviors or delays in social emotional development, on the other hand, add to family stress. When children do not or cannot respond positively to their parents' nurturing and affection, parenting becomes more difficult. These children may be more vulnerable to abuse. Early detection and intervention with children to keep their development on track keeps them safe and assists their parents in facilitating their children's healthy development.

### How Can Practitioners Help?

As a parent's partner, your job may be as simple as determining how parents view their children's social and emotional development and how that affects the parent-child relationship. The terms "social and emotional competence" will not resonate with all parents. They might express its significance in terms of desired outcomes: "My children feel loved, believe they matter, and can get along with others."

### Protective Factors for the Maltreatment of Children with Disabilities

While all children are extremely vulnerable and must be protected, certain subgroups of vulnerable children require special attention due to their circumstances or conditions.

Because they are seen as easy targets, children with disabilities are more likely to be abused. The causes of abuse and neglect of children with disabilities are similar to those that affect all children.

Protective factors associated with children with disabilities should also be considered by child welfare professionals.

**Protective factors** are conditions or characteristics in individuals, families, or communities that can reduce or eliminate risk factors that negatively impact children's and families' health and well-being. For example, increased parental willingness to engage with various service professionals (a protective factor) could protect children who would otherwise be vulnerable to maltreatment.

Children may be challenged in some areas of development while excelling in others. Child welfare professionals and caregivers who are aware of a child's strengths can tailor services to maximize those strengths while also attempting to strengthen other areas.

Children's self-esteem can be improved by focusing on their strengths. When child welfare professionals work with families of disabled children, they can use a strengths-based approach to help the child feel supported and reduce the risk of maltreatment. Parents' confidence and self-esteem can be improved by building strong, positive relationships with their families and focusing on caregivers' strengths, which can reduce stress and other risk factors for abuse.

### Assessing for Maltreatment

Due to the symptoms of their disability or a lack of a connection to a trusted adult, some children may have difficulty communicating their experience of maltreatment, regardless of the type of maltreatment they have experienced or the disability they have.

Adults may believe that disabled children are unable to accurately communicate the type of abuse or neglect they have experienced. However, treating each child as an individual, avoiding

assumptions about a child's abilities, and providing a variety of ways to report maltreatment can help children with disabilities communicate any maltreatment they have experienced.

### Prevention

Despite the fact that many communities have initiatives in place to prevent maltreatment of all children, more work is needed to provide additional protections and raise awareness about the maltreatment of children with disabilities. This section examines community, family, and child-centered prevention strategies.

#### Prevention at a Community Level

Child welfare professionals can add to general child maltreatment prevention efforts by incorporating the following strategies to raise awareness of disability-related maltreatment and change societal attitudes about disabled children:

- Make sure everyone in the community is aware of the increased risk. Members of the community may not realize that children with disabilities are more vulnerable to maltreatment or how to better identify, support, and protect children with disabilities who have been or are at risk of maltreatment.
- Assist others in seeing disabled children as valuable and unique individuals. Negative attitudes can be countered by discussing the strengths of children with disabilities and their families, as well as the unique perspectives they bring to their communities.
- Encourage children with disabilities to participate in everyday activities. To promote greater exposure and decrease isolation, child welfare professionals can identify and address physical and social accessibility barriers for children with disabilities and their families (e.g., access to public buildings and parks, equal opportunities to participate in sports or social events).
- Inspire communities to share responsibility for the well-being of disabled children. Child welfare professionals and service providers can encourage greater community involvement by maintaining regular contact with schools, neighbors, faith-based organizations, and businesses that interact with families. This will help to create a larger support network for children with disabilities and their families.

#### Family-Focused Prevention

Because parents and other caregivers spend the most time with their children, it is critical to connect them with prevention programs that will assist them in raising their children without resorting to abuse. The following are some general prevention services that child welfare workers can refer families to:

**Home visits:** Professional or paraprofessional staff can visit families in their homes to provide support and services. The visitor works with the family to determine their strengths and needs, as well as to strengthen their protective factors.

**Parenting classes:** Given the high number of disabled children involved in child welfare, even general parenting classes should include a focus on parenting disabled children and obtaining supports and services.

**Support groups:** Parents can share their experiences and trade information on resources in a supportive group setting, as well as address issues related to their children's disabilities and form informal support networks.

### **Child-Focused Prevention**

Teaching disabled children about the dangers of abuse and neglect, as well as improving their ability to advocate for themselves, can help to reduce maltreatment.

Additional prevention strategies to keep in mind when working with children with disabilities are summarized below:

**Help children protect themselves:** Children at risk of maltreatment should be included in group-based educational opportunities about abuse and neglect, according to child welfare professionals.

This could include teaching children about their body parts and functions, what constitutes abuse and neglect, how to communicate with a trusted adult in an emergency, and how to distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate social interactions. This can assist children in recognizing abuse, responding to it, and reporting it to others.

**Increase the effectiveness of children's communication skills and tools:** Children may require opportunities to practice effective communication skills. Child welfare professionals can serve as role models for healthy relationships and positive interactions with other children and adults, encouraging others involved in the lives of children to do the same.

Increased verbal development and communication skills in children can help them advocate for themselves and report abuse if it occurs.

**Reduce social isolation among children with disabilities:** Children with disabilities may have limited access to developmentally appropriate activities (e.g., clubs, sports, and jobs) that can help them feel less isolated.

### Further Reading:

- ✓ Save the Children, Education Global Initiative, Moving ahead on education. A focused strategy for achieving our education goals 2012-2015
- ✓ Maas, C., Herrenkohl, T., & Sousa, C. (2008). Review of research on child maltreatment and violence in youth. Trauma, Violence & Abuse,
- ✓ Save the Children, Keeping Children Out of Harmful Institutions. Why we should be investing in family-based care, 2009