

## STABILIZING CHILDREN'S LIVES

# Relationships

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Children's relationships, starting at birth with their parents and continuing through adulthood with family, friends, and romantic partners, form the foundation of their social world. Healthy relationships allow children to express themselves and learn how to behave, communicate, express emotion, understand others, and develop social skills. As such, stability in relationships is critical for children to feel safe and develop in a healthy way. When relationships are healthy and stable, children have the confidence to explore their world and are more likely to thrive physically and emotionally. Although some level of instability in relationships is expected and signifies growth, harmful levels of relationship instability risk compromising children's social development and put their physical and emotional health at risk.

The relationships experienced early in life lay the foundation by which children relate to others and provide children with a way to experience and interpret their world. We focus here on the stability of such relationships, but our definition includes that children need good quality relationships, which are paramount for healthy development. Early relationships characterized by warmth, sensitivity, and responsiveness, as well as continuity and stability, are key to making children feel safe and nurtured. Although most often these early relationships are with parents and education and care providers, extended family and other kin can often fall into this group. As children age, their peers and romantic partners, and other adults in their networks, also emerge as important and significant social touchstones that help shape who they become. Relationships for older children still need to be characterized by warmth and acceptance, but also extend to allowing autonomy and choice as adolescents develop more independence. Although relationships can be dynamic and changing, having adults and peers who help children understand how to process these changes can buffer the negative effects and build resilience.



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 Children’s Relationships?

A family’s ability to ensure their children have stable relationships can be affected by a range of factors, some of which are personal to the family and others of which are shaped by their larger economic, political, and cultural context—factors which also can affect the capacity or willingness of other actors to support families in this area. These can be seen in structural issues that affect what resources families have, how they spend their time and with whom they spend it, the characteristics of 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 affect parents’ ability to help their children have predictable and stable relationships. For example, as is described briefly below—and in more depth in the companion pieces describing the key actors’ roles in affecting children’s core needs—many actors in children’s lives face structural challenges that can affect their ability to support children’s stable relationships. Moreover, the stability of other core needs affects the stability of children’s relationships. That is, if children experience instability in housing or education and care, there will likely be repercussions in the stability of their relationships as well. Conversely, stability across other core needs can further bolster stability in children’s relationships.

## Which Actors Can Affect the Stability of Relationships?

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



### PARENTS OR GUARDIANS

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

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

Parents play a central role in shaping the stability of children’s relationships. Typically the primary relationship for young children, parents are responsible for overseeing the stability of their own relationship with their child, while also managing their children’s relationships with others. Examples of this include parents’ facilitation of play dates and time with other family members, as well as working to choose education and care providers who they feel will be loving and supportive of their children. As children age, parents may also try to help their children by providing information and advice on relationships with peers and adults, buffering them from instability in relationships and helping them learn important relationship skills, and modeling healthy relationships for their children. Parents may also attempt to manage children’s relationships by prioritizing their child’s time spent with supportive, caring peers and adults to further stabilize their child’s relationships. Finally, parents can work to access mental health and social services if their children are struggling.

However, parents can face challenges in trying to support healthy, stable relationships for their children, sometimes because of personal issues or larger constraints or structural issues. On the personal front, parents may not understand the importance of prioritizing healthy relationships or how to help their children in this area. Parents may also put children’s healthy relationships at risk if they are themselves harsh, punitive, or neglectful, or if they expose children to others who are abusive, which may in turn also destabilize children’s ability to have healthy relationships with others. Other challenges can also undercut parents’ ability to help their children form stable relationships with others—for example,

if they have to frequently change their child's education or care setting because of changes in their employment situation, work hours, or housing situation. Finally, parents may face personal issues—such as long work hours, personal health issues, or other family demands—that can make it challenging to know when their children have problems building strong, stable relationships or (for older children) have developed unhealthy relationships with peers or romantic partners. These personal challenges can also make it hard for parents to help their children, and they can face challenges in accessing social or mental health services to help.



## FAMILY AND FRIENDS

**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.



## EDUCATION AND CARE PROVIDERS

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

Education and care providers may directly affect the stability of children's relationships by developing strong, warm, and consistent relationships with children characterized by mutual respect and dependability. These providers can also help children learn to develop strong social skills by talking about how to build healthy relationships and mediating conflicts that occur in education and care settings among peers. The amount of time these providers spend on relationship-building activities and the development of prosocial skills further affects the stability of children's relationships in education and care settings and beyond.

Education and child care providers can also destabilize children's relationships and face challenges in their efforts to meet children's needs for stable, warm, trusting relationships with adults and peers. Levels of public investment in education and care settings affect core issues such as teacher compensation, training, and retention. These, in turn, affect the extent to which children experience turnover or changes in teaching staff, which affects the stability of children's

relationships with them. Further, even if the teacher doesn't change, education and care providers who are not trained in and assessed around positive interventions can engage in harsh, punitive, or neglectful practices in the classroom or care setting and risk creating an unhealthy and unstable relationship with the children in their classroom as well as in the relationships children have with other adults. They may also miss the opportunity to mediate conflicts in the classroom or care setting or do so unfairly or inconsistently, which can affect children's relationships with their peers. Further, education and care providers who are not provided the training, leadership, resources, and flexibility to structure their care setting or classroom with adequate time dedicated to social interactions, age-appropriate play, or group work can limit the ability of children and young people to cultivate and build healthy, stable, relationships.



## CIVIC AND FAITH ORGANIZATIONS

**Key mechanisms:** direct interactions and 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.



## SOCIAL SERVICE PROVIDERS

**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 for their 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 unstable and potentially unhealthy 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.



## EMPLOYERS

**Key mechanisms:** control over time

Employers may indirectly stabilize children's relationships with parents through the effect they have on the amount, schedule, and stability of the time parents have to spend with their children. Parents who work predictable hours and are afforded more flexibility are more likely to be able to spend regular time with their children, facilitating a healthy, stable parent-child relationship, and they have greater ability to deal with unexpected needs (such as a child getting sick at school), which can support children's sense of security. Employers can also affect the stability of other key relationships in children's lives, such as close friends and family, through similar mechanisms.

Parents working for employers who require nontraditional work schedules, in particular irregular schedules, can face more challenges in trying to spend regular time with their children. Nontraditional schedules can make it more difficult for parents to spend time with their children during the day or find stable, loving caregivers to care for their children during work hours. Irregular work hours—when parents' work schedules can change from day to day and week to week—can create even greater challenges for stable relationships on both fronts: parents not only must work to ensure their time with their children is stable, but also find a caregiver who is willing to accommodate these schedule changes. Employers who don't or can't afford to provide parents with paid leave or predictable schedules can make it harder for parents to engage in basic activities with their children—such as taking care of them when they are ill or being involved in their school—which can build trust and healthy relationships. Finally, unpredictable or challenging work schedules can also add to parents' stress, which can also affect their ability to have stable, healthy relationships with their children.



## HEALTH CARE PROVIDERS

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

Health care providers can be a source of stable, positive relationships for children by taking the time to listen, connect, and care for each child and their family—relationships which can be even stronger if the family is able to see the same provider over time. They can also support parents in helping develop their children's prosocial skills by discussing this aspect of children's lives and emphasizing the importance of warm, stable relationships. Health care providers may help young people who are struggling in their relationships by directly providing them services or supports or referring them to other mental health professionals. As young people grow, health care providers may assess them for stability in their relationships, asking if they feel safe in their relationships, romantic and otherwise, and provide appropriate guidance and referrals.

Conversely, children may not have a stable relationship with their health care provider, especially if they don't have a regular provider. In these cases, health care providers can find it more challenging to build trust with the child. Further, because of systemic constraints, providers may not be able to take the time or access the resources to talk with children about their relationships with their friends, family, romantic partners, teammates, and others, and thus they may miss the opportunity to support children and young people who are struggling in their relationships and need help.



## SAFETY, JUSTICE, AND LAW AUTHORITIES

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

Safety, justice, and law authorities such as security guards, crossing guards, and other everyday fixtures in children's lives may themselves have stable, trusting relationships with children. Other safety authorities may stabilize children's relationships by stepping in when children are in unsafe situations or making appropriate referrals to other services as needed. For example, intervening when a child is in a dangerous home environment can protect a child from a harmful situation and ideally could connect the child and family with supports to help stabilize the child and build healthier, more stable relationships. Further, these authorities may play a role in identifying domestic abuse, violence, neglect, or other features of unstable relationships and refer the family to the appropriate supports.

Importantly, safety, justice, and law authorities may also miss opportunities to stabilize children's relationships, or they may actively destabilize them because of problematic policies or practices. For example, they may fail or not have the authority to connect families with appropriate resources in the face of unstable relationships or may unnecessarily remove parents or guardians from the household through incarceration or deportation, further destabilizing children's relationships. They may also fail to follow existing protocols (or not have adequate protocols) on how to behave around children who may be confused or scared that their parent, family member, or friend is in trouble with the law, or unfriendly visitation policies may affect children visiting incarcerated parents. Finally, in the current situation where children of color may see or experience safety, justice, and law authorities as racially biased or motivated or as enforcing laws that disproportionately affect their families and communities (such as deportation efforts), children may experience these figures and indeed the larger legal system as dangerous and destructive to their relationships.

### **Selected Resources**

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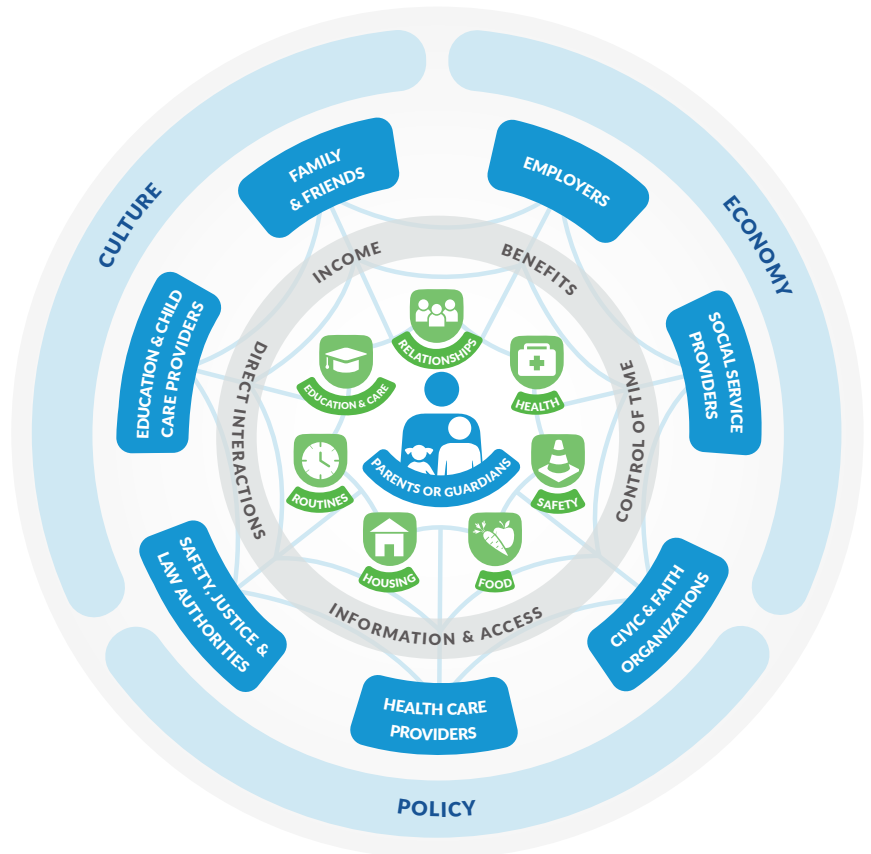
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# Stabilizing Children’s Lives—A Web of Stabilizing Supports

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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