

The Daily Union Article
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Title: Circles of Support

Families matter. They are the basic unit of society upon which the strength of our communities and country rely on to provide support, encouragement, stability, and security. Families come in many different shapes, sizes, relationships, and bonds. They are made up of blood relations, emotional relationships, spiritual relationships and so many other relationships.

If all this is true then why are families, all too often, they left to face all the challenges of our current social environment with minimal support and advocacy? Some who read this article may think I am making a political statement, but really I am making a factual statement that transcends all things political.

Parents are often overwhelmed with the needs of children, the wants their children have, balancing work, family time, finances, social pressures, and other activities. After they have put in a long shift at work, they come home to their second full time job – being a parent.

And yet, there are those simply amazing families that make it look easy. They demonstrate all the parenting skills that others aspire to. Their kids do well in school, seem to have friends that promote positive behaviors and choices, get picked to be part of the team, join the cast, or form a new group. They look like they have it all together.

How do they do it? What makes them different from other families? I could argue that many of these families have a different reality when they are not in the public eye, but I also know we have some pretty amazing, genuine, and “got it together” families in our communities, as well.

To be successful in family relationships, a family unit should work together to build five protective factors. When protective factors are in place within a family, research shows that they experience an increase in over-all well-being for the parents/caregivers and the children. According to the Children’s Trust Fund, protective factors are *“attributes that serve as buffers, helping parents who might otherwise be at risk of abusing their children to find resources, supports, or coping strategies that allow them to parent effectively, even under stress.”*

These five protective factors are: 1) Parental Resilience, 2) Knowledge of Parenting & Child Development, 3) Social Connections, 4) Concrete Supports in Times of Need, and 5) Social and Emotional Competence.

Although building these five protective factors within the family unit is rooted in the work of the parents and caregivers, our communities have an important role in the process, as well. Communities can offer circles of support around families to help protect children and promote their healthy development and well-being. How can everyone work together on building and strengthening these protective factors? Here is a closer look at each of these factors and some activities offered by the Center for the Study of Social Policy that can help build them up in a family:

- 1) **Parental Resilience:** The Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) explains that parental resilience is “The ability to manage and bounce back from all types of challenges that emerge in every family’s life. It means finding ways to solve problems, building and sustaining trusting relationships including relationships with your own child, and knowing how to seek help when necessary.”
Communities can demonstrate that parents are valued in multiple ways. They can honor the ethnic origin(s) and race(s) that a family represents while embracing their language, history, and approach to parenting. Provide programs that can help parents learn how to buffer their children during stressful times.
- 2) **Social Connections:** A family’s social connections are ones in which they have positive relationships that provide a wide variety of support on many levels including emotional, informational, instrumental and spiritual support.
Communities can play a key role in helping families value, build, sustain, and engage social connections. They can create an inclusive environment where families can work, play, and socialize.
- 3) **Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development:** Human development, while unique to each individual, has a relatively predictable and sequential pattern.
Understanding how a child develops and the parenting approaches that support that development will help a parent guide their child’s physical, emotional, social, language, and social development. As a community, other parents and caregivers should model developmentally appropriate interactions with children.
Communities that provide information and resources on parenting and child develop also contribute to a parent’s awareness of development. Programs can provide resources that promote a strength’s based perspective of parenting, as well.
- 4) **Concrete Support in Times of Need:** It is important that a family have access to support and services that address where their needs lie. Community resources can help minimize the amount of stress a family endures by creating a solid support system to surround them.
- 5) **Social and Emotional Competence in Children:** Children who can communicate clearly, both recognize and regulate their own emotions effectively and develop lasting positive relationships demonstrate this protective factors. Parents help build this protective factor while interacting with children in positive environments. Communities can help parents foster the needs of their children and model support of children in a variety of ways. They can respond appropriately when they recognize that the social and emotional needs of children need support.

The results of building multiple levels of support in the communities in which families live is simple, yet undeniably, significantly. Our communities have stronger families that contribute to the community as a whole. The family is the first circle of support, and different people, agencies, and organizations become the additional layers of support to sustain the strength families need.

Families matter. With communities supporting them, we all benefit. Until next time, keep living resourcefully!