Coalition for Juvenile Justice

BACK TO BASICS FOR BETTER FUTURES:

STRENGTHENING YOUTH THROUGH PROTECTIVE FACTORS: CENTERING FAMILIES, COMMUNITY, AND CROSS-SYSTEM COLLABORATION

2026

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

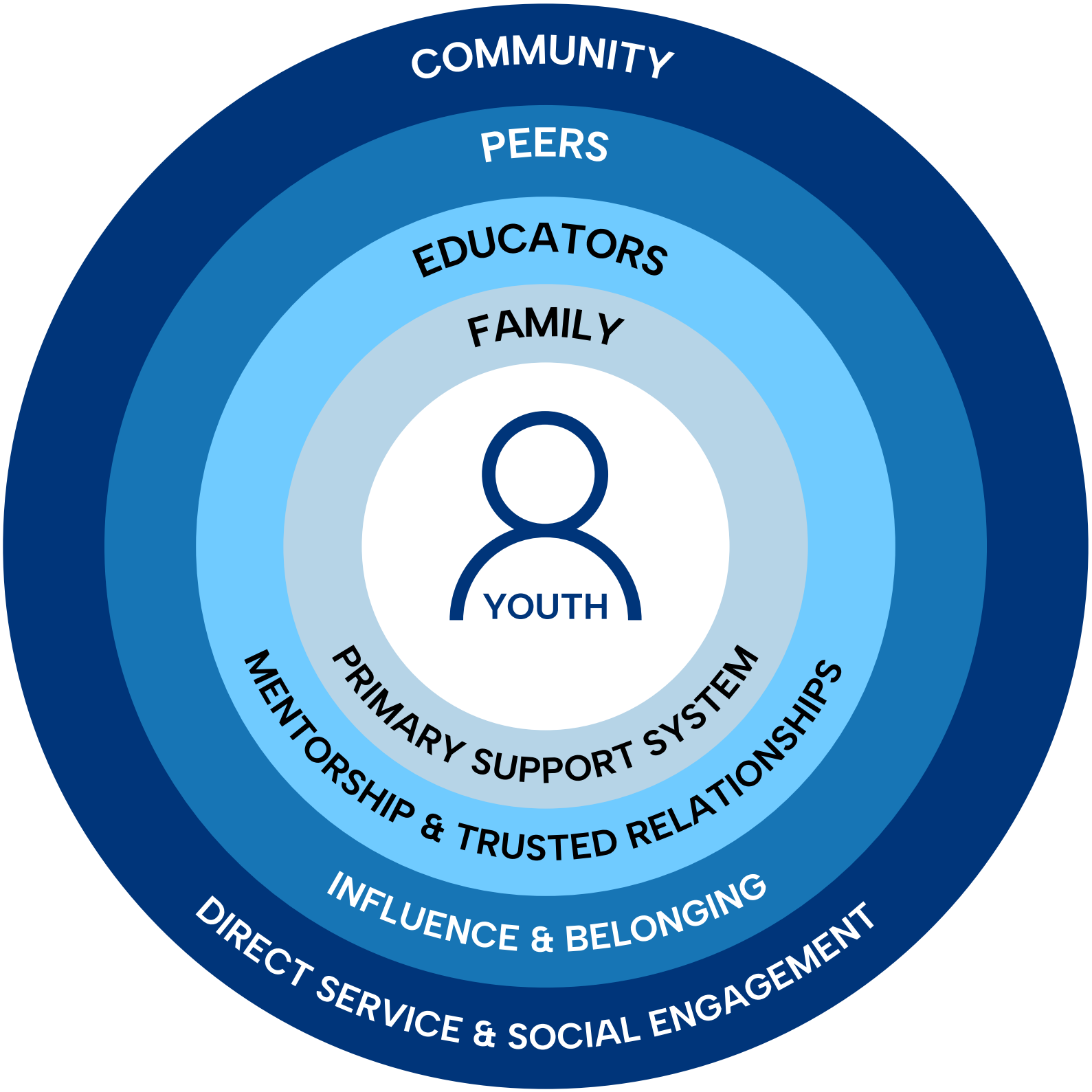
Understanding the impact of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) is only the first step toward improving outcomes for youth and families. Equally important is strengthening the conditions that help young people thrive despite adversity. Protective factors provide a proactive, strength-based approach by focusing on the relationships, resources, and environments that promote healthy development and family well-being.

Protective factors are the individual, family, and community characteristics, support, and conditions that have the potential to reduce the likelihood of adversity and increase young people's ability to navigate challenges successfully.**[1]** These factors are strengthened through supportive relationships, stable and nurturing environments, equitable access to resources, and coordinated systems that work together to meet the needs of youth and families and ultimately reduce unnecessary involvement in the juvenile justice system.

Rather than relying primarily on punitive or crisis-driven interventions after problems emerge, a protective factors approach prioritizes prevention, early support, positive youth development, and community and family strengthening strategies. Investing in youth, family, and communities before risks escalate not only improves outcomes for youth but also strengthens families, reduces system disparities, and lessens the need for more intensive interventions over time.

This work requires collaboration across systems, including families, schools, healthcare providers, youth-serving organizations, and public agencies, to create environments where young people feel safe, supported, and empowered to succeed.

THE FRAMEWORK: PROTECTIVE FACTORS



THE PROTECTIVE FACTORS FRAMEWORK FOR FAMILIES AND YOUTH

Protective factors can be strengthened across multiple levels of a young person's environment. Two widely recognized, research-informed frameworks provide guidance for building resilience and reducing the impact of adversity: Strengthening Families, which focuses on supporting caregivers and families, and Youth Thrive, which centers on the strengths and developmental needs of adolescents and young adults.

Developed by the Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP), the Strengthening Families Protective Factors Framework is designed to improve child and family well-being by strengthening the capacities of parents and caregivers. The framework emphasizes five protective factors that help families promote healthy child development and reduce the likelihood that adversity will negatively affect children's long-term outcomes. These protective factors include:

- Parental resilience: caregivers' ability to manage stress, recover from adversity, and continue providing stable, nurturing care for their children. Strengthening resilience through access to mental health supports, peer networks, and practical resources helps families mitigate challenges before they become crises.
- Social connections: build supportive relationships with extended family, friends, neighbors, and community members to ensure emotional support, a sense of belonging, and access to trusted networks. These relationships can reduce isolation and increase opportunities for mutual support.
- Knowledge of parenting and child development: caregivers understanding child and adolescent development and effective, culturally responsive parenting practices[5] that support healthy physical, cognitive, social, and emotional growth.
- Concrete support in times of need: access to essential resources and services, including housing, food, healthcare, transportation, financial assistance, and childcare, that help families remain stable during periods of stress.
- Social and emotional competence: caregivers helping children develop emotional regulation, communication, problem-solving, and relationship skills that promote healthy development and resilience.**[2]**

Since families are often a child's primary source of support following adversity, strengthening family relationships and reducing caregiver stress are central strategies for promoting resilience and preventing future involvement with child welfare and juvenile justice systems.

While the Strengthening Families framework focuses on caregivers, CSSP's Youth Thrive Framework is designed specifically for adolescents and young adults, including youth involved in child welfare, juvenile justice, and other youth-serving systems.

The framework recognizes that resilience develops through supportive relationships, positive experiences, and opportunities for healthy development, even after exposure to trauma or adversity.

These protective factors include:

- **Youth resilience:** young people's ability to adapt, recover, and continue functioning despite stress, adversity, or trauma.
- **Social connections**: youth developing positive relationships with peers, caring adults, and community members that foster belonging, encouragement, and engagement.
- **Knowledge of adolescent development:** youth understanding the physical, cognitive, emotional, and social changes of adolescence to better support healthy decision-making and development
- **Concrete support in times of need:** timely access to basic necessities and services, including healthcare, behavioral health, education, housing, and legal assistance.
- **Cognitive and social-emotional competence**: youth developing executive functioning, emotional regulation, decision-making, problem-solving, and interpersonal skills that support successful transitions into adulthood.**[3]**

STRENGTHENING FAMILIES & YOUTH THRIVE FRAMEWORKS IN PRACTICE

• Family-centered and youth-focused approaches strengthen protective factors by engaging caregivers, empowering youth, and building supportive relationships and environments that promote healthy development. Evidence-based interventions such as Functional Family Therapy (FFT), Family Group Decision Making (FGDM), Cognitive Behavioral Interventions, and restorative justice practices help strengthen family relationships, address challenges, improve decision-making and emotional regulation, and unnecessary reduce justice-system involvement.

• Community-based approaches further expand opportunities to build caregiver capacity, youth resilience, and connection. Locally established programs such as Parent Cafés create peer-led spaces where caregivers share experiences, build relationships, and strengthen communication and support. Meanwhile, credible messenger initiatives and youth leadership programs provide trusted adult connections and opportunities for young people to build confidence, develop leadership skills, and engage positively with their communities.

• At the systems level, State Advisory Groups (SAGs) help advance the principles of these frameworks by ensuring youth and family member representation, elevating youth and family voice, and investment in prevention-focused, family-centered, and youth-centered strategies that strengthen communities through Title II Formula Grants.

These frameworks have been adopted in various states to inform neglect prevention programming and direct child welfare services. Together, they demonstrate that resilience is strengthened by investing in both families and youth and model the ways in which the long-term effect of ACEs can be prevented through protective factors.**[4][5]**

APPLICATION OF PROTECTIVE FACTORS

EDUCATION AND SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

Schools are a critical setting for strengthening protective factors by providing safe, stable, and supportive environments where youth can learn, develop skills, and access resources that address academic, behavioral, and mental health needs. Schools promote resilience by fostering school connectedness or the extent to which students feel that adults and peers in their school community care about them, value their contributions, and support both their well-being and academic success— which is a key protective factor.

Youth who feel connected to school are more likely to demonstrate academic success, including higher grades, stronger attendance, and increased likelihood of graduating high school.[6] [7] They are also less likely to engage in risky behaviors, including violence, substance use, and other health-related risks, and are more likely to experience positive mental health outcomes.[8] [9] [10] Additionally, school connectedness can serve as a buffer against the harmful effects of neighborhood violence and negative family relations, which system-involved youth are often exposed to.[11]

Schools are also uniquely positioned to identify early signs of trauma, behavioral health concerns, or family stress and connect youth with appropriate resources before challenges escalate.[12] Access to literacy programming, counseling, mentoring, and extracurricular opportunities further strengthen engagement, build social-emotional skills, and create pathways for success.

Relationship-building in School Settings

Positive relationships with caring adults are among the strongest protective factors for youth. Teachers, counselors, coaches, and other trusted school staff provide encouragement, stability, and guidance that help youth navigate challenges and remain connected to their school community.

Creating environments where youth feel seen, respected, and supported strengthens youths' sense of belonging. Restorative justice practices in schools, especially, can help build school connectedness by fostering positive relationships, repairing harm, promoting accountability, and reducing reliance on exclusionary discipline such as suspension and expulsion.[13] In the 2019-2020 school year, 60% of U.S. schools reported using restorative practices, effectively reducing suspensions and student misbehavior while improving student wellness and academic achievement.[14] For example, a 2023 California study found that greater exposure to restorative practices was associated with fewer and shorter suspensions as well as higher English language arts and mathematics achievement, with Black students experiencing the greatest benefits.[15]

These relationship-centered approaches are also applicable in youth justice and residential settings, where trusted relationships are essential for engagement and positive outcomes.

COMMUNITY NETWORKS

Community-based organizations and programs provide critical protective factors by serving as accessible, trusted entry points for youth and families outside of formal systems. These organizations often provide mentorship, enrichment, behavioral health supports, leadership opportunities, and connections to resources that strengthen resilience and promote positive youth development.**[16]**

Programs such as those offered through local youth-serving, and youth-led organizations create spaces where young people can build relationships, explore their strengths, and gain access to supportive adults. These community connections can be especially important for youth who may have limited trust or previous negative experiences with formal systems.

EXAMPLES OF COMMUNITY-BASED PROGRAMS & ORGANIZATIONS STRENGTHENING PROTECTIVE FACTORS

DC Girls' Coalition (Washington, DC) is a youth-led organization promotes leadership, advocacy, and identity development for girls and non-conforming youth through supportive relationships and youth-centered programming

Becoming a Man (BAM) (Chicago, IL; expanded into seven other U.S. cities) is a school-based counseling program that uses mentoring and group-based programming to guide boys in grade 7-12 in emotional regulation, decision-making, conflict resolution, and positive relationships.

Agape Movement Co. (Minneapolis, MN) strengthens youth protective factors through culturally responsive programming that promotes identity, resilience, and positive relationships. This organization supports programs that connect youth with cultural heritage, elders, and mentors; uses sports to support academic success; and encourages storytelling to build communication skills and support healing.

Tackling Chronic Absenteeism Project (Baltimore, MD) is a voluntary, peer mentoring program that uses restorative practices and positive youth development approaches to increase belonging in middle school students by strengthening their leadership, conflict resolution, and communication skills and supporting parents as they navigate legal, social, and behavioral health systems.

Local, faith-based institutions including organizations and places of worship, such as churches, mosques, and temples, also serve as important community anchors by providing spaces for belonging, mentorship, service, and identity development. Through supportive relationships and shared values, faith-based institutions can help youth develop a sense of purpose, connection, and responsibility to their communities.

POSITIVE PEER ENGAGEMENT

Developmentally, during early adolescence peer relationships become highly influential on social and emotional outcomes for youth**[17]**. High-quality peer relationships have an association with lower levels of antisocial behavior, greater socio-emotional competence, and improved psychological well-being. Peer relationships provide youth with opportunities to practice communication, emotional regulation, cooperation, conflict resolution, and perspective taking while fostering belonging, identity development, and resilience. Additionally, these relationships can provide a buffer against adversity**[18]**. Importantly, these benefits are most pronounced when youth are connected to supportive, prosocial peers. Research suggests that positive peer relationships can be intentionally cultivated by creating structured opportunities for youth to cooperate, work toward shared goals, and engage in positive social interactions**[19][20].**

Examples of positive peer engagement opportunities[21]:

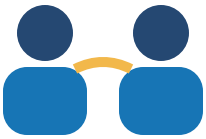
·Youth leadership councils and advisory boards
·Peer mentoring programs
·Restorative justice circles and peer mediation programs
·After-school clubs and extracurricular activities
·Sports and recreation programs
·Service-learning and community volunteer programs
·Youth development organizations (e.g., Boys and Girls Club, YMCA, 4-H)

OPPORTUNITIES IN ACTION



LEADERSHIP

Youth councils
and advisory boards



MENTORSHIP

Peer mentoring
and mediation



COMMUNITY

Clubs, service,
and recreation

Research-based Tenants of Positive Peer Engagement Programs [22]

States should prioritize programs that…	What this looks like in practice
Define the desired peer outcome	Identify whether the goal is increased belonging, peer acceptance, friendship quality, positive interactions, or reduced loneliness.
Match the program to youth needs	Consider age, developmental level, behavioral/emotional needs, and the context in which youth live and interact.
Teach relevant skills	Provide explicit instruction in communication, emotion regulation, conflict resolution, cooperation, and other skills related to successful peer interaction.
Provide active practice	Give youth repeated opportunities to rehearse and use skills with peers rather than relying primarily on classroom instruction. Active practice was associated with stronger peer outcomes in several types of interventions.
Create structured opportunities for positive interaction	Incorporate cooperative activities, recreation, projects, discussion, and other settings in which positive peer relationships can naturally develop.
Reinforce prosocial interactions	Train adults to recognize and reinforce cooperation, support, conflict resolution, inclusion, and other desired peer behaviors.
Measure relationships—not just skills	Evaluate whether youth actually experience greater connection, acceptance, positive peer engagement, and relationship quality rather than measuring social-skill acquisition alone.
Monitor whether improvements last	Assess outcomes over time and adjust implementation when gains do not generalize or maintain. Follow-up evidence suggests peer-related improvements can persist beyond intervention.

CULTURAL CONNECTION AND IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

Developing a strong sense of cultural identity and belonging is another important protective factor that supports resilience, self-esteem, and overall well-being. When young people have opportunities to explore, affirm, and celebrate their cultural, racial, ethnic, linguistic, gender, sexual, and community identities, they are more likely to develop a strong sense of purpose, pride, and connection. These experiences foster belonging, strengthen positive identity development, and equip youth with the confidence and coping skills needed to navigate adversity and discrimination.**[23]**

Demographic	Protective Factor	Examples of Support Through Cultural Connection
Native youth	Cultural preservation and community belonging	Participation in Native Nations' traditions and ceremonies, language revitalization, and mentorship from Tribal Elders with the goal of reinforcing cultural identity and connection to community
Black youth	Positive racial identity and mentorship	Programs that affirm racial identity, teach Black cultural history, and provide mentors who share lived experiences with the goal of strengthening self-efficacy and buffering the effects of discrimination and systemic inequities
Immigrant & refugee youth	Cultural continuity and social inclusion	Programs preserve cultural heritage, opportunities to build connections within new communities, and access to bilingual legal and social navigation services with the goal of reducing isolation and increasing sense of belonging
LGBTQ+ youth	Identity affirmation and safe relationships	Access to affirming LGBTQ+ adults, peer support, and inclusive environments where LGBTQ+ youth can safely express their identities with the goal of feeling a sense of safety and belonging

Culturally responsive and affirming programs help youth build confidence, strengthen supportive relationships, and develop the tools needed to overcome adversity. By recognizing and valuing the diverse identities of young people, communities can create environments where all youth feel seen, respected, connected, and empowered to thrive.

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT AND SKILL-BUILDING

Workforce development and career readiness opportunities help youth build the knowledge, skills, and confidence needed for long-term success and economic stability**[24]**. Employment experiences, internships, career exploration**[25]**, financial literacy, vocational training, and job readiness programs**[26]** promote responsibility, problem-solving, communication, and goal setting while helping youth envision positive futures.

Promising strategies to strengthen workforce development and skill building as protective factors include establishing formal partnerships between juvenile justice agencies and local community organizations to create clear referral pathway and targeted programming**[27]**. These partnerships can also expand access to funding opportunities while supporting the development of sustainable programs that monitor implementation, track and evaluate outcomes, and demonstrate meaningful impacts on a youth's ability to secure and maintain employment.

EXAMPLES OF WORKFORCE DEVELOPEMENT AND SKILL BUILDING PROGRAMS

United Mentoring Program (Lansing, MI) connects youth with employers through job shadowing, career exploration, internships, apprenticeships, and workforce readiness training.

Carl's Cars (Washington, D.C.; Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services) is a program that provides youth with hands-on automotive training that develops technical skills, workplace competencies, and career readiness while exposing them to employment opportunities in the automotive industries.

Café Momentum (started in Dallas, TX; expanded into three other U.S. cities) is a non-profit workforce development model that provides justice-involved youth (ages 15 – 19) with a paid, year-long internship in a professional restaurant while delivering case management, education support, mental health services, and like skills training.

WORKFORCE PATHWAY BEST MODELS



MENTORING

Job shadowing
and internships



TECHNICAL TRAINING

Hands-on technical
skills training



PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE WITH SUPPORT

Paid work experience
and life skills

POSITIVE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES ASSESSMENT

Assessing Positive Childhood Experiences (PCEs) is an important component of trauma-informed practices that aim to support youth resilience. Standardized PCE measures enable justice practitioners to identify protective factors that inform prevention and intervention strategies.

The Standard Positive Childhood Experiences (PCEs) Scale assesses the presence or absence of nurturing and supportive experiences during childhood. The scale includes items related to feeling safe and protected by family, having supportive friends, experiencing a sense of belonging at school, participating in community traditions, feeling supported by at least two non-parent adults, and being able to talk with family members about feelings. Research has shown that higher PCE scores are associated with better adult mental health and lower odds of depression and poor mental well-being, even among individuals with significant adverse childhood experiences. **[28] [29]**

Similarly, the Benevolent Childhood Experiences (BCEs) Screener measures experiences that foster resilience. The 10-item screening tool evaluates whether a young person experienced protective factors such as having at least one safe caregiver, a good friend, comforting beliefs, enjoyment at school, supportive teachers, a stable home routine, and opportunities for fun during childhood.

See assessment tool questions in the Appendix.

Together, these tools provide a more comprehensive understanding of childhood protective factors and can be used alongside ACEs screening to guide strength-based assessment, policy development, and service planning. Incorporating PCE measures into routine assessments can help shift systems from being risk-focused to relying on a balanced approach that recognizes resilience and protective factors. These tools can help clinicians gain some insight into a youth's resilience, but the tools' binary format require clinicians to engage with youth beyond the assessment in order to develop a full understanding of how various positive factors impacted the youth's development. Additionally, the tools offer limited assessments of the systemic, socioecological, and cultural factors that can contribute to youths' resilience.

Using Data to Inform Prevention and Protective Factors Investments

Effective prevention strategies require understanding both the adversities youth experience (ACE's) and the strengths that help them thrive (protective factors). ACEs data and protective factors data should be viewed as two sides of the same coin: ACEs data helps identify exposure to adversity and potential service needs, while protective factors data highlights the relationships, supports, and opportunities that foster resilience and positive development. Together, these measures provide a more complete picture of youth well-being and can help states target resources where they are needed most. Research shows that positive childhood experiences and supportive environments can improve outcomes even among youth who have experienced significant adversity.**[30]**

States can strengthen prevention planning by pairing ACEs and protective factors data with other commonly collected indicators, including data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS)**[31]**, which measures youth experiences related to mental health, substance use, violence, bullying, and school connectedness. Combined with juvenile justice, education, behavioral health, and child welfare data, these measures can help identify disparities, service gaps, and opportunities to strengthen protective factors through targeted investments and prevention strategies.**[32]**

Using a combined risk-and-resilience framework allows State Advisory Groups and other policymakers to make more informed investment decisions, prioritize evidence-based and trauma-informed programs, and evaluate whether prevention efforts are improving outcomes over time. This approach aligns closely with the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act (JJDPA) purpose area of supporting trauma-informed, evidence-based, and developmentally appropriate services for at-risk and justice-involved youth.**[33]**

PROTECTIVE FACTORS AND THE JJDPA

As noted, protective factors framework aligns closely with the enumerated purpose areas of the JJDPA.**[34]** By strengthening the relationships, supports, and environments that promote healthy development, protective factors help reduce unnecessary juvenile justice involvement and improve long-term outcomes for youth.

The JJDPA prioritizes preventing delinquency and diverting youth from formal court involvement whenever appropriate. Investing in protective factors such as positive school environments and access to behavioral health and community services helps address youth needs early and reduces reliance on punitive interventions. When diversion alone is not appropriate, maintaining connections to family, school, and community remains critical. Community-based alternatives to detention provide opportunities to strengthen protective factors while promoting accountability and rehabilitation. JJDPA encourages investments in programs, including mentoring, family support, restorative justice, and behavioral health services, as well as effective alternatives to detention that support positive youth development.**[35]**

Equally important is ensuring that these opportunities are available to all youth. The JJDPA's core requirement to identify and develop an action plan with strategies to reduce racial and ethnic disparities (R/ED) recognizes that disparities in access to diversion and community-based services can contribute to inequitable outcomes.**[36]** A protective factors approach advances disparity reduction by promoting equitable access to the resources and supports that help prevent system involvement in the first place. Expanding access to culturally responsive, community-based support helps address these inequities while reducing disparities in arrest, diversion, detention, and other system touchpoints.

Opportunities for JJDPA Implementation.
Integrating protective factors into JJDPA implementation presents several opportunities for states and local jurisdictions to strengthen juvenile justice reform efforts.

1. ***Invest in family-centered programming.*** *Families are one of the strongest protective factors in a young person's life. Investing in evidence-informed family support services like Functional Family Therapy (FFT)**[37]**, parent education, and related caregiver support and engagement initiatives can strengthen family relationships, family stability, and youth well-being.*
2. ***Fund community-based alternatives.*** *Title II formula grant funds provide states with opportunities to invest in prevention and early intervention strategies that strengthen protective factors for youth and families. Supporting mentoring programs, behavioral health services, workforce development, positive youth development programs and other community-based initiatives helps youth build resilience, maintain positive connections, and access needed services before challenges escalate.*
3. ***Encourage cross-system collaboration.*** *Protective factors are strengthened when education, child welfare, healthcare, behavioral health, and juvenile justice systems coordinate their efforts around the needs of youth and families. Cross-system partnerships improve information sharing, reduce service gaps, and ensure that youth receive timely, comprehensive support rather than fragmented interventions.*

Together, these strategies have the potential to promote youth resilience, reduce justice involvement, and advance more equitable outcomes for youth.

CONCLUSION

Protective factors remind us that a young person's future is not defined by adversity. Supportive relationships, strong families, connected communities, and equitable access to resources can help youth overcome challenges and build resilience.

The Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act provides a framework for advancing this work through investment in prevention, positive youth development, community-based services, family engagement, and cross-system collaboration.

TOPICS UP NEXT IN THE BACK-TO-BASICS SERIES

III. Operationalizing Trauma-Informed Care for Justice Involved Youth

IV. Care Over Custody: Alternatives to Arrest for Youth

V. Strengthening Youth and Public Safety Through Community-Based Alternatives to Incarceration

Acknowledgements: CJJ thanks our Organizational Advisory Committee, expert peer reviewers, supporting foundation partners, and subject-matter experts for supporting the development, review, and publication of the Back to Basics Series.

Footnotes

1 CDC. (2024b, May 16). Risk and Protective Factors. Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). https://www.cdc.gov/aces/risk-factors/index.html

2 Core Meanings of the Strengthening Families Protective Factors. (n.d.-a). Center for the Study of Social Policy. https://cssp.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Core-Meanings-of-the-SF-Protective-Factors-2015.pdf

3 Protective & Promotive Factors. (n.d.-b). Center for the Study of Social Policy. https://cssp.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/youth-thrive-protective-promotive-factors.pdf

4 Protective Factors Approaches in Child Welfare. (2020). In Child Welfare Information Gateway. *Goddard, A. (2021). Adverse childhood experiences and trauma-informed care.* Journal of Pediatric Health Care, 35*(2), 145–155.* https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pedhc.2020.09.001

5 Sexton, T. L., & Alexander, J. F. (2000). Functional Family Therapy. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. FFT strengthens family functioning, reduces recidivism, and improves outcomes among justice-involved youth.

6 Niehaus, K., Rudasill, K. M., & Rakes, C. R. (2012). A Longitudinal Study of School Connectedness and Academic Outcomes Across Sixth Grade. Journal of School Psychology, 50(4), 443–460. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsp.2012.03.002

7 Niehaus, K., Irvin, M. J., & Rogelberg, S. (2016). School Connectedness and Valuing as Predictors of High School Completion and Postsecondary Attendance Among Latino Youth [Review of School Connectedness and Valuing as Predictors of High School Completion and Postsecondary Attendance Among Latino Youth]. Contemporary Educational Psychology, 44–45, 54–67. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cedpsych.2016.02.003

8 Steiner, R. J., Sheremenko, G., Lesesne, C., Dittus, P. J., Sieving, R. E., & Ethier, K. A. (2019). Adolescent Connectedness and Adult Health Outcomes. Pediatrics, 144(1), e20183766. https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2018-3766

9 Goetschius, L. G., McLoyd, V. C., Hein, T. C., Mitchell, C., Hyde, L. W., & Monk, C. S. (2023). School connectedness as a protective factor against childhood exposure to violence and social deprivation: A longitudinal study of adaptive and maladaptive outcomes. Development and Psychopathology, 35(3), 1219–1234. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954579421001140

10 Bond L, Butler H, Thomas L, Carlin J, Glover S, Bowes G, & Patton G (2007). Social and School Connectedness in Early Secondary School as Predictors of Late Teenage Substance Use, Mental Health, and Academic Outcomes. Journal of Adolescent Health, 40(4), 357.e9–357.e18. 10.1016/j.jadohealth.2006.10.013

11 Hardaway CR, McLoyd VC, & Wood D (2012). Exposure to Violence and Socioemotional Adjustment in Low-Income Youth: An Examination of Protective Factors. American Journal of Community Psychology, 49(1–2), 112–126. 10.1007/s10464-011-9440-3

12 National Child Traumatic Stress Network. (n.d.). Creating, Supporting, and Sustaining Trauma-Informed Schools. Schools often serve as primary access points for identifying trauma exposure and connecting youth to behavioral health and supportive services.

13 CDC. (2024, December 3). Promoting School Connectedness Through Restorative Practices. Reducing Health Risks Among Youth. https://www.cdc.gov/youth-behavior/school-connectedness/restorative-practices.html

14 Wang, K., Kemp, J., & Burr, R. (2022). Crime, violence, discipline, and safety in U.S. public schools in 2019–20: Findings from the School Survey on Crime and Safety (NCES 2022-029). U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2022/2022029.pdf

15 Darling-Hammond, S. (2023). Fostering belonging, transforming schools: The impact of restorative practices. Learning Policy Institute. https://doi.org/10.54300/169.703

16 Lerner, R. M., Lerner, J. V., Bowers, E. P., & Geldhof, G. J. (2015). Positive Youth Development and Relational-Developmental-Systems. In Handbook of Child Psychology and Developmental Science. Positive youth development research demonstrates that community-based opportunities, supportive adult relationships, and meaningful engagement promote healthy development and resilience.

Footnotes

17 Mitic, M., Woodcock, K. A., Amering, M., Krammer, I., Stiehl, K. A., Zehetmayer, S., & Schrank, B. (2021). Toward an integrated model of supportive peer relationships in early adolescence: A systematic review and exploratory meta-analysis. Frontiers in psychology, 12, 589403.

18 Yule, K., Houston, J., & Grych, J. (2019). Resilience in children exposed to violence: A meta-analysis of protective factors across ecological contexts. Clinical child and family psychology review, 22(3), 406-431.

19 Van Ryzin, M. J., & Roseth, C. J. (2018). Cooperative learning in middle school: A means to improve peer relations and reduce victimization, bullying, and related outcomes. Journal of educational psychology, 110(8), 1192.

20 Pollak, I., Mitic, M., Birchwood, J., Dörfler, S., Krammer, I., Rogers, J. C., ... & Woodcock, K. A. (2023). A systematic review of intervention programs promoting peer relationships among children and adolescents: Methods and targets used in effective programs. Adolescent research review, 8(3), 297-321.

21 Adapted from Pollak et al. (2023) and Van Ryzin & Roseth (2018), whose findings indicate that effective peer-focused interventions provide opportunities for skill-building, active practice, structured social interaction, and reinforcement of prosocial behaviors.

22 Pollak, I., Mitic, M., Birchwood, J., Dörfler, S., Krammer, I., Rogers, J. C., et al. (2023). A systematic review of intervention programs promoting peer relationships among children and adolescents: Methods and targets used in effective programs. Adolescent Research Review, 8(3), 297-321.
Graf, G. H.-J. (2020). Adverse Childhood Experiences and Justice System Contact.

23 Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2023). Behavioral Health Equity and Cultural Connectedness. Cultural identity, belonging, and affirming environments are associated with resilience and positive youth outcomes.

24 Agus-Kleinman, J., Salomon, N., & Weber, J. (2019). On track: How well are states preparing youth in the juvenile justice system for employment. Council of State Governments, Justice Center.

25 Hester, O. R., Odom, K. P., Pitzel, A., Jolivette, K., Sanders, S., & Hackney, A. J. (2026). "Finding Your Purpose Doesn't Come Overnight": How Youth Describe Vocational Training Opportunities in Juvenile Justice. Journal of Career Development, 53(3), 290-307.

26 Mathur, S. R., Clark, H. G., Grayson, A., & Robertson, K. S. (2023). Preparing justice involved youth for transition: Employer perceptions. Children and Youth Services Review, 155, 107270.

27 Agus-Kleinman, J., Salomon, N., & Weber, J. (2019). On track: How well are states preparing youth in the juvenile justice system for employment. Council of State Governments, Justice Center.

28 Huang, C. X., Halfon, N., Sastry, N., Chung, P. J., & Schickedanz, A. (2023). Positive Childhood Experiences and Adult Health Outcomes. Pediatrics, 152(1), e2022060951. https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2022-060951

29 Cunha, O., Sousa, M., Pereira, B., Pinheiro, M., Machado, A. B., Caridade, S., & Almeida, T. C. (2025). Positive Childhood Experiences and Adult Outcomes: A Systematic Review. Trauma, violence & abuse, 26(5), 991–1010. https://doi.org/10.1177/15248380241299434

30 Huang, C. X., Halfon, N., Sastry, N., Chung, P. J., & Schickedanz, A. (2023). Positive Childhood Experiences and Adult Health Outcomes. Pediatrics, 152(1), e2022060951. Add a little bit of body text.

31 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2024). Youth Risk Behavior Survey Data Summary & Trends Report: 2013-2023. Available at: Add a little bit of body text

32 Casey Family Programs. (2023). Using Data to Strengthen Prevention and Protective Factors. Integrating risk, resilience, child welfare, education, behavioral health, and juvenile justice data can improve resource allocation and prevention planning.
[33]Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act of 1974, 34 U.S.C. § 11102(4) (2018).

33 Liu, S. R., Kia-Keating, M., Nylund-Gibson, K., & Barnett. M. L. (2019). Co-occurring youth profiles of adverse childhood experiences and protective factors: Associations with health, resilience, and racial disparities. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 65*(1-2), 173-186.

Footnotes

34 Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act of 1974, 34 U.S.C. § 11102(4) (2018). The JJDPA supports "a continuum of evidence-based or promising programs … that are trauma informed, reflect the science of adolescent development, and are designed to meet the needs of at-risk youth and youth who come into contact with the justice system."

35 Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act of 1974, 34 U.S.C. § 11102(4) (2018); Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. (2025). Title II Formula Grants Program Program and Budget Areas. The JJDPA encourages investments in prevention, family services, behavioral health treatment, and community-based interventions.

36 Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act of 1974, 34 U.S.C. § 11133(a)(15) (2018). The JJDPA's Reducing Racial and Ethnic Disparities (R/ED) Core Requirement requires participating states to identify and analyze race and ethnicity data at key juvenile justice decision points and develop and implement measurable strategies to reduce identified disparities.

37 Sexton, T. L., & Alexander, J. F. (2000). Functional Family Therapy. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. Functional Family Therapy is an evidence-based family intervention associated with reductions in delinquency and recidivism among justice-involved youth.

APPENDIX

Appendix A: Four ways providers can assess positive childhood experiences handout

HOPE HEALTHY OUTCOMES FROM POSITIVE EXPERIENCES

TuftsMedicine

FOUR WAYS PROVIDERS CAN ASSESS POSITIVE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES HANDOUT

INQUIRING ABOUT STRENGTHS, LEARNING PROXY MEASURES FOR RESILIENCE, AND PROMOTING ACCESS TO POSITIVE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES (PCES) ARE KEY COMPONENTS OF THE HOPE FRAMEWORK. THERE ARE MANY EVIDENCE-BASED APPROACHES THAT PROVIDERS CAN USE TO ASK ABOUT PCES WHEN INTERACTING WITH CHILDREN AND FAMILIES. THIS HANDOUT SHARES FOUR RESEARCH-INFORMED METHODS TO ACCESS PCES INCLUDING STANDARDIZED AND CONVERSATIONAL METHODS.



THE FIRST TWO TECHNIQUES ARE BASED ON STANDARDIZED, VALIDATED QUERIES AND WILL GENERATE SCORES. HIGHER SCORES ARE ASSOCIATED WITH STRONGER RESILIENCE. THE QUESTIONS CAN BE INCLUDED IN ANY STANDARD INTAKE FORM, PAIRED WITH AN ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES SCREEN, OR USED AS A STAND-ALONE SCREENING TOOL.

1

POSITIVE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES SCALE (BETHELL ET AL., 2019)

FIRST CONDUCTED IN A 2019 POPULATION SURVEY IN WISCONSIN, THE POSITIVE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES SCALE CONSISTS OF 7 PCE QUESTIONS. A PCE SCORE IS CALCULATED BASED ON THE NUMBER OF QUESTIONS THE RESPONDENT AGREES WITH.

THINKING BACK TO YOUR CHILDHOOD, UP TO THE AGE OF 18, PLEASE INDICATE HOW OFTEN YOU:

- FELT ABLE TO TALK TO YOUR FAMILY ABOUT FEELINGS
- FELT YOUR FAMILY STOOD BY YOU DURING DIFFICULT TIMES
- ENJOYED PARTICIPATING IN COMMUNITY TRADITIONS
- FELT A SENSE OF BELONGING IN HIGH SCHOOL
- FELT SUPPORTED BY FRIENDS
- HAD AT LEAST TWO NON-PARENT ADULTS WHO TOOK GENUINE INTEREST IN YOU
- FELT SAFE AND PROTECTED BY AN ADULT IN YOUR HOME

BETHELL C, JONES J, GOMBOJAV N, LINKENBACH J, SEGE R. POSITIVE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES AND ADULT MENTAL AND RELATIONAL HEALTH IN A STATEWIDE SAMPLE: ASSOCIATIONS ACROSS ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES LEVELS. JAMA PEDIATR. 2019 SEP 9. 173(11):E193007. DOI: 10.1001/JAMAPEDIATRICS.2019.3007.

HOPE HEALTHY OUTCOMES FROM POSITIVE EXPERIENCES TuftsMedicine

2 BENEVOLENTCHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES SCREENER (NARAYAN ET AL., 2018)

THEBENEVOLENTCHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES SCREENER WAS DEVELOPED FOR CLINICAL USE ATTHEPRIMARYCARECLINIC AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN FRANCISCO. IT HAS BEEN VALIDATEDINSMALLSTUDIES CONDUCTED AMONG HIGH-RISK POPULATIONS. SIMILAR TO THE POSITIVECHILDHOODEXPERIENCE SCALE ABOVE, A TOTAL SCORE IS GENERATED BY TALLYING THENUMBEROFAFFIRMATIVE ANSWERS.

WHEN YOU WERE GROWING UP, DURING THE FIRST 18 YEARS OF LIFE:

- DID YOU HAVE AT LEAST ONE CAREGIVER WITH WHOM YOU FELT SAFE?
- DID YOU HAVE AT LEAST ONE GOOD FRIEND?
- DID YOU HAVE BELIEFS THAT GAVE YOU COMFORT?
- DID YOU LIKE SCHOOL?
- DID YOU HAVE AT LEAST ONE TEACHER WHO CARED ABOUT YOU?
- DID YOU HAVE GOOD NEIGHBORS?
- WAS THERE AN ADULT (NON-PARENT/CAREGIVER) WHO COULD PROVIDE YOU WITH SUPPORT AND ADVICE?
- DID YOU HAVE OPPORTUNITIES TO HAVE A GOOD TIME?
- DID YOU LIKE YOURSELF OR FEEL COMFORTABLE WITH YOURSELF?
- DID YOU HAVE A PREDICTABLE HOME ROUTINE, LIKE REGULAR MEALS AND A REGULAR BEDTIME?

NARAYAN, A. J., RIVERA, L. M., BERNSTEIN, R. E., HARRIS, W. W., & LIEBERMAN, A. F. (2018). POSITIVE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES PREDICT LESS PSYCHOPATHOLOGY AND STRESS IN PREGNANT WOMEN WITH CHILDHOOD ADVERSITY: A PILOT STUDY OF THE BENEVOLENT CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES (BCES) SCALE. CHILD ABUSE & NEGLECT, 78, 19-30.

THE NEXT TWO APPROACHES ARE MORE CONVERSATIONAL. THEY SERVE TO BETTER UNDERSTAND THE CHILD AND FAMILY CIRCUMSTANCES WHILE FORMING A FOUNDATION FOR ENGAGED, COLLABORATIVE PROBLEM SOLVING.

3THE FOUR BUILDING BLOCKS OF HOPE

THE FOUR BUILDING BLOCKS OF HOPE, KEY TYPES OF PCES CAN BE ADAPTED FOR USE

ADVERSITY. THIS IS NOT A FORMAL SCREEN AND DOES NOT RESULT IN A SCORE. IT IS UP TO EACH FAMILY TO DEFINE WHAT EACH BUILDING BLOCK MEANS TO THEM. THE WORKSHEET BELOW CAN SERVE AS A CONVERSATION STARTER BETWEEN THE PROVIDER AND THE FAMILY. THIS IS PART OF A BUILDING BLOCKS FOR HEALTH TOOL DEVELOPED BY GRETCHEN PIANKA, MD, MPH, FAAP IN LEWISTON, MAINE AND IS REPRODUCED WITH PERMISSION. THE COMPLETE TOOL CAN BE CAN BE DOWNLOADED ON THE HOPE WEBSITE.

HOPE HEALTHY OUTCOMES FROM POSITIVE EXPERIENCES

TuftsMedicine

BUILDING BLOCKS FOR HEALTH

THESE FOUR BUILDING BLOCKS ARE IMPORTANT FACTORS IN GROWING UP HEALTHY. SHARE WHAT IS WORKING AND YOUR PROVIDER WILL BRAINSTORM WITH YOU FOR SOLUTIONS TO ANYTHING THAT IS NOT WORKING.

ENGAGEMENT:

WHAT IS ONE THING YOU LIKE TO DO AS A FAMILY OUTSIDE THE HOME? WHERE DO YOU FEEL THE MOST CONNECTED TO OTHERS?

ENVIRONMENT:

DESCRIBE A PLACE YOU LOVE TO GO OR PLAY. WHERE IS YOUR SAFE SPACE?

RELATIONSHIPS:

WHAT DOYOU LIKE TODO AT HOME WITH YOUR FAMILY? WHO IS SOMEONE OUTSIDE OF YOUR FAMILY THAT REALLY CARES ABOUT YOU?

EMOTIONAL HEALTH:

WHAT FEELINGS DO YOU TALK ABOUT AT HOME? WHO CAN YOU TALK TO ABOUT FEELINGS WITH? HOW CAN YOU TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF WHEN YOU HAVE BIG FEELINGS?

4

NARRATIVE THERAPY TECHNIQUES

PROVIDERS CAN USE NARRATIVE THERAPY TO DRAW OUT FAMILY AND CHILD STRENGTHS BY ASKING QUESTIONS LIKE:

- CAN YOU DESCRIBE THE LAST TIME YOU MANAGED TO GET FREE OF {THE PROBLEM} FOR A COUPLE OF MINUTES?
- HOW HAVE YOU HANDLED {PRESSING CONCERN} IN THE PAST?
- CAN YOU SHARE A BIT ABOUT SOMETHING YOU'VE DONE RECENTLY THAT YOU'RE PROUD OF?

EXPLORE WITH THEM THE FACTORS THAT ENABLED THEM TO SUCCEED. LISTEN FOR THE FOUR BUILDING BLOCKS OF HOPE - RELATIONSHIPS, ENVIRONMENTS, ENGAGEMENT, AND EMOTIONAL GROWTH. CAREFUL LISTENING TO A PERSON'S PAST SUCCESSES PLACES THE PROVIDER IN A POSITION TO BETTER UNDERSTAND WHAT RESOURCES TO DRAW ON TO ADDRESS CURRENT CHALLENGES. THIS APPROACH MAY FIT BEST WHEN CONFRONTED WITH A CHALLENGING SITUATION, OR WHEN A PERSON FEELS HELPLESS TO APPROACH A PROBLEM.