

## STABILIZING CHILDREN'S LIVES

# Family and Friends

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Family and friends include children's extended family, family friends, and children's own friends. In short, this group includes anyone outside of children's immediate family but still in their social network. People in this category can range from those central to the child's life—who in some cases play a role similar to parents—to those who are less central but still can affect children's development and well-being. (See companion document on *Parents or Guardians* for more information.)

### How Do Family and Friends Affect Stability?

Family and friends can directly stabilize children by fostering warm, supportive relationships, providing a safe home to stay in or food to eat, or being positive role models. For older children, friends become especially important sources of support and have the power to shape children's beliefs, behaviors, and attitudes. Family and friends can also help parents meet children's core needs by helping with logistics such as getting children to and from school and doctor's appointments or by providing children with a place to stay when parents need help. They may also help stabilize parents by offering support (e.g., social or economic), which in turn helps parents meet their children's needs.

These connections, sometimes referred to as social capital, can provide various supports, such as economic support (money or housing), social support (help navigating stressful and difficult situations), informational support (sharing relevant and helpful resources), or logistical support (helping parents coordinate care or pick up children from school). Alternatively, friends and family who drain parents' economic and social resources, who have challenging relationships with the family, who model poor behavior for children, or who facilitate risky behavior may contribute to instability across a range of core needs.

### 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.

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

In tough economic times or in communities with fewer resources, family and friends may be less likely or able to offer economic support to parents or may drain family resources. The cultural and economic context in which families live may also affect norms around social support and the supports children and families receive. For example, it may be more typical for extended families to live in the same home or nearby in some communities and cultures compared with others, thereby sharing resources, caregiving, and the burdens of crises and challenges.

## What Core Needs Do Family and Friends Affect?

Family and friends can directly and indirectly affect the stability of several core needs for children, including *relationships, health, safety, food, housing, routines, and education and care*. Each is described below.



### RELATIONSHIPS

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

Family and friends can provide consistent, warm, and nurturing relationships. As children age, their own friends and peers emerge as sources of important relationships who can—depending on the quality of the relationship—offer stability directly through close platonic and romantic relationships with mutual respect and understanding. Family and friends—including friends who are peers of older children—may also help children understand what it means to build healthy, stable relationships and help children build stable relationships with others. They may also step in to offer stability if they see that the relationship with a parent is tumultuous or see a child struggling in their relationships with others. They can also help children process challenging relationships, helping build resilience even if the child is facing instability or unhealthy relationships.

However, family and friends can play a role in the instability of children's relationships, sometimes because of their own constraints and challenges. They may not be able to step in to support children who are facing challenges at home or school. They can also have unstable relationships with the child or family or model poor and unstable relationships with others. Further, unhealthy relationships with family and/or friends, even if stable, may destabilize children's relationships with others and contribute to antisocial or risky behaviors or the development of poor social skills. For example, peers who encourage risky behavior can destabilize children in other ways, as can watching friends or family be abusive or be in an abusive relationship.



### HEALTH

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

Like parents, family and friends can stabilize children's health by ensuring children's other needs are met. They may directly support the child by helping them eat a balanced diet, taking them to exercise regularly, and emphasizing the importance of social relationships and mental health. They can also model healthy behavior in all of these areas. Family members can also step in when parents are unable to facilitate access to health professionals by taking children

to the doctor, school, or child care, providing money for medical bills, feeding children, maintaining routines, and ensuring that children have strong relationships to rely on. As children age, their peers can also play a role in modeling healthy behavior.

Family and friends can also miss an opportunity to stabilize children's health if they notice a health issue and don't or can't help. They can play a destabilizing role in children's health by modeling unhealthy physical and mental health practices. They may also harm children or put them at risk of harm by engaging in physically or mentally abusive relationships or exposing children to harmful people. Further, as children grow, their peer networks play an increasingly important role in their health. Peer pressure around behaviors such as smoking, drinking, and risky sexual activities can destabilize children's health.



## SAFETY

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

Family and friends can support children's basic safety and sense of safety. Like parents do, they can take steps to help secure the child's physical environment, as well as support a sense of safety by providing warm, supportive relationships. These adults contribute to children's sense of safety by being consistently positive forces in their lives and potentially buffering the effect of children feeling unsafe by offering them a safe place to go in times of instability. They may also teach children how to be safe in different environments and be a source of comfort for children to share their fears and concerns. Finally, they may also provide children with a wider network of support to help build relationships, building resilience and creating a safe community in which children can develop.

Yet family and friends can miss an opportunity to help stabilize children's sense of security and safety if they don't or can't step in to help stabilize children who are in unsafe circumstances or environments, including at home, at school, or in the community. They may also model risky behavior or fail to speak up when they notice children or, in some cases, their friends engaging in unsafe and/or risky behavior. Finally, relationships with family and friends characterized by conflict, violence, or risky behavior put children in danger and actively destabilize children's safety.



## FOOD

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

Family and friends may directly provide children with food or parents with money for food, which can buffer against food insecurity when parents can't provide a stable source of food. Similar to parents, family and friends can share important messages around food, such as the importance of regular meal times, and model healthy attitudes and behaviors toward food. Finally, family and friends can provide the family with information and help them access community resources, including food banks and public nutrition programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program or the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children.

However, family and friends can also destabilize children's access to healthy food by needing financial support from the child's parents, thus reducing the parents' economic resources for food. Family and friends may also not be willing

or able to help when they notice children displaying behaviors consistent with food insecurity. They may also miss an opportunity to help stabilize children by modeling unhealthy attitudes and behaviors around food and nutrition.

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## HOUSING

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

Family and friends may directly contribute to the stability of children's home lives as a source of consistent housing or by helping parents find stable housing in the face of instability. Family and friends can give parents money for rent, help them navigate the housing voucher system, or help them find an affordable home that meets their needs.

However, family and friends may miss an opportunity to help stabilize children's access to housing, for example, if they don't or can't help when they notice parents having difficulty finding or affording housing. They can also contribute to instability if they take actions that make the home unsafe or unstable, such as borrowing money that would otherwise pay for rent, depleting the family's resources, contributing to overcrowdedness, or participating in verbal or physical abuse in the child's home. In an effort to save money—which can stabilize children's basic needs—family or friends may move into children's homes—also known as “doubling up.” But this can sometimes lead to instability in the child's life, including food instability.

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## ROUTINES

**Key mechanisms:** direct interactions

Family and friends can stabilize children's routines by directly setting routines with the child (e.g., having a regular time or set activities when they are with the child), continuing to carry out established routines in the absence of parents (e.g., maintaining routines while caregiving or babysitting), or actively helping parents who are struggling to establish routines. They can also provide supports to children whose families are facing significant challenges or instability by offering them some stability and predictability through visits or other supports.

Family and friends can also miss an opportunity to help stabilize children's routines if they fail to recognize the problem or choose not to help stabilize the child's routines when the family is struggling. They can directly destabilize routines by contributing to a household environment of conflict, overcrowding, and general chaos, which may keep children from having predictable routines such as going to bed at the same time each night or getting up and going to school on time. Finally, they can contribute to instability by affecting the parent's ability to establish strong routines and a sense of predictability.

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## EDUCATION AND CARE

**Key mechanisms:** direct interactions, information and access, control over time

Family and friends can stabilize children's education and care by providing care on a formal or informal basis for young children and during after-school hours for older children. They can also participate in children's academic pursuits, such as

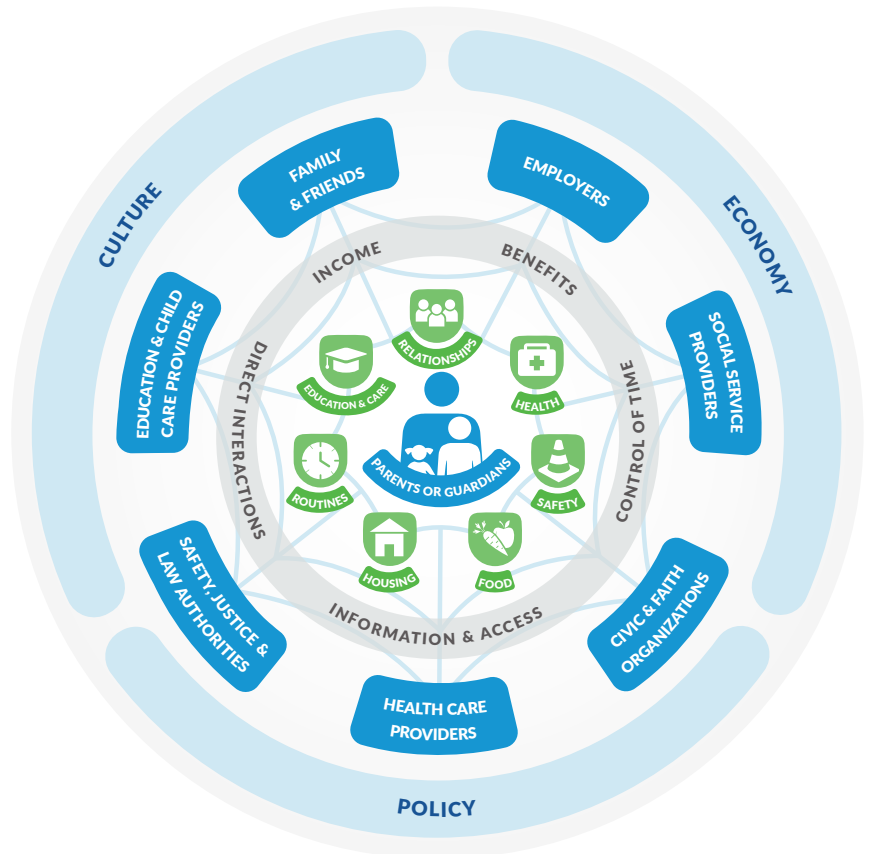
helping with homework or tutoring. They may also facilitate access by helping with transportation to and from education and care settings or providing parents with information about high-quality education and care settings. Family and friends may also buffer against instability by filling gaps in care when needed or lending aid, such as loaning parents a car to help take the child to school or money for education and care when resources are tight.

However, family and friends may also miss the chance to help stabilize children's access to education and care if they fail to recognize the problem or don't or can't share pertinent information around high-quality education and care. If they are the caregiver, they can also directly destabilize education and care by providing low-quality care. They may also exacerbate parents' ability to facilitate high-quality education and care by draining parents' mental, emotional, and economic resources.

# 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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