

STABILIZING CHILDREN'S LIVES

Social Service Providers

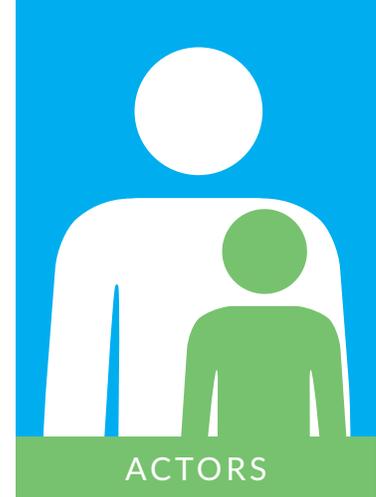
Gina Adams and Catherine Kuhns
April 2, 2020

Social service providers include any governmental or nongovernmental public service programs that offer benefits and services around a host of basic human needs. These include, for example, providers that help families with food subsidies, health care, child care subsidies, job training, subsidized housing and homelessness, adoption, community management, early childhood screening, youth development services, runaway and homeless youth, and child welfare services.

They also include entities that provide families with vouchers or referrals to other key supports, such as child care vouchers or health insurance. This category also can include the subset of civic and faith organizations, education and care providers, health care providers, and safety, justice, and law authorities who provide these services. (See companion documents on *Civic and Faith Organizations*, *Education and Care Providers*, and *Safety, Justice, and Law Authorities*. Health services are discussed in the *Health Care Providers* companion document.)

How Do Social Service Providers Affect Stability?

Social service providers help build stronger families and communities by promoting well-being, safety, health, opportunity, and—ideally—equity. Social service providers can directly affect children's stability by providing services, programs, and benefits that support children's core needs, such as child welfare services, nutrition services (such as the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women,



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.

Infants, and Children (WIC), the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), or local food banks), child care subsidies, cash assistance, and housing assistance.

These providers may also indirectly stabilize children by supporting parents with services (e.g., job training programs, substance abuse treatment) that can help stabilize the family. These providers are also important sources of information around what services parents and children are eligible for and can make referrals to other services and programs families may benefit from. These services can be run by public agencies, private organizations, and nonprofit community organizations and be delivered in various settings.

Providers who work to help families access the appropriate programs and services or those who work with families directly by providing the services in a compassionate and supportive way can help stabilize children and families. Alternatively, social service providers who either don't or can't take action to provide support to stabilize families will miss the opportunity to stabilize families and can, in some cases, be a source of instability for children.

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

In some cases, providers don't act because of inadequate funding or a shortage of available services to support families or because of policies that limit which families can be helped. In other cases, providers may face challenges because of policies and practices that create hurdles for families needing help, make the process of getting services demeaning or overly focused on fraud, or make parents feel they are unfairly accused of cheating the system. These experiences can deter parents from seeking needed services. Although funding and policy limitations can constrain social service providers' ability to support family stability in the short term, providers may be able to draw attention to these challenges and highlight the need for policy and funding improvements to better meet children's needs in the long term.

What Core Needs Do Social Service Providers Affect?

Social service providers can directly or indirectly affect the stability of several 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

Social service providers can affect the stability of children's relationships by working with children or parents directly—sometimes simultaneously. For example, social workers may work with children and parents to build stronger, more stable relationships through home visiting, parenting programs, social services affiliated with education and care programs such as Head Start and/or the foster care system. Social service providers in schools or early education programs may also recognize when children are struggling in their relationships and refer them to services tailored to building prosocial behavior and stable, healthy relationships, or they can help parents better understand how to help their children. In these instances, social service providers may both provide information and access and deliver services directly to children and parents to increase stability in their relationships. The social service provider's relationship with the family can also indirectly but critically affect family well-being and stability; when a parent's direct interaction with a social service

provider is respectful and supportive, it can build the parent's trust in the system and confidence in him- or herself to access supports her family needs. Finally, in the most serious cases, if relationships at home are not safe for children, the child welfare system may play a role in removing children from unstable and/or harmful relationships. The goal in this removal process is to provide services so the family can reunify if the situation improves or find a stable foster home or permanent placement where the child can develop new healthy relationships if the family situation remains unsafe for the child.

Yet social service providers may miss the opportunity to stabilize children's relationships by not stepping in when a family or child is struggling in their relationships or being unable to step in because of policy or funding constraints or a lack of resources or services to which they can refer families. Social service providers may also contribute to instability when their direct interactions with parents are disrespectful or impersonal. When the child welfare system has to step in to remove the child from the home, systemic challenges can lead to failure to ensure the quality and stability of the foster home(s) (i.e., resulting in repeated changes in foster care placements), inconsistency in child welfare services, and/or failure to expedite reunification goals for children separated from their families, all of which can contribute to unhealthy and unstable relationships for children. Moreover, systematic biases in child welfare policies can result in separating families rather than addressing underlying needs, which can also be destabilizing.



HEALTH

Key mechanisms: direct interactions, information and access, benefits

Helping families meet their basic needs can have direct and indirect effects on children's health and well-being. For example, social service providers help parents with basic health practices and children's health needs through parenting education or home visiting programs, or they can connect parents with other programs that target child health by making referrals as appropriate. Some programs focus directly on health, such as Medicaid or the Children's Health Insurance Program; others conduct developmental screenings for children or are state or local programs focused on health or mental health services. Other programs target other child needs that have implications for children's health, such as nutrition programs (e.g., SNAP or WIC), housing assistance, outreach programs for homeless families or runaway and homeless youth, or youth development programs. Social service providers may also refer parents to health care providers or local community organizations that aim to address children's physical, mental, and social health needs.

However, social service providers may miss an opportunity to stabilize children's health if they don't or can't act to help families whose children are facing health challenges. Yet their ability to do so is strongly shaped by the policy, funding, and system contexts in which they operate, which can result in some workers not being able to spend the time needed with families to correctly identify the child's or family's health issues, some workers not having the knowledge about health-related resources that may be available to help the family, or there being no services to meet the child's needs when referred. Providers can also affect children's access to services that can stabilize health if their program's eligibility processes create hurdles for families or if the workers don't treat families well when they seek help—both of which can result in families not getting the health services they need.



SAFETY

Key mechanisms: direct interactions, information and access

Social service providers can help identify ways that parents can keep their children safe and help children develop a sense of safety by providing parents with information or training about these issues, as well as referring them to other services or supports. They can help families find resources to address safety concerns—such as accessing smoke detectors or getting a safe crib. They can also help parents learn how to work with their children during times of stress to help them build resilience and feel safer. They may also work directly with children who have experienced trauma or challenges to help them build skills to become more resilient and feel more powerful. In extreme cases, social service providers may stabilize children's safety by removing them from an unsafe situation, as is most evident in the child welfare system. Although removing a child destabilizes their life in the short term, in this case, removing a child from an unsafe situation can be an essential first step to stabilizing their life and sense of safety in the long run.

However, social service providers may miss the opportunity to stabilize children's safety if they see unsafe situations and don't make appropriate referrals, help parents keep their children safe, or step in to protect children who are in unsafe situations. In some cases, this is because the systems in which they operate don't provide them with the knowledge, skills, and resources to take these steps—although they are required to take action if the child is in actual danger. Social service providers can also actively contribute to instability in cases when these providers remove a child from their home because of neglect or abuse but are unable to ensure the child is in a stable placement and receives the necessary services—sometimes because of provider actions but often because of systemic challenges around resources and service availability. Failing to find a stable placement is particularly problematic for children, as there can be instances of high child mobility in the child welfare system—that is, children who continually move between foster care homes, residential facilities, and so on. This fundamentally undermines children's sense of safety and access to stable relationships with caring adults who can help them feel safe, even if their homes are basically safe. At worst, however, it can expose children to many new and potentially unsafe environments.



FOOD

Key mechanisms: direct interactions, information and access, benefits

Social service providers can help children access food directly through programs such as WIC or indirectly by helping families access benefits through programs such as SNAP, which provides food assistance, or obtain cash benefits from the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program. Social service providers can help parents navigate the system, complete paperwork, and advocate for their families. They may also screen families for food insecurity and/or connect parents with local community organizations such as food banks, backpack programs, or other services focused on combatting food insecurity.

Yet social service providers may miss the opportunity to stabilize families' access to food if they don't recognize problems or don't make appropriate referrals to programs and services that combat food insecurity for struggling families. There may also be larger systemic issues resulting in services not being there to meet families' needs when referred or there being many hurdles in place that they must overcome before being able to get help. Some of these issues are related to the provider's actions, but many are related to larger issues around funding, resources, policies, and practices that shape the contexts within which social service providers operate. Social service providers may also contribute to

food instability when their direct interactions with parents needing food assistance are disrespectful or impersonal and when they make it difficult for parents to get help or keep their benefits.



HOUSING

Key mechanisms: direct interactions, information and access, benefits

Social service providers may stabilize children's housing by providing emergency assistance in the face of housing instability and/or work with parents to obtain housing vouchers, navigate paperwork for supportive housing programs, and support parents as they work to achieve a stable housing situation. They may also refer parents to services or programs that help parents make a house a home by supporting parents in their relationships with their children, their routines, and making sure that children feel safe and cared for at home.

Conversely, social service providers may miss the opportunity to stabilize families' housing if they are unable to make appropriate referrals to programs and services that combat housing instability for struggling families. However, their ability to ensure that these referrals result in stabilizing housing for families depends on whether the services are available to meet the family's needs when referred—which is a significant problem across the country. Social service providers can personally contribute to families' housing challenges if they treat parents poorly in the process, are overly harsh in interpreting policy parameters, or don't help parents navigate the complexities of eligibility and assistance. Finally, if an effort to protect a child by removing them from their family home because of child welfare concerns is not followed by successful efforts to give the parents services they need to be reunited with their child or find a new permanent and stable living arrangement, children's housing and sense of home may be destabilized. However, child welfare systems can face significant policy and funding constraints that can limit reunification services or make successful permanent placements difficult to achieve.



EDUCATION AND CARE

Key mechanisms: information and access, benefits

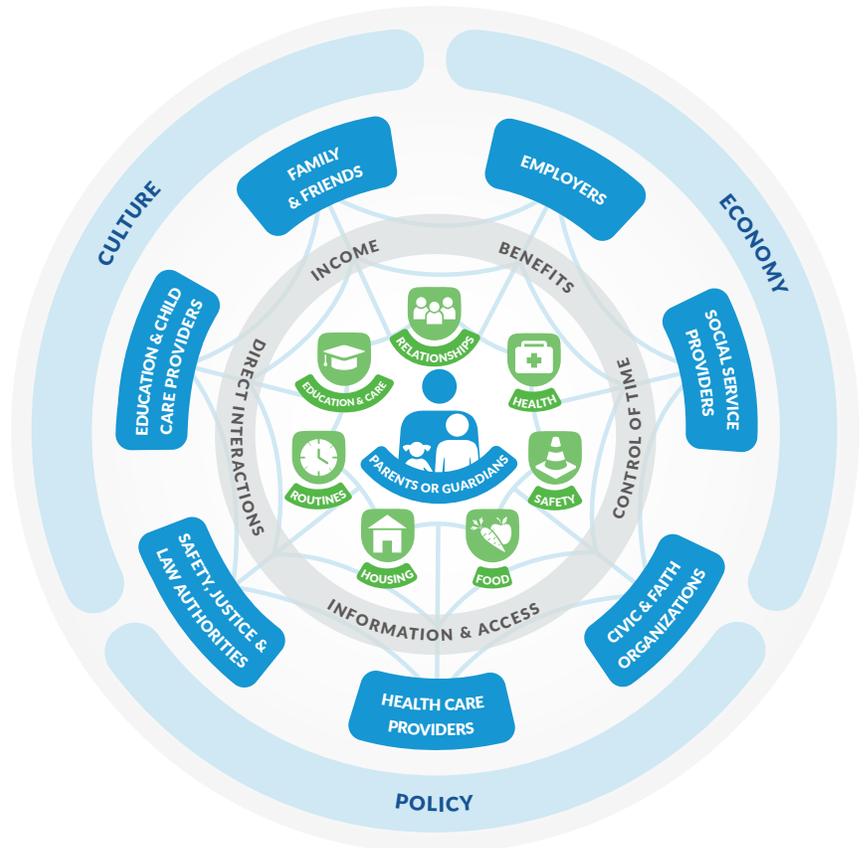
Social service providers can help stabilize children's access to quality education or child care by helping parents find care and/or making referrals to education and care providers and settings. They may also provide or help parents access benefits, such as subsidies, scholarships, and other financial aid that make certain education and care settings more affordable and attainable.

Yet social service providers may also fail to stabilize children's education and care if they don't or can't offer parents in need the information and access to education and care services their children are eligible for. They also can face challenges in stabilizing access to education and care if they are unable to connect eligible families with financial aid and subsidies they qualify for, if services are not available, if the program's policies and practices make parents jump through too many hoops to access supports, or if policies result in parents being moved quickly to terminate benefits. These challenges can sometimes be caused by the social service providers but often are related to larger structural challenges around funding, resources, and policies.

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.

Acknowledgments

This memo was funded by a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. We are grateful to them and to all our funders, who make it possible for Urban to advance its mission. The authors would like to thank Heather Sandstrom, Mary Bogle, Laudan Aron, Susan Popkin, Elaine Waxman, Heather Hahn, Elisabeth Jacobs, Erica Greenberg, Julia Isaacs, Diana Elliott, Leah Sakala, and Samantha Harvell, who were instrumental in providing insights and guidance for these materials; Elizabeth Forney, Serena Lei, and Liza Hagerman for their editorial and production support; Brittney Spinner for her design support; and Shirley Adelstein for helping bring this idea to life.

The views expressed are those of the authors and should not be attributed to the Urban Institute, its trustees, or its funders. Funders do not determine research findings or the insights and recommendations of Urban experts. Further information on the Urban Institute's funding principles is available at urban.org/fundingprinciples.

About the Urban Institute

The nonprofit Urban Institute is a leading research organization dedicated to developing evidence-based insights that improve people's lives and strengthen communities. For 50 years, Urban has been the trusted source for rigorous analysis of complex social and economic issues; strategic advice to policymakers, philanthropists, and practitioners; and new, promising ideas that expand opportunities for all. Our work inspires effective decisions that advance fairness and enhance the well-being of people and places.

Copyright © April 2020. Urban Institute. Permission is granted for reproduction of this file, with attribution to the Urban Institute.