



*Center for the  
Study of  
Social Policy*  
Ideas into Action



# Protective Factors for Youth Involved in Systems of Care

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# Protective Factors for Youth Involved in Systems of Care

## Abstract

This report examines the importance of intentionally and actively targeting protective factors, in addition to risk factors, in an effort to promote healthy development and well-being in youth involved in systems of care. Protective factors are conditions and characteristics of individuals, interpersonal relationships, communities, and the larger society that are associated with decreased chances of negative outcomes and increased chances of positive outcomes. Key research- and practice-informed protective factors in each domain of the social ecology are described and recommended actions to build protective factors are provided. Individual domain protective factors of focus are resilience, social and emotional competencies, and character strengths. Core relational domain protective factors are positive peer connectedness, peer norms, connectedness with parents and other significant adults, and spiritual connectedness. Protective factors included in the community domain are safe, stable, nurturing, and equitable environments; engagement in social institutions; and the availability, accessibility, and provision of concrete supports. The societal domain protective factors refer to systems-level policies, priorities, and procedures that create and sustain the context for healthy youth development and well-being and the developmentally appropriate and equitable treatment of all youth. Strengthening protective factors of youth involved in systems of care is essential because protective factors help to mitigate the effects of youths' stressful life events and other risk factors, maximize their potential, better navigate difficult circumstances, and put them on a trajectory that leads to positive and productive life outcomes.

This report is one in a five-part series about improving outcomes for youth involved in systems of care. The titles in the series are:

1. Promoting the Well-Being of Black, Native, Latinx, and Asian Youth Involved in Systems of Care
2. Protective Factors for Youth Involved in Systems of Care
3. Shifting the Perception and Treatment of Black, Native, and Latinx Youth in Systems of Care
4. The Systemic Neglect of Children, Youth, and Families of Color: Distinguishing Poverty Experienced by Families from Neglect
5. Breaking the Stigma and Changing the Narrative: Strategies for Supporting Expectant and Parenting Youth Involved in Systems of Care

## **Protective Factors for Youth Involved in Systems of Care**

Over the years many interventions for vulnerable youth have primarily focused on addressing conditions and circumstances identified as risk factors. Increasingly, research suggests that interventions should focus on reducing modifiable risk factors *and* promoting protective factors in order to be more effective and achieve the greatest benefit.<sup>1,2,3</sup> For youth who have experienced significant challenges before and during their involvement in systems of care—such as child welfare, courts, social services, juvenile justice, victim services, and health services—identifying, building, and reinforcing protective factors is essential for promoting healthy development and well-being and increases the likelihood of positive outcomes. In describing the importance of protective factors, researchers have suggested that “they make a more profound impact on the life course of children who grow up under adverse conditions than do specific risk factors or stressful life events” (p. 117).<sup>4</sup>

### **What are Protective Factors?**

Protective factors are conditions and characteristics that serve three essential purposes:

- preventing or mitigating the effect of exposure to risk factors and stressful life events;
- maximizing potential and building strengths, resources, and environments that promote healthy development, healing, and well-being; and
- helping individuals negotiate difficult circumstances and fare better in school, work, and life.<sup>5,6</sup>

Protective factors are interrelated in that experiences that can strengthen one protective factor can help to build or strengthen another one.<sup>7</sup> Also, studies have shown that the “accumulation of protection”—that is, the presence of multiple protective factors—has a more substantial positive effect within high-risk environments than independent protective factors.<sup>8,9,10,11</sup>

### **Why are Protective Factors Important for Youth Involved in Systems of Care?**

Studies have found that systems-involved youth are more likely than their peers with no systems involvement to experience educational and formal training deficits; unemployment, underemployment, or dependence on public assistance; housing instability and homelessness; pregnancy and early parenthood; compromised physical and mental health; difficulty maintaining positive relationships; and problem behaviors including domestic violence and substance use and abuse.<sup>12</sup> Numerous risk factors contribute to these outcomes such as family conflict; attending under-resourced, low-performing schools; multiple placements in resource homes; involvement in interventions that fail to address youths’ healing as well as their trauma histories; and systems that fail to address racism, sexism, and the inequitable treatment of LGBTQ+ and Trans youth. While youth involved in systems of care may have unique challenges and needs, it is important to recognize that they also need and deserve the same supports, opportunities, experiences, high expectations, and forgiveness for mistakes as other youth.

Intentionally and actively using a strengths-based protective factors approach can be an effective way for practitioners to engage systems-involved youth because it looks beyond a youth's stressors and trauma and maximizes their strengths and what they are doing, or potentially can do, well. This stands in stark contrast to approaches that define youth in terms of problems and employ practices and policies that are punitive, stigmatizing, and disempower youth. A protective factors approach:

- promotes youths' skills, personal characteristics, knowledge, relationships, and opportunities that offset risk exposure;
- enables youth to draw upon their personal, family, and community strengths and resources to address the challenges they are experiencing;
- helps youth to recognize, reclaim, and enhance their own strengths which can lead to a sense of renewed hope and optimism that empowers them to do better in school, work, interactions, and life; and
- recognizes and addressed the influence of the larger context that youth live, learn, play, and work.<sup>13,14</sup>



### **Why is it Important to Use a Social Ecological Approach to Address Protective Factors?**

A social ecological approach to improving youth's outcomes moves beyond a singular focus on individual influences to targeting a wide range of influences "because changing individuals and their behaviors may be temporary without corresponding changes to the environment in which they are embedded."<sup>15</sup> Protective factors are found in all domains of the social ecology. That is, protective factors are conditions and characteristics of individuals, interpersonal relationships, communities, and the larger society that are associated with decreased chances of negative outcomes and increased chances of positive outcomes. Using a social ecological approach to address protective factors underscores the need to intervene across multiple domains in order to achieve better outcomes for youth involved in systems of care.

### **What are Key Protective Factors for Youth Involved in Systems of Care?**

The protective factors for youth involved in systems of care are the same as the protective factors that all other youth need. The protective factors described in this report represent a synthesis of findings from seven evidence-based, research-informed, or practice-informed frameworks that address a broad range of conditions, characteristics, and experiences that are associated with positive youth outcomes. The frameworks are:

1. *Youth Thrive* (Center for the Study of Social Policy)<sup>16</sup>
2. *The Five Cs of Positive Youth Development, Plus One* (Richard Lerner)<sup>17</sup>
3. *The 40 Developmental Assets* (Search Institute)<sup>18</sup>

4. *Circle of Courage Model* (Larry K. Brendtro, Martin Brokenleg, Steve Van Bockern)<sup>19,20</sup>
5. *Healing Centered Engagement* (Shawn Ginwright)<sup>21</sup>
6. *The Developmental Relationships Framework* (Search Institute)<sup>22</sup>
7. *Essentials for Childhood* (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention)<sup>23</sup>

Table 1 provides a list of protective factors organized by the four domains of the social ecology.

Domains of the Social Ecology	Protective Factors
<p><b><u>Individual Protective Factors</u></b>  <i>Personal characteristics and life experiences that influence outcomes</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ <u>Resilience:</u> ⇒ Functioning well despite adversity</li> <li>◆ <u>Social and emotional competencies:</u> ⇒ Self-control, problem-solving skills ⇒ Self-esteem, confidence, responsibility ⇒ Respect for others ⇒ Communication &amp; cooperation skills</li> <li>◆ <u>Character strengths:</u> ⇒ Integrity, hope, optimism, empathy, etc.</li> </ul>
<p><b><u>Relationship Protective Factors</u></b>  <i>Personal relationships that influence outcomes</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ <u>Positive Relationships:</u> ⇒ With parents/other family members ⇒ With peers ⇒ With a higher power (spirituality)</li> <li>◆ <u>Relationships that build:</u> ⇒ Connectedness ⇒ Trust ⇒ A sense of belonging ⇒ A belief that you matter</li> <li>◆ <u>Character strengths:</u> ⇒ Integrity, hope, optimism, empathy, etc.</li> </ul>
<p><b><u>Community Protective Factors</u></b>  <i>Rules and regulations of institutions and organizations, as well as the availability of resources, that influence outcomes</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Safe, stable, equitable, &amp; nurturing environments</li> <li>◆ Engagement in social institutions</li> <li>◆ Availability &amp; accessibility of resources &amp; supports</li> </ul>
<p><b><u>Societal Protective Factors</u></b>  <i>Broad social values, norms, policies, and practices that influence outcomes</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ <u>Policies &amp; procedures that create and sustain:</u> ⇒ Healthy youth development &amp; well-being ⇒ Developmentally appropriate programs ⇒ Equitable treatment of all youth</li> </ul>

Figure 1. Protective Factors for Youth Involved in Systems of Care

## What Are Key Protective Factors in the *Individual Domain*?

The individual domain of the social ecology considers the effect of youths' personal characteristics and life experiences on their healthy development and well-being. Protective factors of focus in this domain are **resilience, social and emotional competencies, and character strengths**. Many studies have described the protective nature of these characteristics and suggest that they help to lay the foundation for more mature learning and problem solving, forming an independent identity, and having a productive, responsible, and satisfying adulthood.<sup>24,25,26</sup>

### Resilience

Youth's adverse experiences and trauma always should be acknowledged and addressed, yet youth should not be defined by their challenges and pain. Youth have personal strengths and the potential to persevere despite or in response to their pain; that is, to be resilient. **Resilience means positive adaptation—the process of managing stress and functioning competently despite or in response to challenges, adversity, or trauma.**<sup>27,28</sup>

Resilience is not a personality trait that some youth possess and others don't; it involves behaviors, thoughts, and actions that can be developed and strengthened in all youth.<sup>29</sup> Although resilience is regarded as a universal human capability, how it is displayed varies across contexts, situations, individuals, families, cultures, social norms.<sup>30,31</sup> Thus, youth may display adaptive behavior in response to adverse experiences at one point in time or in one setting, but not at other times or in all settings. Similarly, a youth's behaviors, thoughts, and actions may be quite appropriate in one family or cultural context and regarded as inappropriate in another.

Developing resilience enables youth to see evidence of their ability to face challenges and make competent decisions; be accountable for their actions and the consequences of their actions; feel more in control of what happens to them; and internalize a belief in their own power to change.<sup>32</sup> Ultimately, developing resilience helps youth to believe that their lives are important and meaningful, which enables them to envision and conscientiously work with purpose and optimism toward productive, future possibilities for themselves.

<p><b>Individual Protective Factors</b> <i>Personal characteristics and life experiences that influence outcomes</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>◆ <u>Resilience</u>: ⇒ Functioning well despite adversity</li><li>◆ <u>Social and emotional competencies</u>: ⇒ Self-control, problem-solving skills ⇒ Self-esteem, confidence, responsibility ⇒ Respect for others ⇒ Communication &amp; cooperation skills</li><li>◆ <u>Character strengths</u>: ⇒ Integrity, hope, optimism, empathy, etc.</li></ul>
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## Social and Emotional Competencies

**Social and emotional competencies refer to people’s abilities to manage their thoughts, emotions, and behavior; understand themselves; and engage with others.**<sup>33</sup>

Social and emotional competencies contribute to all areas of development, as well as to a wide range of outcomes, including academic achievement and the ability to establish meaningful and lasting friendships and partnerships.<sup>34</sup> These abilities begin to develop in early childhood and continue to be important during adolescence due to the maturation of the prefrontal cortex and other regions of the brain, youths’ search for identity, and their desire for more independence. Social and emotional competencies do not evolve naturally; their course—whether healthy or unhealthy—depends on the quality of nurturing and responsive contexts children and youth experience. **Core social and emotional competencies are executive function and self-regulation skills, healthy sense of self, social awareness, and relational skills.**

**Executive function and self-regulation skills** - Executive function and self-regulation skills are the mental processes that enable youth to: plan, reason, and problem solve; use ethics and weigh consequences in making responsible decisions; experience, express, and exercise a level of control over their thinking, emotions, and behavior; prioritize and juggle multiple tasks; set and achieve goals; consider the potential consequences of their thoughts, emotions, behavior, and choices before acting; change their behavior in order to achieve a preferred outcome; and persevere through significant challenges and adversity in their lives.<sup>35,36,37</sup>

**Healthy sense of self** - An individual’s sense of self refers to their assessment and perception of the many characteristics that define them. Gaining confidence about, comfort with, and valuing oneself is a lifelong process that is essential for healthy development and well-being. Youth receive direct and vicarious messages about who they are, who they should be, and what are acceptable ways of being and living. Messages come from family, friends, peer groups, mass media, social media, school, social norms, and the larger society—and youth learn that all identities are not equally valued. A youth’s healthy sense of self can be threatened by negative messages and other experiences such as parental rejection, toxic relationships, and lack of a trusting and meaningful relationship with peers or adults who understand and support their unique concerns and needs.

When youth have a healthy sense of self they are able to understand their developmental history, needs, emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence their behavior (self-awareness); form a stable positive identity (self-concept); have overall good feelings about themselves (self-esteem), as well as realistic beliefs about their capabilities (self-efficacy); be kind to themselves when confronted with personal failings and suffering (self-compassion); commit to and prepare to meet goals (self-improvement); communicate, negotiate, and assert their interests, needs, and rights (self-advocacy); feel in control of their actions and take responsibility for themselves and their decisions

(personal agency); and envision near and more distal possibilities of what they would like to become and what they would like to avoid becoming (possible selves).<sup>38,39</sup>

**Social awareness** - Social awareness is defined as “the ability to take the perspective of and empathize with others from diverse backgrounds and cultures, to understand social and ethical norms for behavior, and to recognize family, school, and community resources and supports.”<sup>40</sup> When youth develop social awareness they are able to appreciate diversity; have respect for other individuals, groups, and communities; reflect on the needs of communities;<sup>41</sup> and identify activities that will enable them to demonstrate a concern for and giving of themselves to other people, institutions, community, and/or society (e.g., activism).

**Relationship skills** - Relationship skills are abilities that enable youth to establish positive and meaningful relationships with others; interact and communicate effectively with others; cooperate and collaborate with others; listen actively; engage in constructive conflict resolution; and seek and offer help.<sup>42,43</sup>

## Character Strengths

**Character strengths are positive aspects of an individual’s personality and behavior that reflect their core values, ethics, and beliefs.** Examples of character strengths are integrity, honesty, humility, compassion, empathy, perseverance, patience, courage, loyalty, ambition, conscientiousness, critical thinking, flexibility, curiosity, helpfulness, morality, creativity, kindness, gratitude, self-control, hope, a sense of purpose, and optimism. When youth have experiences that cultivate character strengths, they tend to: be more socially connected; view missteps, challenges, and defeat as learning opportunities; believe that they can improve their performance; and achieve desirable outcomes such as leadership, school success, tolerance, and altruism. Also, studies show that certain character strengths, such as kindness and hope, can help to mitigate against the negative effects of stress, adversity, and trauma.<sup>44</sup>

## What Are Key Protective Factors in the *Relational Domain*?

The relational domain of the social ecology considers the effect of youths’ close relationships on their healthy development and well-being. Protective factors of focus in this domain are **social support and a sense of connectedness.**

### **Social Support and Connectedness**

Social support refers to safe, stable, nurturing, meaningful, and sustained relationships that help to meet youth’s developmental needs.<sup>45</sup> Social support plays a significant role in the life outcomes of youth. Through these relationships, youth can feel encouraged and valued, understand more about themselves, exercise some control over their journey to adulthood, and demonstrate a concern for the world around them.<sup>46,47,48,49</sup> Also, social



support can help to reduce the impact of negative outcomes in the face of stressors, adversity, or trauma.

<p><b>Relationship Protective Factors</b> <i>Personal relationships that influence outcomes</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>◆ <b>Positive Relationships:</b><ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>⇒ With parents/other family members</li><li>⇒ With peers</li><li>⇒ With a higher power (spirituality)</li></ul></li><li>◆ <b>Relationships that build:</b><ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>⇒ Connectedness</li><li>⇒ Trust</li><li>⇒ A sense of belonging</li><li>⇒ A belief that you matter</li></ul></li><li>◆ <b>Character strengths:</b><ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>⇒ Integrity, hope, optimism, empathy, etc.</li></ul></li></ul>
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In order for these relationships to be effective, they must engender in youth a sense of connectedness. **Connectedness refers to a healthy, protective relationship with people and places that promote a sense of trust, belonging, and a belief that you and others like you matter and are valued members of community.**<sup>50</sup>

Unfortunately, many youth are denied opportunities to develop and sustain social support and a sense of connectedness because of their challenging circumstances and gaps within and between social systems such as education, health, mental health, child welfare, juvenile justice, and employment. For example, “for older youth and young adults in foster care, being connected. . . may be particularly challenging because they have often experienced disconnections from supportive networks that are readily available for their non–foster care peers”.<sup>51</sup> Numerous studies have demonstrated that youth having a strong sense of connectedness to their peers, family, parents, other significant adults, school, other social institutions, and spirituality is protective against various risk behaviors and is associated with positive outcomes.<sup>52</sup>

**Positive peer connectedness and peer norms** - Positive peer networks provide youth important sources of companionship, fun, acceptance, support, information, and feedback, as well as contexts for developing and expressing independence and their own identities. Youth peer networks tend to have stated or unstated peer norms; that is, shared perceptions of what is acceptable and unacceptable behavior and attitudes. “The presence of positive peer norms is related to reductions in rapid repeat pregnancies; less alcohol, tobacco and other drug use; lower levels of sexual activity; less antisocial and delinquent behavior; and more success in school.”<sup>53</sup>

**Connectedness with parents/family and other significant adults** - Youth need competent, caring, trusting, emotionally healthy, non-judgmental adults, inside and

outside of their families. In contrast to the belief that parents' influence is overshadowed by peer networks' influence, there is increasing evidence that youth's "healthy transition to autonomy and adulthood is facilitated by secure attachment and emotional connectedness with parents"<sup>54</sup> or other significant adults. Youths' connectedness to nonparental adults when their parents are not central figures can mitigate risk factors and support resilience in youth.<sup>55</sup> Supportive adults provide encouragement and well-informed guidance; set developmentally appropriate structure, limits, and expectations that is increasingly informed by youth themselves; and help youth to determine and navigate a productive path.

**Spirituality/spiritual connectedness** - There is no consensus about a single definition of spirituality. As youth begin to think in abstract terms and think about future possibilities, they tend to explore questions suggestive of a search of spiritual connectedness: What is the meaning of life? What is the meaning of my life? Why am I here? Is life worth living? What should I try to accomplish in life? Is there a God? In this context, spirituality refers to personal beliefs about the meaning and purpose of one's existence, hope and optimism, moral and ethical guidelines for living, and a connectedness to a higher power.<sup>56,57</sup> Spirituality is considered an important aspect of youth's day-to-day living in that it can help them to cope with their troubles and difficult circumstances, recover from setbacks, feel protected, comforted, and secure, and have an optimistic view of their future and a positive purpose in their lives.<sup>58,59</sup>

### **What Are Key Protective Factors in the *Community Domain*?**

The community domain of the social ecology considers the effect of resources, supports, services, opportunities, and the settings in which youth live, learn, play, and work on their healthy development and well-being. Protective factors of focus in this domain are **safe, stable, nurturing, equitable environments; engagement in social institutions; and concrete support.**

### **Safe, Stable, Nurturing, Equitable Environments**

**Safe, stable, nurturing, equitable environments refer to predictable, consistent, warm, responsive, fair, anti-racist physical and social environments in which youth feel secure<sup>60</sup> and free from fear of bullying, harassment, assault, violence, and discrimination by peers and adults—including those who wield authority over youth (e.g., law enforcement).** Safe, stable, nurturing, and equitable environments have been found to contribute to youths' health and well-being and to help buffer the impact of stressful and traumatic experiences.<sup>61,62,63</sup> Conversely, youths' options, choices, decision-making, problem-solving, sense of security, and access to help can be negatively affected by adverse environments and experiences such as:

- unsafe and unstable living conditions (e.g., frequent residential moves);

- life events that create stressful family circumstances (e.g., death of a parent);
- exposure to environmental hazards (e.g., lead in water) and infectious agents (e.g., coronavirus); and
- racist and discriminatory policies and practices in organizational and community contexts that result in inequities in opportunities, resources, and outcomes based on race, ethnicity, income, immigration status, gender identity, sexual orientation, or abilities (e.g., racial disproportionalities in out-of-school suspensions).

<p><b>Community Protective Factors</b>  <i>Rules and regulations of institutions and organizations, as well as the availability of resources, that influence outcomes</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Safe, stable, equitable, &amp; nurturing environments</li> <li>◆ Engagement in social institutions</li> <li>◆ Availability &amp; accessibility of resources &amp; supports</li> </ul>
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## Engagement in Social Institutions

It is critical that social institutions in which youth live, learn, play, and work—such as schools, religious communities, and recreational facilities—are safe, stable, inclusive, and equitable environments. Youth “deserve institutions and communities that will embrace and include them rather than treat them with stigma or shame.”<sup>64</sup> Social institutions provide youth opportunities to be constructively engaged in meaningful and challenging roles and activities that promote intellectual, social, emotional, moral, spiritual, and physical development; they are also places for youth to have unstructured time and hang out with their peers. A positive school environment can be particularly important for youth involved in or transitioning out of the child welfare system. “Research has shown that supports such as educational liaisons for elementary and middle school students and programs for older adolescents transitioning from foster care to college are related to positive outcomes such as improved school performance, knowledge of college requirements, awareness of college life, and resilience.”<sup>65</sup>

Social institutions are also contexts in which youth can give back via volunteerism, community service, or activism. Participating in or leading activities that contribute to a better community and society helps youth grow in compassion for others and fosters a sense of collective responsibility. “Giving of oneself to family, school, community, and society implicitly assigns value to the giver and positively contributes to one’s sense of self-worth.”<sup>66</sup> Activism has been proposed as a mechanism through which youth who witness or experience racism, cultural disruption, community destruction, or the fear of being deported can strengthen their individual and collective identity, support a positive sense of self, forge community bonds, promote well-being, and heal.<sup>67,68,69</sup>

## Availability, Accessibility, and Provision of Concrete Support

All youth need help sometimes. Youth will develop in healthy, positive ways when help is available and accessible and their needs and strengths are aligned with resources, supports, and services in the various contexts in which they live, learn, play, and work.<sup>70</sup> But, for some youth, needing help does not always result in seeking help. Studies show that youth may be reluctant to seek help for many reasons, such as perceiving it as a sign of personal inadequacy; believing they can handle the problem by themselves; having concerns about confidentiality; and feeling embarrassed because the services they may need have a stigma associated with them (e.g., special education programs, domestic violence shelters, homeless shelters, or mental health clinics).<sup>71</sup> Thus, it is important to help youth to view help-seeking as an essential life skill and form of self-advocacy. Youth who are faced with challenging circumstances or are involved with systems of care deserve as high a level of responsiveness, investment, and a range of resources and supports as youth who are not. The provision of concrete support to youth must include both the basic necessities everyone needs to grow and thrive, as well as specialized academic, health, mental health, social, legal, economic, or employment services to meet their individual needs. “Being able to seek and find help—from formal or informal sources—is a protective factor for adolescent health and development and overall satisfaction with life.”<sup>72</sup> Resources, supports, and services must be provided in a manner that is respectful, preserves youth’s dignity, and includes and affirms the experiences of all youth, including those who are often marginalized such as young parents, youth with disabilities, and youth who identify as LGBTQ+.

## What Are Key Protective Factors in the Societal Domain?

The societal domain of the social ecology considers the effect of broad social values, norms, policies, and practices on youths’ healthy development and well-being. The societal domain impacts all the other domains in that broad social values, norms, policies, and practices can shape how youth are perceived and treated; influence which youth acquire the skills, attitudes, and behaviors they need to become successful adults;<sup>73</sup> and create differential outcomes based on race, ethnicity, income, gender, sexual orientation, or ability. Core protective factors in this domain are **systems-level policies, priorities, and procedures that create and sustain the context for healthy youth development and well-being and the developmentally appropriate and equitable treatment of all youth.**

**Societal Protective Factors**  
*Broad social values, norms, policies, and practices that influence outcomes*

◆ Policies & procedures that create and sustain:  
⇒ Healthy youth development & well-being  
⇒ Developmentally appropriate programs  
⇒ Equitable treatment of all youth

## **What Actions Can Be Taken Across the Social Ecology to Build Protective Factors for Youth Involved in Systems of Care?**

The nature and quality of youths' experiences can either strengthen or undermine their protective factors. Advancing healthy development and well-being for all youth requires "an intentional, deliberate process of providing support, relationships, experiences, and opportunities that promote positive outcomes for young people."<sup>74</sup> Findings about the interrelated and cumulative nature of protective factors highlight the importance of implementing actions that target multiple protective factors—rather than single protective factors—within and across the domains of the social ecology. Below is a list of research- and/or practice-informed important actions, organized by the four domains of the social ecology.<sup>75,76,77</sup>

### **Individual Domain**

1. Ensure that youth of every race, ethnicity, gender identity, ability status, and sexual orientation feel safe and supported.
2. Foster the belief in youth themselves that their circumstances can be improved through a commitment to change and consistent effort.
3. Listen to and talk with youth about envisioning near and distal future possibilities of what they would like to become (desired self) and what they would not like to become (undesired self). Identify specific action plans to achieve their desired self and avoid their undesired self.
4. Listen to and talk with youth about proactive ways to respond to past, current, and future stressful situations.
5. Provide opportunities for productive decision-making, problem-solving, critical thinking, constructive engagement, and leadership development in various settings.
6. Encourage and honor youth voice, choice, and opinions.
7. Encourage regular physical activity, nutritious food, adequate sleep, good hygiene, and maintaining a healthy lifestyle, given one's unique conditions and circumstances. Provide lessons about the benefits of avoiding negative risky behaviors and fostering lifelong healthy habits.
8. Listen to and talk with youth about strategies for being an agent in fostering their own well-being, exercising some control over their journey to adulthood, advocating for themselves, and navigating the complex web of healthcare, mental health, employment, economic, and social service systems.
9. Encourage and provide opportunities for youth to gain more knowledge about financial literacy, developmental issues, life skills, education and training options, career goals, and their own interests and talents.

10. Listen to and talk with youth about their sense of racial/ethnic/cultural pride, the challenges they face, and strategies for effectively addressing the challenges.

### **Relational Domain**

1. Help youth to identify and connect with positive peers—virtually or in-person—who have similar interests, concerns, or identities and who they can provide or turn to for social or emotional support.
2. Connect youth—including those who leave foster care without legal permanence—to a nurturing, stable family or family-like environment.
3. Help youth with unique concerns and needs (e.g., expectant and parenting youth of all gender identities and expressions; LGBTQ+ and Trans youth) forge a consistent, predictable, trusting, and meaningful relationship with peers and adults who understand and support their unique concerns and needs.
4. Help youth build a strong bond with at least one supportive, trusting, and caring adult who provides encouragement and non-judgmental listening and guidance.
5. Help youth connect with an adult or peer who could serve as a role model or mentor in their actions, behaviors, and speech. Ensure that role models/mentors are appropriately vetted to ensure youth safety.
6. Connect youth to resources and opportunities that will enable them to engage in healthy risk-taking.
7. Facilitate volunteer or community service opportunities or projects.
8. Talk with and listen to youth about the difference between healthy and unhealthy relationships.
9. Support youth's spiritual growth based on their conception of spirituality and spiritual needs. Encourage youth to reflect on and talk about spirituality in their lives and how it helps to promote meaning, a positive purpose, and an optimistic future perspective.
10. Check-in with youth to determine if they are being treated fairly in their day-to-day living. Work with youth to take appropriate action in cases of identified inequities.

### **Community Domain**

1. Treat youth with dignity and respect. Involve them in identifying priorities for advancing healthy development and well-being; in the design and evaluation of programming, services, activities, and materials; and in understanding how to make

institutions, organizations, and services youth friendly, welcoming, equitable, and effective.

2. Provide access to caring people and physically and psychologically safe places that are supportive and empowering; provide explicit rules, responsibilities, and expectations for success; and cultivate a sense of hope.
3. Connect youth with supports that address their specific challenges and needs (e.g., youth who are homeless, parenting, low-income, disabled, in foster care, or no longer in school).
4. Use assessment tools that screen for risk factors and identify youths' strengths.
5. Stay abreast of the latest relevant research, best practices, training and technical assistance strategies, and regulations.
6. Train staff on current knowledge about adolescent development, relevant laws and policies, the impact of racism on youth, and working with populations who are often marginalized (e.g., youth experiencing homelessness or who are in foster care) so that staff have the competence and tools to be trusted allies and advocates for youth. Assess if and how this knowledge is integrated into all aspects of the organization or institution.
7. Build community partnerships with others who serve youth.
8. Collect and disseminate local data about youth and their outcomes disaggregated by race, ethnicity, income, immigration status, gender identity, sexual orientation, ability status, region, and other demographics.
9. Ensure that programs and services comply with guidelines and regulations designed to protect youths' safety and employ practices that reflect the importance of safety and reduce the probability of threats and danger.
10. Maintain confidentiality within legal guidelines.

### **Societal Domain**

1. Prioritize building and strengthening youths' protective factors and protective networks, as well as strengths-based, trauma-informed, healing-focused strategies, throughout and across systems.
2. Raise public awareness about youths' capabilities, talents, and successes and promote a positive, strengths-based perspective about youth.
3. Collect and disseminate state and regional data about youth and their outcomes disaggregated by race, ethnicity, income, immigration status, gender identity, sexual orientation, ability status, region, and other demographics.

4. Advocate for intersectional policies that address youths' diversity of backgrounds, identities, and experiences.
5. Provide information and materials in appropriate languages and reading levels via websites, emails, handouts, and meetings.
6. Collaborate with leaders to ensure the provision of services to youth is integrated and coordinated across systems, particularly for those youth involved in multiple systems of care. Identify and address gaps in existing services and programs.
7. Require ongoing training, capacity building, and coaching on key topics such as adolescent brain development, trauma and healing, social determinants of health, racism, and anti-racism.
8. Actively work to reform federal, state, and local zero-tolerance and discriminatory punitive discipline policies that result in the criminalization of Black, Native, and Latinx youth and promote the school-to-prison pipeline. Implement anti-bullying policies regarding all students with particular supports for LGBTQ+ and Trans youth.
9. Work to dismantle harmful values, norms, laws, policies, and practices that are incompatible with youths' well-being and contribute to youths' trauma (e.g., youth tried as adults; placement instability).
10. Develop and implement institutional and systems policies, programs, and practices that identify, address, reduce, and ultimately prevent racial and ethnic inequitable treatment and outcomes.

## **Conclusion**

It is important that practitioners working with youth involved with systems of care actively target protective factors, in addition to risk factors. A protective factors approach focuses on positive ways to engage youth by maximizing their strengths and what they are doing well and reframes problems as areas of needed growth and support. In addition, a protective factors approach emphasizes the role and importance of prosocial connections; collaborative community partnerships; safe and equitable environments; and systems-level efforts that promote and sustain youths' well-being. Strengthening protective factors of youth involved in systems of care is essential because protective factors help to mitigate the effects of youths' stressful life events and other risk factors, maximize their potential, better navigate difficult circumstances, and be on a trajectory that leads to positive and productive life outcomes.



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