

**Off to a Great Start:  
Key Factors in Building an Early Foundation for  
Later Healthy Development and Well-Being**

**Picture a Brighter Future for Oklahoma Children  
Child Abuse Prevention Day Mini Conference**

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# State of America's Children, Youth, & Families



- In 2010, 16.4 million children were poor in the United States, and 7.4 million of those children lived in extreme poverty.
- Poverty is linked to a number of negative outcomes for children (e.g., completing fewer years of schooling, earning lower wages as adults, greater likelihood of poor health).
- 1 in 4 infants, toddlers, and preschoolers are poor during the years of critical brain development.
- Between 9.5% and 14.2% of children between 0-5 years old experience social-emotional problems.

# State of America's Children, Youth, & Families



- Infants and toddlers are the most likely age group to be victims of maltreatment.
- 60% of 4th and 8th grade public school students are reading or doing math below grade level.
- The United States has the highest teen birth rate in the industrialized world.
- Homeless children are twice as likely as other children to repeat a grade in school, to be expelled or suspended, or to drop out of high school.

Children's Defense Fund. (2012). *The State of America's Children*.

# Concern about Outcomes



Begin parenting  
with the end in mind.

# What Children Need



“The most important thing children need to thrive is to live in ***an environment of relationships*** that begins with their family and extends out. . . . What children need is for that entire environment of relationships be invested in their healthy development.” *Jack Shonkoff*

# A Two-Generation Approach



A strategy or approach to promote young children's healthy development by:

- serving parents and children individually and together as a family unit
- developing the capabilities and resources of parents or caregivers

# Building Adult Capabilities



- Increasing parents'/caregivers' knowledge, skills, attitudes, and sense of competence
- Promoting the best possible social, emotional, cognitive, and physical outcomes given
- Building protective factors

# Development in Context



- Development involves several processes:  
biological, psychological, cognitive, social
- Development influenced by total ecology/  
life situation in multiple contexts:
  - \* family
  - \* neighborhood
  - \* school
  - \* socioeconomic status
  - \* cultural
  - \* sociopolitical
  - \* gender
  - \* cohort



# Early Trauma and Later Behavior

## Adverse Experiences

- Direct experience of exposure to violence
- Child abuse, neglect, abandonment
- Accumulated burden of economic hardship
- Parental substance abuse
- Parental depression

## Later Impacts

- Hypersensitivity to stressors
- Problems with trust, autonomy, and initiative
- Difficulty interpreting emotional responses
- Patterns of intense, unstable relationships

# Family Well-Being



## Family Members:

1. Know, unequivocally, they are loved, and experience pleasure in each other's presence
2. Perform various functions (e.g., socialize children; chores)
3. Communicate and interact with each other
4. Protect its members, particularly vulnerable members
5. Provide resources, goods, and services needed to support and maintain the family

# Family Well-Being, continued



6. Bond together as a unit to: provide reciprocal care, emotional support, hope, encouragement, and guidance; resolve conflicts and seek peace
7. Serve as buffers between its members and negative social forces or conditions (e.g., community violence)
8. Demonstrate resilience—as individuals and as a unit—in the face of adversity

# A Caveat about Parenting



It is important to acknowledge that what is considered to be effective parenting is *contextual*, particularly with respect to culture and circumstances.

**Common Assumption:** Poor families have poorer parenting skills because of their various social conditions (e.g., economic inequities, community gang violence, and limited resources).

**Emerging Evidence:** Poor families do not necessarily have lesser skills or fewer of the qualities that aid child development than do families living elsewhere.

# A Strengths-Based Perspective



## Family Strengths

“The set of relationships and processes that support and protect families and family members, especially during times of adversity and change. Family strengths help to maintain family cohesion while also supporting the development and well-being of individual family members” (Moore et al., 2002, p. 1).

# Considering Cultural Strengths



## **Culture Is. . .**

Comprised of both surface structure elements and deep structure elements

**Surface Structure:** music, traditions, style of dress, etc.

**Deep Structure:** worldview, values, beliefs/ethos

# Parenting is a Cultural Act



- Too often, ideas, research, and practice about parenting proceeds as though there is a single parenting *norm* (i.e., “traditional” White American conception) that all parenting must be compared to.

**Differences = Deviances = Deficiencies**

- Such thinking minimizes or ignores important differences in what cultures expect of and understand about parenting and parent-child relationships.

# Two Critical Matters of Culture



## Cultural Competence

- Understanding and respecting culturally-based values, beliefs, and behaviors

## Cultural Humility

- Active self-reflection and critical consciousness of one's own assumptions, beliefs, values, and worldview regarding culture/race/ethnicity

# Risk and Protective Factors



## Risk Factors

Conditions or attributes of individuals, families, communities, and the larger society that increase the **probability of poor outcomes.**

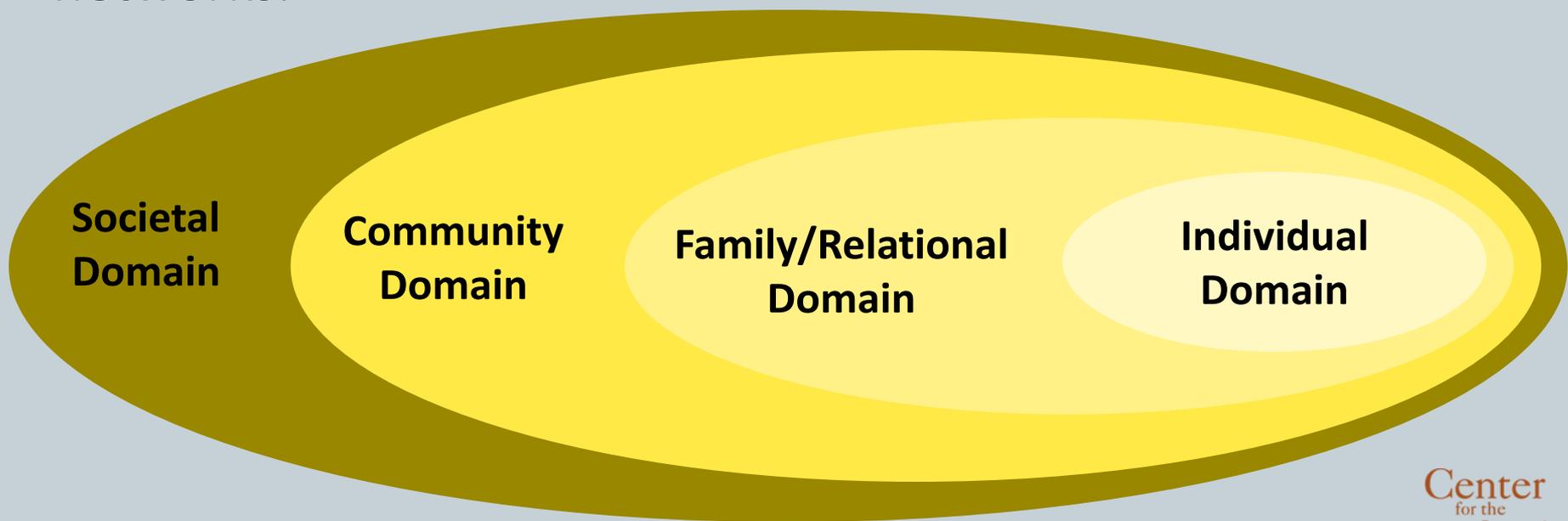
## Protective Factors

Conditions or attributes of individuals, families, communities, and the larger society that ***simultaneously* mitigate or prevent the impact of risk factors and actively enhance well-being.**

# The Nature of Risk & Protective Factors



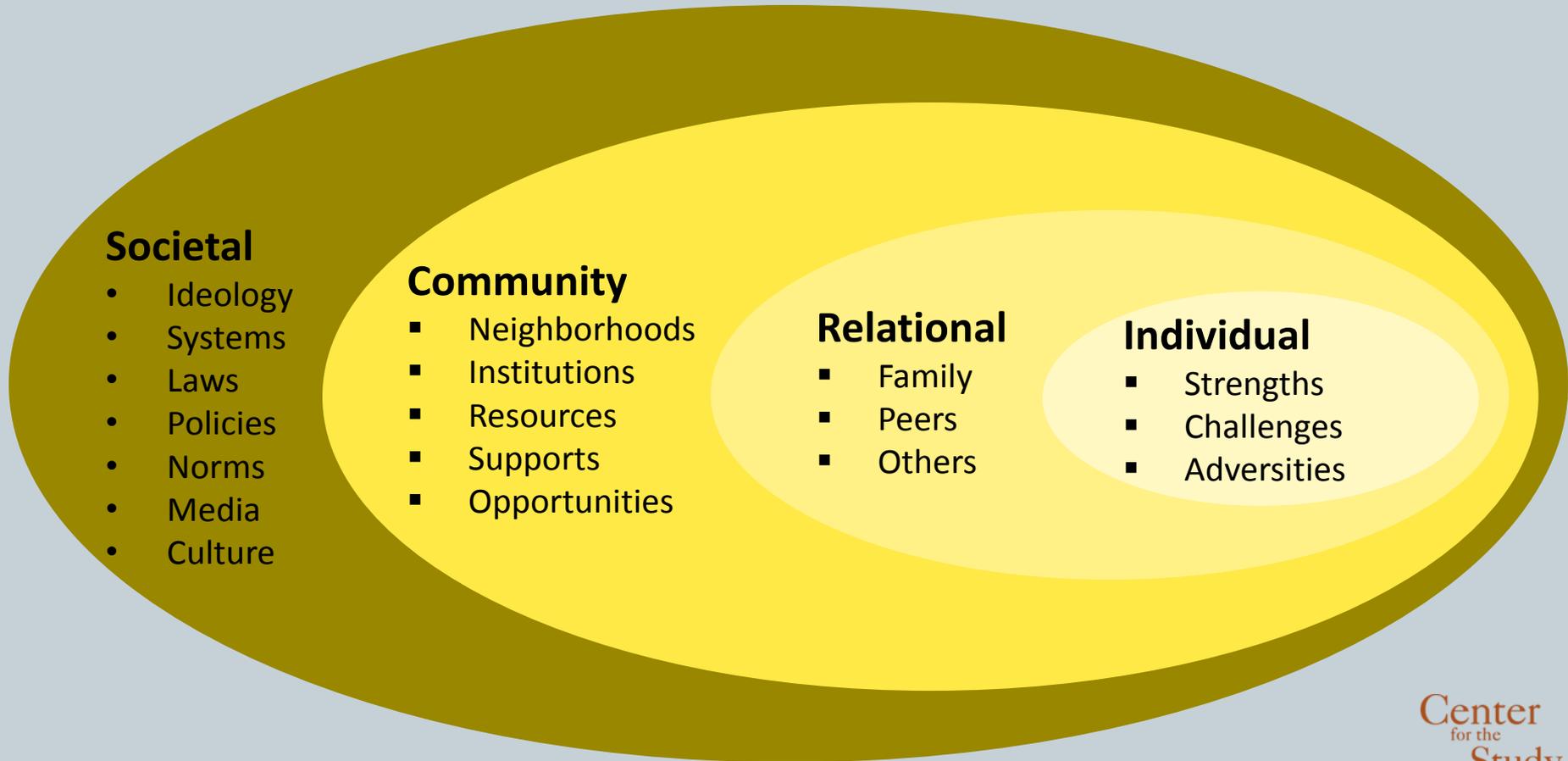
“Family systems do not function in a vacuum; families are always embedded within other systems. These extra-familial interactions have a profound impact on the strength of family networks.”



Adapted from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Social-Ecological Model:  
A Framework for Prevention

# The Nature of Risk & Protective Factors

## Domains of the Social Ecology



Adapted from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Social-Ecological Model:  
A Framework for Prevention

# Cumulative Protective Factors



## **Protective Factors**

The presence of multiple protective factors is associated with a decreased likelihood of involvement in problem behaviors.

# The Strengthening Families™ Protective Factors

Parental Resilience

Social Connections

Knowledge of Parenting  
& Child Development

Concrete Support in  
Times of Need

Social & Emotional  
Competence of Children



# Strengthening Families Protective Factors



- **Parental Resilience:** Managing both general life and parenting stress, and functioning well when faced with stressors, challenges, or adversity; the outcome is personal growth and positive change
- **Social Connections:** Having healthy, sustained relationships with people, institutions, the community, and a force greater than oneself
- **Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development:** Understanding the unique aspects of child development; implementing developmentally and contextually appropriate best parenting practices

# Strengthening Families Protective Factors



- **Social and Emotional Competence of Children:** Providing an environment and experiences that enable the child to form close and secure adult and peer relationships, and to experience, regulate, and express emotions
- **Concrete Support in Times of Need:** Identifying, seeking, accessing, advocating for, and receiving needed adult, child, and family services; receiving a quality of service designed to preserve parents' dignity and promote healthy development

# Resilience



**Resilience:** The process of managing stress and functioning well when faced with challenges, adversity, and trauma. Positive change and growth occur.



# Parental Resilience



## **Resilience is Much More Than “Bouncing Back” from Challenges and Adversity**

In describing findings from the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) Study, Felitti (2002b) acknowledged: “The Study makes it clear that time does not heal some of the adverse experiences we found so common in the childhoods of a large population of middle-aged, middle class Americans. One does not ‘just get over’ some things, not even fifty years later.”

# Factors that Contribute to Parental Stress



Parenting Domain Stressors : Parents' personal characteristics or situations (e.g., clinically significant depressive symptoms; feeling overwhelmed by what is required in the parenting role; lack of emotional closeness and attunement with child)

Child Domain Stressors: Parents' perceived qualities of the child that the parent believes make it difficult to fulfill his or her parenting role (e.g., feeling the child requires too much of the parent; experiencing child as a source of pleasure or good feelings)

Life Domain Stressors: Social, situational, or contextual circumstances that are outside of parents' control (e.g., death of a loved one; financial hardship)

# Parental Role Strain



The inability to fulfill the socially ascribed role of parent due to, for example:

- non-standard work schedule
- being the non-custodial parent
- lack of emotional closeness with the child
- unwillingness to accept the parenting role
- mental health and substance abuse problems

# Chronic Environmental Stress

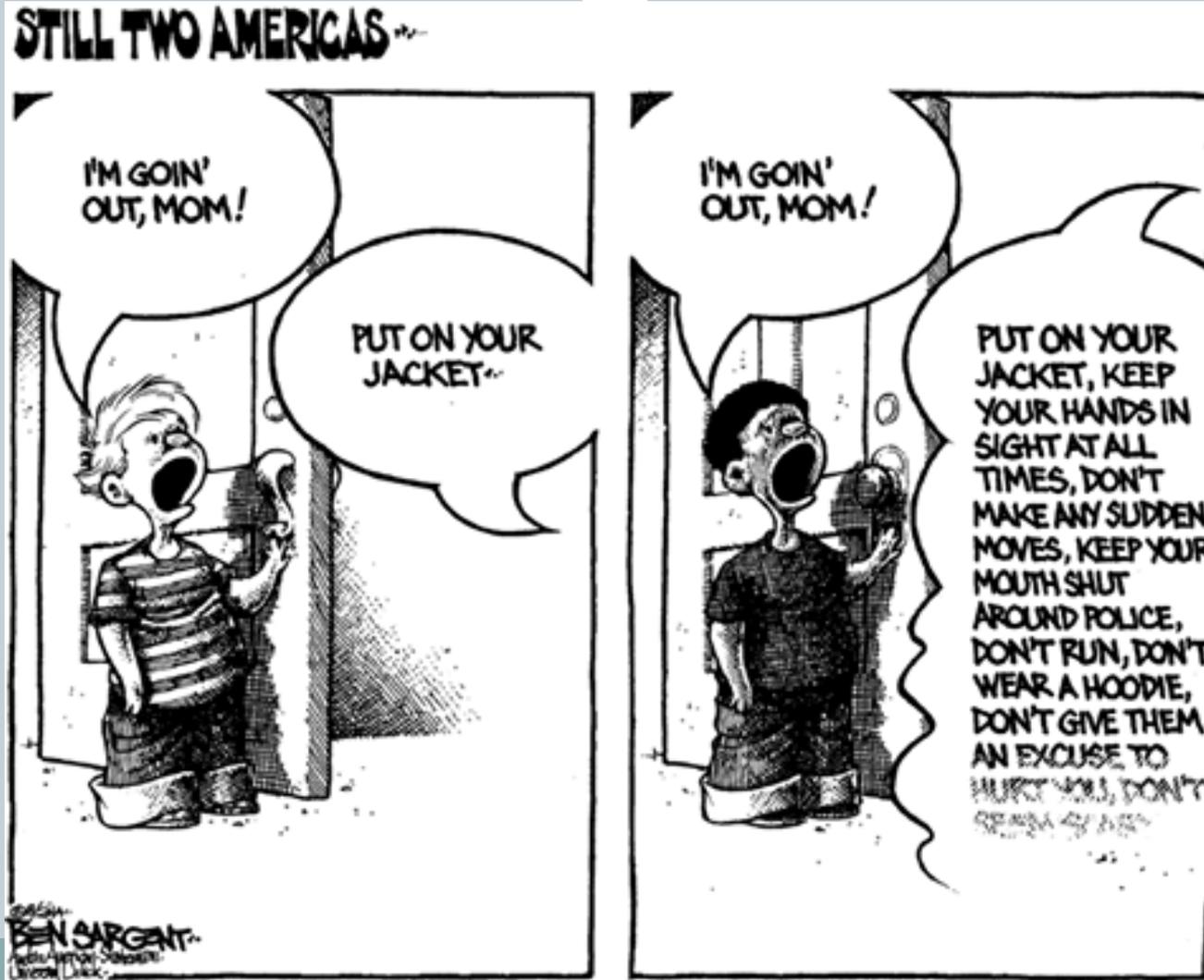


A constant background level of threat based in the environmental physical and social structure. For example:

- racism and economic inequity
- heightened danger
- the intrusion of social problems into everyday life.

Chronic environmental stress impinges on optimism, sense of control, and goal-directed behavior—cognitive functions that can propel a child [or adult] to be industrious and engaged with the world.

# Chronic Environmental Stress



# Parents and Stress



***How*** parents respond to stressors is much more important in determining the outcomes for themselves and their children than the stressor itself.

# Parental Resilience



- The ability to display positive outcomes despite significant threats to adaptation and development.
- The outcome of parental resilience is personal growth and positive change.

# Impact of Parental Resilience



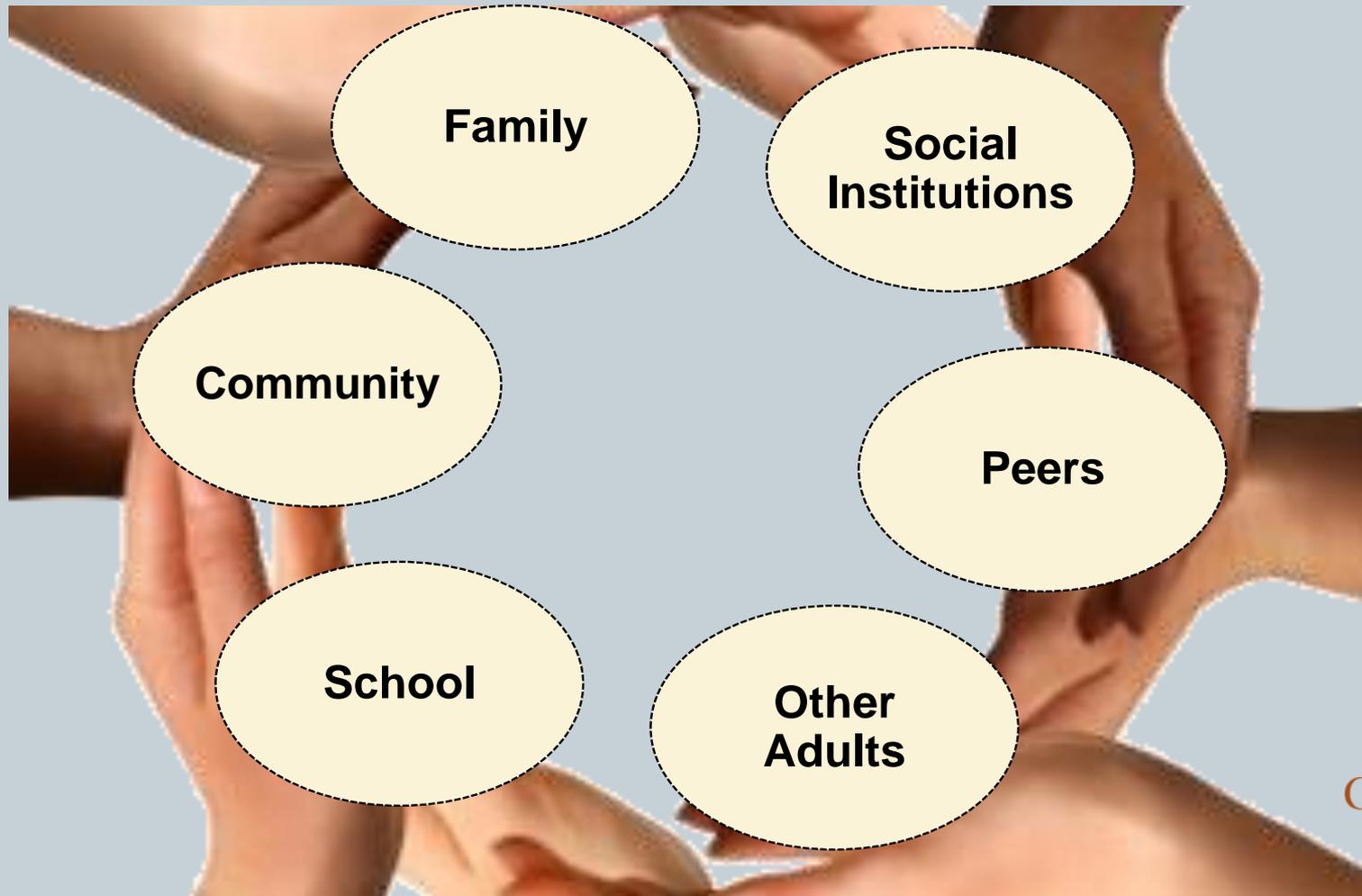
- Increased parental self-efficacy
- Increased ability to provide nurturing attention to child
- Development of secure attachments
- Development of resilience in children

# Children and Stress



- The extent to which stressful events have lasting adverse effects is determined by:
  - child's response to the stress
  - past experiences
  - availability of a supportive adult
- A child's ability to cope with stress in the early years has consequences for physical and mental health throughout life.

# Social Connections



# Social Connections



Parents' healthy, sustained relationships with people, institutions, the community, or a force greater than oneself that promote a sense of:

- trust
- belonging
- that one matters

# Sense of Connectedness



- Feelings of “fit” with people, organizations, etc.
- Belongingness
- Reciprocal positive regard
- Potential for shared or complementary values, beliefs, etc.
- (Eventually) can share joy, pain, uncertainties

# Social Connections for Parents



- **Emotional support**  
(e.g., affirming parenting skills)
- **Informational support**  
(e.g., recommending a pediatric dentist)
- **Instrumental support**  
(e.g., providing transportation)
- **Spiritual support**  
(e.g., providing hope and encouragement)

# High Quality Social Connections



## Associated with:

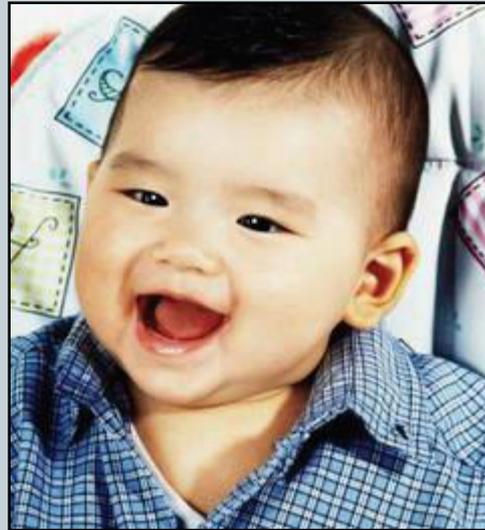
- Positive parent affect
- Positive perceptions of one's children
- Responsiveness to one's children
- Parental satisfaction, well-being, and sense of competence
- Lower levels of anger, anxiety, and depression
- Buffering parents and parent-child relationship from stress

# Social Connections for Young Children



- Healthy, supportive, caring relationships with family and other adults who:
  - provide positive guidance
  - promote high expectations
  - set developmentally appropriate limits, rules, and monitoring

# Knowledge of Parenting & Child Development



# Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development



Q: Why is increasing knowledge about parenting and child development so important?

A: “You can’t do pass what you don’t know.”

(Mrs. Green, circa 1984)



# Critical Importance of Early Childhood



“Early childhood is both the **most critical** and the **most vulnerable** time in any child’s development. In the first few years, the ingredients for intellectual, emotional, and moral growth are laid down. We cannot fail children in these early years.”

Brazelton, T. B., & Greenspan, S. (2000). *The irreducible needs of children: What every child must have to grow, learn, and flourish*. Cambridge, MA: Perseus Books.

# Key Knowledge Areas



1. Early brain development\*
2. Secure Attachment\*
3. Social and emotional competence\*
4. Language and vocabulary development\*
5. Cultural factors that influence parenting practices and the perception of children
6. Signs indicating a child may have a developmental delay and needs special help
7. How to positively address inappropriate child behavior

# Early Brain Development



- Much evidence points to the central importance of prenatal and early postnatal brain development
- Early experiences affect the quality of brain architecture (e.g., “serve & return” interactions)
- Toxic stress negatively impacts development
- Brain development is life-long
- Developing brains need proper nutrition, regularly scheduled periods of sleep; physical activity; a variety of stimulating experiences; protection from environmental threats, toxins, ACEs

# Early Brain Development



- Developing brains also need **attuned, emotionally available and responsive parents** and other primary caregivers who recognize and consistently attend to the needs of young children, and interact with them in an affectionate, sensitive, responsive, and nurturing manner.

# “Serve and Return” Interactions



Adult-child interactions shape early brain circuitry



# Neglect: Absence of Responsiveness



“Child Neglect is a failure to meet children’s basic needs—whether the failure is the responsibility of parents, communities, or society—and this void places children in harm’s way”

(National Alliance of Children’s Trust and Prevention Funds)

# Importance of Vocabulary Development



## Findings from Hart & Risley's 1995 study:

1. Children's academic successes at ages nine and ten are attributable to the amount of talk they hear from 0-3.
2. The variation in children's language abilities is relative to the amount parents speak to their children.
3. Parent-child talking in low-income families is significantly less than in more educated families. But if quantity is comparable, language development is comparable.

Hart, B. & T. R. Risley. (1995). *Meaningful differences in the everyday experience of young American children*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes Pub.

# More Importantly. . .



- While the quantity of a child's vocabulary is important, focusing on the number of words known *alone* it is not sufficient.
- Must focus also on the child's interactive communication experiences.

# Concrete Support in Times of Need



# Concrete Support in Times of Need



Assisting parents to identify, find, and receive concrete support in times of need helps to ensure they and their family:

- receive the basic necessities everyone deserves in order to grow
- receive specialized medical, mental health, social, educational, or legal services.

# Providing Supports and Services



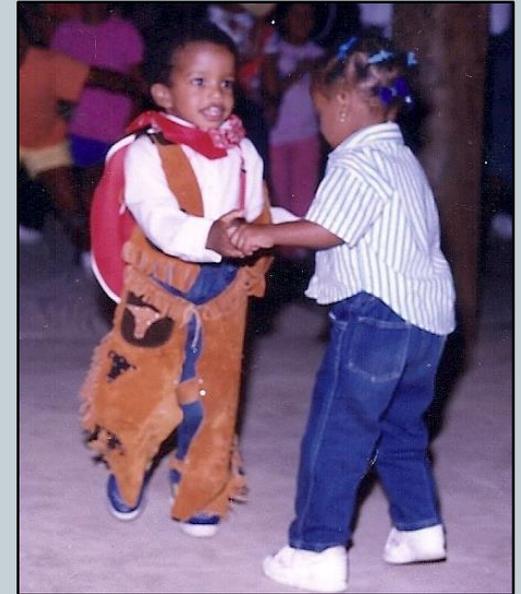
- Recognizing personal and family resources for meeting needs
- Understanding rights to services
- Knowing where and how to access services and goods
- Receiving timely and relevant assistance
- Learning to navigate through systems
- Being treated with dignity

# Trauma-Informed Care Perspective



- Recognizes the presence of trauma symptoms and acknowledges the role that trauma has played in a person's life
- Paradigm shift from:  
"What's wrong with you?"  
to  
"What has happened to you?"

# Social & Emotional Competence of Children



# Social & Emotional Competence of Children



## Social and Emotional Competence

The developing capacity of the child from birth-5 years to:

- form close and secure adult and peer relationships
- experience, regulate, and express emotions in socially and culturally appropriate ways
- explore the environment and learn

*All in the context of family, community, and culture*

(Center on the Social Emotional Foundations for Early Learning)

# Importance of Social-Emotional Competence



- A growing body of research has demonstrated the strong link between children's social-emotional competence and:
  - cognitive development
  - language skills
  - mental health
  - school success
  - forming an independent identity
  - having a productive, responsible, and satisfying adulthood

# Secure Attachment



- Young children who receive consistent, warm, affectionate, nurturing, responsive care
  - learn to trust
  - learn to manage stress better
  - are more willing to try new things and explore independently
  - form better relationships with others

# Unmet Social-Emotional Needs: Prevalence



- Between 9.5% and 14.2% of children between 0-5 years old experience social-emotional problems
- Approximately 9% of children who receive specialty mental health services in the United States are between 0-5 years old
- Almost 40% of 2-year-olds in early care and education settings had insecure attachment relationships with their mothers

# Insecure Attachment



- Experiences with caregivers that are *inconsistent, unresponsive, detached, hostile, or rejecting*
  - lead to insecure attachments
  - create fear, distrust, anxiety, and distress in young children
  - place young children at risk for long-term adverse effects on brain development

# Dimensions of Social & Emotional Competence



1. Having a positive sense of self (**self-concept**) and good feelings about oneself (**self-esteem**)
2. Being open to new challenges and willing to explore new environments (**self-confidence**)
3. Believing that one is capable of performing an action and working to achieve a goal (**self-efficacy**)
4. Controlling impulses and acting appropriately based on the context (**self-regulation**)

# Dimensions of Social & Emotional Competence, cont.



5. Understanding and expressing a range of positive and negative emotions (**communication skills**)
6. Understanding and responding to the emotions and rights of others (**empathy**)
7. Willing to try again when first attempts are not successful (**persistence**)
8. Forming close relationships and getting along with others (**social skills**)
9. Learning a sense of right and wrong (**morality**)

# Dimensions of Social & Emotional Competence, cont.



## 10. Executive Functioning

- Seeing alternate solutions to problems and being able to shift perspective (**cognitive flexibility**)
- Planning and carrying out purposeful actions (**personal agency**)
- Exercising control over thinking (**cognitive self-regulation**)
- Exercising control over feelings (**emotional self-regulation**)
- Staying on task even in the face of distractions (**behavioral self-regulation**)

## 11. Positive Character Traits (**e.g., self-control, curiosity, persistence, conscientiousness, grit, and self-confidence**)

# Promoting Social & Emotional Competence Requires. . .



- 1. Parents and other adult caregivers whose social and emotional competence is well developed**
2. A warm, nurturing, and trusting relationship with at least one parent or other adult caregiver
3. Intentional actions of parents designed to promote social and emotional competence (e.g., modeling skills; practicing skills with the child)
4. Consistent, affectionate, sensitive, and responsive care and interaction from parents and other adult caregivers
5. The positive and encouraging messages communicated to children—directly or indirectly—about themselves

# Promoting Social & Emotional Competence Requires. . .



6. Regular and predictable routines
7. A physically and emotionally safe environment that provides for basic physiological needs, protects children from harm, or mitigates the effects of adversity
8. An interactive language-rich environment that promotes vocabulary development, talking, and reading, and encourages children to express their emotions
9. An environment that encourages developmentally appropriate play and opportunities to explore and learn by doing



# Picture a Brighter Future for Oklahoma Children

“In order to develop normally, a child requires progressively more complex joint activity with one or more adults who have an irrational emotional relationship with the child. ***Somebody’s got to be crazy about that kid.*** That’s number one. First, last, and always.” (Urie Bronfenbrenner)

# Contact Information



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