

## STABILIZING CHILDREN'S LIVES

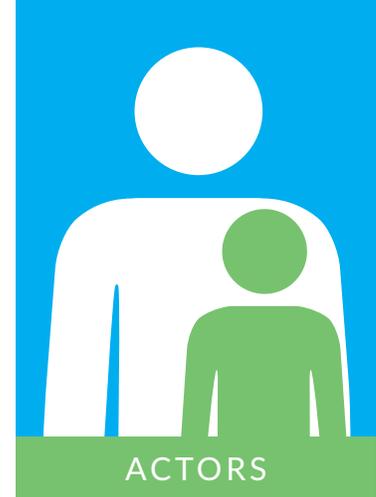
# Civic and Faith Organizations

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Civic and faith organizations offer a range of services and supports to members and others within the scope of their outreach. These organizations are often community based with missions focused on educational, charitable, religious, cultural, or local economic development purposes. Almost all civic and faith organizations offer a sense of belonging to their members, and membership is typically voluntary. Examples of these organizations include faith organizations (churches, synagogues, mosques, etc.), youth-focused organizations (such as scouting or mentoring), local chapters of national affinity groups, community organizations, membership service organizations, voting or civic action groups, and so on. This category also overlaps a great deal with a subset of social service providers and education and care providers who offer similar supports, as well as safety, justice, and law authorities. (See companion documents on *Social Service Providers*, *Education and Care Providers*, and *Safety, Justice, and Law Authorities*.)

### How Do Civic and Faith Organizations Affect Stability?

Civic and faith organizations can play various roles in stabilizing children. In some cases, this is contingent on the family or child being a member, while in other cases, parents or older children may simply visit the organization when in need of help. Civic and faith organizations can directly stabilize children by providing services, relationships, or other supports to the child, parent, or entire family. Some organizations teach children important life skills, are designed to meet one or more specific needs of the child or family, provide a sense of belonging and community, and/or help families through information or referrals. Faith organizations, for example, can provide families with important spiritual



### ABOUT THIS MEMO

This document illustrates part of a conceptual model (see last page) showing how a child's healthy development depends on the stability of seven core needs. Whether those needs are stably met depends on the actions of key actors, including parents or guardians, who are part of a stabilizing web of supports, which is also shaped by larger contextual forces. For more information, visit <https://www.urban.org/stabilizing-children> to see the conceptual model and documents about each core need and each actor.

support, which can help parents and children cope with instability and build resiliency, as well as access a supportive community, direct help and services, and referrals to other services.

Often these organizations can be important sources of social support, as they are typically community based and free to join. Yet they can also be destabilizing when inappropriate, predatory, or harmful people gain access to them and harm children or parents or when they apply damaging exclusionary membership standards. Some organizations may also make it difficult for families to participate, perhaps because of monetary dues, faith affiliation, or other criteria.

## How Does the Larger Economic, Political, and Cultural Context Shape These Organizations' Ability to Support Children?

Similar to other key actors, civic and faith organizations may face struggles with inadequate funding and underresourced and/or understaffed programs that limit their ability to support families, a challenge which may be greater for organizations located in underresourced communities. However, unlike social service providers, who typically have more oversight and regulations in place, civic and faith organizations may have looser standards and regulations, such as not requiring child abuse training or oversight mechanisms, which can have serious consequences for children and families. Also, depending on the cultural context, some organizations may practice religious discrimination, may not be inclusive to families of diverse cultural, racial, or ethnic backgrounds, or may not be accepting of LGBTQ young people or parents. These practices can further isolate potentially vulnerable children and families.

## What Core Needs Do Civic and Faith Organizations Affect?

Civic and faith organizations can directly or indirectly affect the stability of numerous core needs for children, including *relationships, health, safety, food, housing, and education and care*. Each is described below.



### RELATIONSHIPS

**Key mechanisms:** direct interactions, information and access

Civic and faith organizations can play a role in stabilizing children's relationships both directly as a source of stable relationships and indirectly by offering a space for close, stable relationships to be cultivated. For example, a pastor may be a comforting, stable relationship for a child and parent, a youth group may offer opportunities and supports to a child who otherwise might not have the opportunity to build stable relationships, and a mentoring program may provide children and young people with important relationships with adults or mentors. Further, these organizations may spend time on and prioritize discussion about healthy, stable relationships. Finally, these organizations may help buffer children from instability in their relationships by stepping in when they notice instability and activating a network of support for resilience.

Civic and faith organizations may miss the opportunity to stabilize children's relationships if they don't or can't step in when they notice a child or family struggling or if they are not equipped to make referrals to the appropriate or necessary services. In some cases, organizations have strict rules about eligibility or standards of conduct—such as organizations that have strict beliefs around the inclusion and rights of LGBTQ young people—or have other barriers such as high fees or associated costs that may further isolate young people from participating and destabilize their access to supportive,

stable relationships. In some cases, these entities can destabilize children's access to healthy relationships if the adults in the organization are not supportive of children, are abusive, or engage in other inappropriate or destructive relationships.

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## HEALTH

**Key mechanisms:** direct interactions, information and access, benefits

Civic and faith organizations can directly meet children's diverse health needs either through programming or benefits, as well as through messaging and curriculum around healthy behaviors. Some organizations, such as scouting groups or youth mentoring organizations, can offer programming that targets children's physical, mental, and social health, while others, including faith organizations, may focus on children's or parents' emotional, mental, and/or spiritual health specifically. These organizations may also connect parents with resources and other community organizations that help parents meet children's health needs, especially in the face of instability.

However, civic and faith organizations can miss an opportunity to help stabilize health if they do not provide a safe community for parents and children or don't or can't provide health-related services or referrals in the face of visible health issues. Exclusionary rules or monetary dues may keep some families with low incomes from participating or having their children participate, potentially making it harder for families who face the greatest challenges to access health-related services and supports their children might need.

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## SAFETY

**Key mechanisms:** direct interactions, information and access

Civic and faith organizations can support children's safety directly by providing safe spaces for children who participate in these organizations and by cultivating relationships that help children feel safe and secure. Organizations such as neighborhood watch or safety patrols may also do a fair amount of work to help secure children's communities. Organizations designed specifically for children, such as scouting organizations, may also teach children about safety and how to identify risks.

Yet civic and faith organizations may miss an opportunity to stabilize children's safety if they do not speak up when they notice children are in unsafe situations at home, school, or in the community or do not work to ensure that children are safe in their involvement with the organization. In extreme cases, these organizations themselves may be the setting for harmful or negative relationships between children and other adults, thus destabilizing children's safety directly.

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## FOOD

**Key mechanisms:** direct interactions, information and access, benefits

Civic and faith organizations can directly provide children and families with food, either through eating together in fellowship or through the programs or services for children and families, or they can provide parents emergency cash for groceries or refer parents to social service agencies to access food-related benefits. They can also provide children with

messaging around healthy behaviors and attitudes around food and may help connect parents to resources that combat food insecurity, such as neighborhood food banks, backpack food programs, and summer meal programs. Finally, they may provide volunteer staff for local social service organizations providing food, such as food banks or other local food services.

Although civic and faith organizations are unlikely to actively destabilize children's access to food, they may miss an opportunity to stabilize children's access to food if they do not recognize signs of food insecurity and respond by attempting to connect families with programs or services that address food insecurity. Larger systemic issues may also result in services not meeting families' needs when referred.



## HOUSING

**Key mechanisms:** direct interactions, information and access

Civic and faith organizations can play a role in stabilizing children's home life by connecting parents with people, services, and programs that may help combat housing instability. In some instances, they may function as social service providers by providing short-term housing or money to help parents pay their rent while they get back on their feet. In other instances, they may provide staff for housing-focused initiatives, such as homeless shelter kitchens and food pantries.

Although civic and faith organizations are unlikely to actively destabilize children's access to housing, they may miss the opportunity to help stabilize children if they don't try to provide parents with resources or referrals to address housing insecurity, especially in the face of instability.



## EDUCATION AND CARE

**Key mechanisms:** information and access, direct interactions, benefits

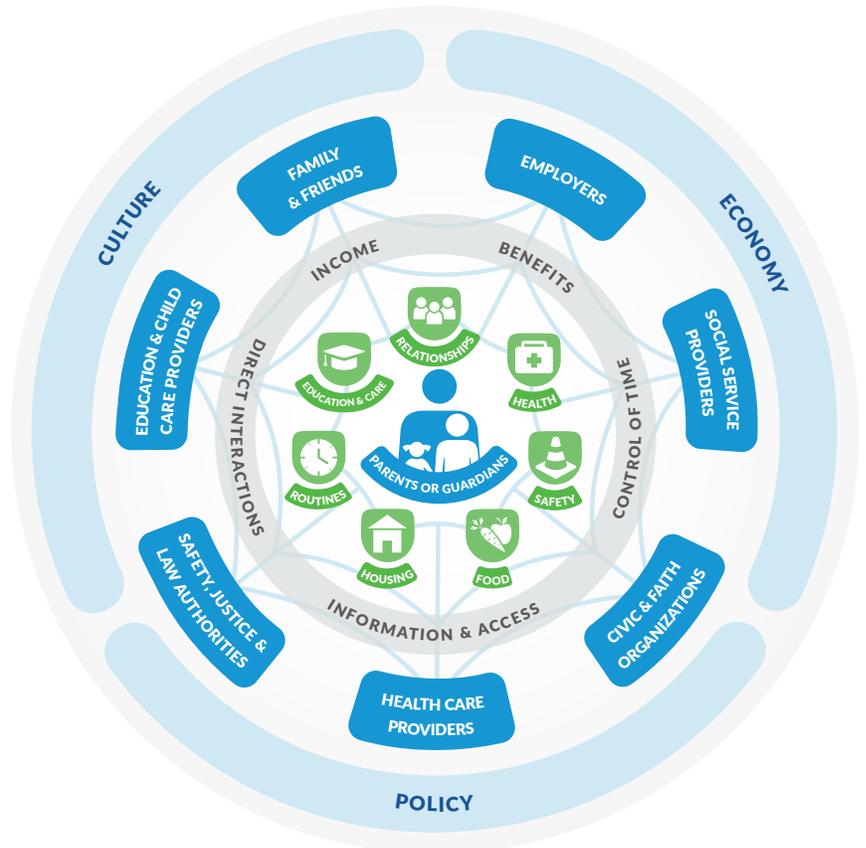
Civic and faith organizations may stabilize children's education by directly providing high-quality education and care services, such as preschools, after-school programs, drop-in programs, and so on, providing free or low-cost space for such programs to operate, or providing staff to help care for children. They may also be a source of information and connect parents with education and care services. Further, in some instances, these organizations may provide public programs or benefits such as subsidies or funding that parents can use.

Alternatively, civic and faith organizations may destabilize children's education by providing low-quality or unstable care if they directly provide the care. In some cases, civic and faith organizations that provide or sponsor education and care services with insufficient oversight may expose children to dangerous, predatory adults and compromise both the quality of care and children's healthy development and education.

# Stabilizing Children’s Lives—A Web of Stabilizing Supports

Stability in children’s environments, relationships, and basic needs being met is critical for their healthy development and well-being. Instability—defined as the experience of abrupt and/or involuntary change in individual, family, or community circumstances—can create significant barriers to meeting these foundational needs, particularly if the disruption is negative, frequent, or not buffered by an adult. The extent to which children experience instability is related to the actions of various **actors**, with **parents and guardians** primary among them, who together play an important role in the stability of meeting children’s **core needs** and can buffer children from instability through different **mechanisms**. However, all relationships and interactions demonstrated in the model, and the ability of different actors to actively support stability in meeting children’s core needs, are shaped by the greater contexts of the **economy, policy, and culture**. Finally, the model’s different elements are highly **interconnected**, as they are all part of the child’s **web of stabilizing supports**.

For more information, visit <https://www.urban.org/stabilizing-children> to see the conceptual model and documents about each core need and each actor.



## CORE NEEDS

All children need stability in three core areas: **relationships** with at least one loving, caring adult, access to basic resources (**food, health, housing, education**), and daily life (**routine, safety**). The **parent or guardian** directly or indirectly helps children access most core needs and serves as a child’s central buffer against stress and instability.

## MECHANISMS

Children’s core needs can be stabilized or destabilized through different mechanisms, or the ways in which different actors affect core needs. Key mechanisms include **income, benefits, direct interactions, information and access, and control over time**.

## ACTORS

Although **parents or guardians** are the central actors affecting a child’s core needs, other actors can affect the stability of these needs being met through mechanisms that affect children directly, or indirectly through parents. Key actors include but are not limited to **employers; social service providers; health care providers; civic and faith organizations, safety, justice, and law authorities; education and child care providers; and family and friends**.

## CONTEXT

The ways in which actors in the model affect children’s core needs are shaped by the **cultural, economic, and political** climate in which all actors live. These overlapping contexts affect what resources families have,

how they spend their time and with whom they spend it, their communities, what services and supports they have access to from other actors, and the quality of those services and supports—all of which can be stabilizing or destabilizing for children. These contextual factors also shape the ability of key actors to support stability in children’s lives.

## THE WEB OF INTERCONNECTIONS

All actors and core needs in the cycle of family stability are interrelated, as illustrated by the **web** in the model. The impact of one actor on a child’s life can not only affect the stability of a child’s core needs being met, but can also reverberate back out and affect the stability of that child’s relationship with another actor. Moreover, the stability of any given core need can affect the stability of other core needs.

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