

## STABILIZING CHILDREN'S LIVES

# Safety

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A main tenet of childhood is the need to explore, yet children grow and develop in a world that is not always safe. As a result, childhood is a complex mix of needing to be and feel safe, being supported in taking steps outside of one's comfort zone, and recovering from challenging experiences and learning to understand one's strengths. In fact, helping children learn how to take healthy risks (i.e., risks that don't endanger their physical safety or mental well-being) is critical for healthy development. These elements support children's healthy development and help build their resilience and ability to handle challenges. Therefore, "safety" as a core need in this model refers both to "basic safety," which involves minimizing physical, mental, or emotional harm to children, and ensuring that children have a "sense of safety," which supports feelings of security and confidence.

Research suggests that even young children have an understanding of risks and protections and what it means to feel safe and that children's sense of safety can affect their ability to learn, grow, and thrive. Both having basic safety and a sense of safety are closely related to children's core need of health; a breach of either or both can directly affect children's physical or mental health. Having a sense of safety is also interrelated with other core needs such as relationships, routines, and education. Feeling safe makes children more likely to build strong relationships, sleep well, and learn effectively, all of which can in turn support children's sense of safety. Conversely, chronic exposure to unsafe environments and situations risks destabilizing children's healthy development. Moreover, children's sense of safety is dependent on believing that the adults they count on are safe as well. If children don't feel confident that those they care about and depend on are safe, then their sense of safety is compromised.



### 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.

When children are young, adults play an active role in ensuring that the physical spaces children spend their time in are safe. Adults are also responsible for fostering warm, nurturing relationships and environments that help children feel safe. As children age and develop autonomy, they have more agency over the environments they find themselves in and have more responsibility to protect themselves from dangerous circumstances and events.

## How Does the Larger Economic, Political, and Cultural Context Shape Children's Safety?

Yet a child's safety, family's ability to keep their children safe, and parents' ability to rely on other actors to prevent harm and keep their children safe are strongly affected by many factors shaped by the larger economic, political, and cultural context in which they live. These larger structural issues shape what resources families have and challenges they face, the characteristics of their communities, and whether other actors can stabilize or destabilize their children's safety—all of which can affect parents' ability to prevent harm and help their child both be and feel safe. These issues play out in many ways that affect children's safety, whether because of living in unsafe neighborhoods and communities, the threat of gun violence in schools and communities, the extensive dangers for children on the internet and social media, the sense of danger that Black and Latinx children and children of immigrants can feel from law enforcement in their communities, the vulnerability and bullying of LGBTQ young people, or the rising attacks on certain religious communities.

## Which Actors Can Affect the Stability of Safety?

Safety can be affected by numerous actors, including *parents or guardians, education and care providers, safety, justice, and law authorities, family and friends, social service providers, civic and faith organizations, and health care providers*. Each is described below.



### PARENTS OR GUARDIANS

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

*For simplicity, we use the term "parent" to refer to both parents and guardians.*

Parents play a central role in shaping children's sense of safety and keeping them safe. When children are young, parents try to ensure that the children's physical environments, as well as the relationships children have with other adults, are safe and promote healthy growth and development. Parents can also try to help children process threats and assess risky situations, tools that they will continue to use as they grow. They can provide practical information and try to build routines around safety, such as looking both ways before crossing the street, while also giving children the space to share their fears, allowing children to feel heard and addressing any real or perceived concerns of safety. Parents can also play a key role in keeping their children safe on the internet by monitoring their children's access and behavior online, as well as trying to teach them about how to stay safe online. Finally, parents can try to buffer the effects of frightening or challenging events by helping children process what happened and build resilience.

However, parents can face significant challenges in trying to help children both be and feel safe. Sometimes parents face physical or mental health problems or struggle with other challenges that make it difficult to engage in the activities described above that can help children be and feel safe. Sometimes parents may not know how to help their children process the dangers around them in ways that allow them to feel safe or may not understand the importance of talking

through fears with children. In some circumstances, parents may compromise children's sense of safety through verbal and physical abuse or expose children to dangerous people and circumstances. In extreme cases, parents may be the reason children are exposed to unsafe environments, especially in homes with domestic abuse or addiction. However, as described above, structural issues beyond parents' control also create major challenges for parents to help their children be or feel safe. Although parents can try to protect their children, these realities can fundamentally threaten children's sense of safety in ways that are hard to assuage.



## EDUCATION AND CHILD CARE PROVIDERS

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

Education and child care providers are responsible for keeping children safe in school and child care settings. Basic safety in these settings can be maximized by ensuring basic safety procedures, ranging from having soft surfaces under playground equipment and functioning smoke detectors to ensuring strong procedures exist around identity verification at all times, especially at pick-up and drop-off. Safety can also be maximized by working to address incidents of bullying or other unsafe behavior in school. Providers may support children's sense of safety by teaching children to identify risky situations and skills to keep them safe—physically, mentally, and emotionally. They can give children the opportunity to discuss what it means to feel safe and who to go when they don't feel safe. These providers can also share information with parents about child safety, including information about child-proofing the house, sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS), and—for older children—how to monitor internet use and navigate difficult conversations about alcohol and drug use and risky sexual behavior. They can share information with parents about their children, noting when the child seems “off” and alerting parents of any behaviors or activities that may compromise child safety. With the proliferation and use of trauma-informed care, education and child care providers may buffer against instability by employing strategies that help children cope with existing trauma and create a safe, secure space at school where children feel safe to learn.

Yet education and child care providers can jeopardize children's safety if they don't or can't provide a physically and mentally safe space for children to learn and develop. Yet their ability to do so can be shaped by larger systemic issues around staffing, resources, time, and funding. For example, they may not have the resources to dispense safety information, nor time or staff to discuss important safety practices. They may not have the staff training or time to mediate physical conflict or bullying among students or build warm and supportive relationships with their students. As conduits between children's life at school and parents, these providers may not have time to share information about safety or how children are doing in school with parents. In extreme cases, education and child care providers could exacerbate instability in safety by using harsh and punitive discipline practices. Finally, it is important to recognize that larger societal dangers, such as gun violence in education settings, create a particular challenge for education and care providers' efforts to keep children safe.



## SAFETY, JUSTICE, AND LAW AUTHORITIES

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

The inherent responsibility of safety, justice, and law authorities is to keep children safe and free of harm. In many ways, these actors exert their influence across a range of contexts that can keep children safe—from school resource officers and crossing guards in schools to regulators implementing licensing regulations for child care programs to family court judges working with children and their caregivers in collaborative ways to support their safety and well-being. These authorities and others may directly stabilize children’s safety by supporting basic safety practices, monitoring their multiple environments, linking them to community-based services and supports, or providing children and their families with information around safety and how to identify and avoid risky or dangerous situations. They can also intervene to protect children or families when they are in danger.

However, safety, justice, and law authorities may also miss the opportunity to stabilize children if they are absent from the multiple contexts in which children live, an absence that may contribute to unsafe schools, neighborhoods, and communities. Yet, there is also evidence that they can destabilize children’s lives when they are present, sometimes because of a legal system that is not necessarily designed to support collaborative efforts between communities and these authorities, and sometimes because of the ways that authorities enforce those laws. In some cases authorities intervene inappropriately or with excessive force—overcriminalizing, harassing, or harming children, their parents or primary caregivers, and friends and family—which undermines children’s perceived and/or actual safety. Further, law enforcement officials can perpetuate deeply destabilizing practices in many communities of color, particularly Black communities, which can make them less safe for children. The current anti-immigrant climate, in which immigration authorities are implementing and enforcing deportation laws more aggressively, may be having a similar effect on the extent to which immigrant communities, and thereby their children, see law enforcement and the legal system as a threat rather than a source of protection. This can affect the extent to which these authorities are destabilizing children’s lives.



## FAMILY AND FRIENDS

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

Family and friends can support children’s basic safety and sense of safety. As 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.



## SOCIAL SERVICE PROVIDERS

**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.



## CIVIC AND FAITH ORGANIZATIONS

**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 don't speak up when they notice children are in unsafe situations at home, school, or in the community or don't 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.



## HEALTH CARE PROVIDERS

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

Health care providers can directly stabilize children's safety by talking with parents about best practices for ensuring young children grow and develop in a healthy way, including putting infants to sleep on their back, child-proofing, and ensuring that children have warm, nurturing relationships that help them feel safe and secure. For older children, health care providers may counsel them directly, providing medical advice, discussing risky and unsafe behaviors and the consequences of such behaviors, and providing children with a space to have open and judgement-free conversations about whether they feel safe in their relationships at home, at school, with friends, and with partners. Health care providers can also identify potential or actual child abuse or signs of parental mental health or substance abuse problems, and they can ensure that steps are taken to protect the child and support the family.

However, health care providers may miss the opportunity to stabilize children if they are unable to assess children's safety risks or refer families for services. Health care providers may also not have the time to counsel parents, as appropriate, on the developmental needs and milestones of children, risking uninformed or misinformed parents. Finally, health care providers who don't have time to work with parents may miss symptoms of mental health issues and thus miss an opportunity to stabilize children. The structural challenges health care providers face in terms of funding, resources, training, and incentives to serve families quickly can create barriers to these important steps.

### Selected Resources

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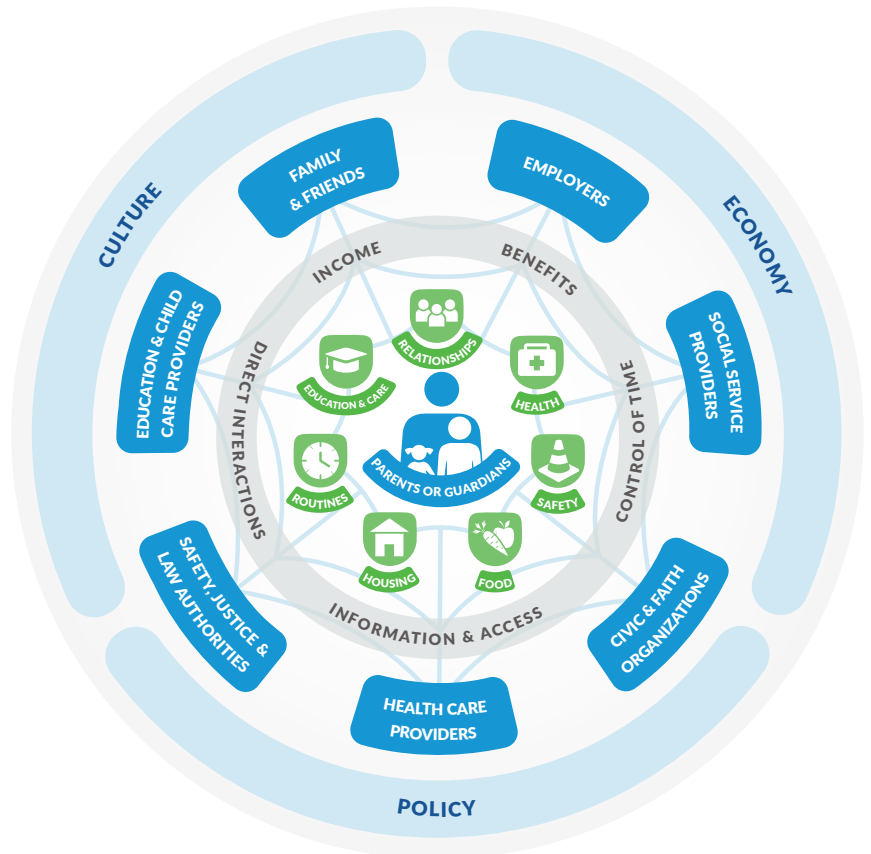
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# Stabilizing Children’s Lives—A Web of Stabilizing Supports

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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