ACTORS

STABILIZING CHILDREN'S LIVES

Parents or Guardians

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Although many different actors can stabilize or destabilize children's core needs, parents are children's first line of defense—their key stabilizer and typically their primary caregiver. (For simplicity, we use the term "parent" to refer to both parents and guardians.) Parents work directly to ensure that children's needs are met, but they also facilitate access to other actors to support children's stability across every need. That makes them a unique actor in children's lives, and therefore they hold a unique spot in our conceptual model.

For young children, parents lay the foundation for emotional, linguistic, cognitive, social, and physical development. As children age, parents continue contributing to healthy development by establishing boundaries, rules, and consequences, and by fostering a healthy sense of independence and autonomy.

Parents Are Directly Responsible For Trying to Meet Children's Basic Needs

Because parents are foundational to children's lives, in many cases they are responsible for trying to stabilize children's needs directly. For example, parents are the primary actors working to help children feel safe and secure in the world, which is essential for healthy development. Parents also are responsible for trying to ensure that children have adequate housing and access to food and are enrolled in school or other types of education and care settings. Parents are also primarily responsible for trying to meet their children's health needs, setting routines, and working to foster a warm, nurturing relationship on which all future relationships may be based.
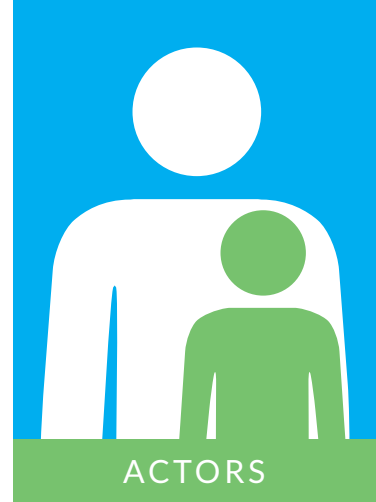
ABOUT THIS MEMO

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.

As a result, the full range of parents' resources can play an important role in shaping the extent to which they can successfully manage to keep their children's lives stable and healthy. These resources include, for example, their personal resources (including mental, emotional, psychological, and physical capacities), access to family and social networks and resources, education and employment experiences, financial resources (both income and assets), and so on. However, as discussed below, parents can face significant gaps in these resources, which can undercut their ability to successfully meet their children's basic needs in a stable way.

Parents Are at the Center of, and Try to Facilitate Access to, A Web of Supports

Parents cannot stabilize children's lives alone. Ideally, parents work to support children by facilitating access to, and enlisting support from, many other actors who can affect the stability of children's core needs—all of which can be part of children's web of stabilizing supports. (Older children gradually take on a more proactive role in these relationships as they get older and become more independent.) In fact, parents are often the gatekeepers to other core services and supports that children need for healthy development:

- Although parents provide the primary foundational relationship upon which others are built and modeled for children, they can also help children foster **relationships** with other **family and friends**, building a network that supports children as they grow and develop.

- Parents also can be responsible for seeking involvement with and support from **civic and faith organizations**, which can help support children and parents in various ways.

- Although parents are tasked with keeping children **healthy**, the primary way of doing this is through regular well-child visits and other health-related appointments with **health care providers**, which parents are typically responsible for maintaining.

- Parents also facilitate access to **education and care** through interactions with **education and child care providers**, who play a role in meeting the health, safety, routine, food, and educational needs of children young and old.

- Parents may also access **social service providers** who can try to help fill gaps when families need assistance in meeting children's core needs.

- Finally, parents are responsible for engaging with **employers** in their efforts to find and maintain employment, which affects their ability to meet their family's basic needs in various ways, including the level and stability of the family's income and schedules.

Parents Need the Support of Other Actors to Stabilize Children's Lives

In the ideal world, all actors would work with parents to provide a web of stabilizing supports for children—not only as a source of stability in helping directly or indirectly meet children's basic needs, but also in working to ameliorate the effects of instability should it occur in children's lives, albeit within the constraints on their role.

In this ideal world, the different actors serve as buffers, helping stabilize families during challenging times. As described in depth in each actor companion document (for more information, visit https://www.urban.org/stabilizing-children), actors can directly and indirectly support parents' ability to stabilize their children's access to core needs in many ways.

For example, a parent is much more likely to successfully support their children through a crisis and stably meet their children's needs if they have:

- **employers** who allow them time off to deal with family challenges and provide a stable, adequate income;

- a strong network of supportive **friends and family** who can step in when things get bad;

- a rich system of **civic and faith organizations** that can support them;

- **education and child care providers** who can communicate with parents and support children through rough times;

- **social service providers** who can respond efficiently and appropriately by helping parents access needed supportive services;

- **health care providers** who can offer needed health services and supports; and/or

- **safety, justice, and law authorities** who can focus on maintaining peace and preventing harm to help keep both parents and children safe.

Parents and Key Actors Can Face Significant Challenges in Working to Stabilize Children

In the real world, this web of stabilizing supports can have significant holes. Regardless of parents' socioeconomic status, their ability to stabilize children and support them across these various domains can be supported or undercut by the larger economic, political, and cultural context in which they—and other actors they rely on for stabilizing support—live.

Parents themselves bring different strengths, capabilities, and resources to this task and face different structural and systemic challenges such as poverty, racism, and discrimination. Some face personal challenges of disability or physical health challenges, mental health challenges, demanding family responsibilities, or other difficulties that can destabilize them and undercut their ability to undertake all actions needed to fully support their children and/or engage the other key actors in that effort. Some have access to personal or family resources or assets they can use to buffer themselves and their children from instability, but others do not—an issue closely related to numerous factors, including systemic racism that has limited the accumulation of wealth for people of color in the US.

Some challenges are affected by outside factors. For example, having a child with special needs can create extra demands on parents both in terms of caregiving and finances, as well as on the ability or willingness of other actors in a child's life to help. Finding steady employment with predictable income and good benefits may be difficult in a labor market that increasingly relies on workers working multiple jobs paid lower wages, which can in turn affect parents' ability to provide for their children—including in core needs such as food and housing or health care—or require them to accept jobs during nonstandard hours even if that makes it harder to care for their children. Finding steady, affordable housing can be more challenging for parents if housing policies are restrictive or discriminatory in nature, the market of affordable housing is tight, and/or the cost of housing makes it difficult for parents to meet their children's other needs. These are only a few examples of how outside factors can create additional challenges for parents.

Further, each major actor in children's lives—family and friends, civic and faith organizations, education and child care providers, employers, social service providers, health care providers, and safety, justice, and law authorities—also operate within larger economic, political, and cultural contexts that affect the ways in which they function. Issues such

as structural inequities and systemic racism, as well as decisions about public policies and investments, shape what these actors can do and the resources and supports that families can access from them, as well as whether actors function to stabilize or destabilize families. For example, social service providers who work in systems characterized by chronic underfunding, limited or no resources, and policies that limit the number of families they can help will have difficulty supporting parents as they try to stabilize children's core needs. Health care providers who work in a health care system characterized by high costs, low accessibility, and gaps in insurance coverage may find it difficult to provide adequate services to children and parents, a challenge which is even greater for families with children who have chronic health conditions or developmental disabilities.

As described in depth in the companion documents on the different actors, many key actors in children's lives face these structural barriers to being able to stabilize children's lives. In sum, these systemic and structural impediments affect the extent to which families can count on these actors to help buffer their children from instability, as well as the likelihood that families will have access to personal resources to do so.

## All Families Need Buffers and Supports to Stabilize Children's Lives

Parents who already face barriers and challenges because of structural inequities may face substantial and more frequent gaps in this web of supports. Yet parents at every level can fall victim to these gaps in support if they do not have sufficient buffers to protect them and their children from instability and if the systems within which they live do not have adequate supports. For example, parents who face an unexpected financial challenge such as a health crisis or a government shutdown may suddenly find themselves vulnerable and unable to meet their children's basic needs if they do not have savings or access to family members to lend them money—a problem facing many American families. Parents whose children have mental health needs or learning challenges can face major difficulties accessing the services they need to stabilize their children's health and development in both the health care and education systems. Parents who live in underresourced communities, whether rural, suburban, or urban, face additional challenges in meeting their children's needs.

All parents need the support of all actors in their lives to help them buffer their children from instability, and every actor has an important role to play in the stabilizing web of supports that children and families need to thrive. Taking steps to create a true stabilizing web for all families and children will require that parents and key actors understand the roles that they play, the effect they can have on children's stability, and the importance of addressing the structural challenges that limit their ability to reach this goal.

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.
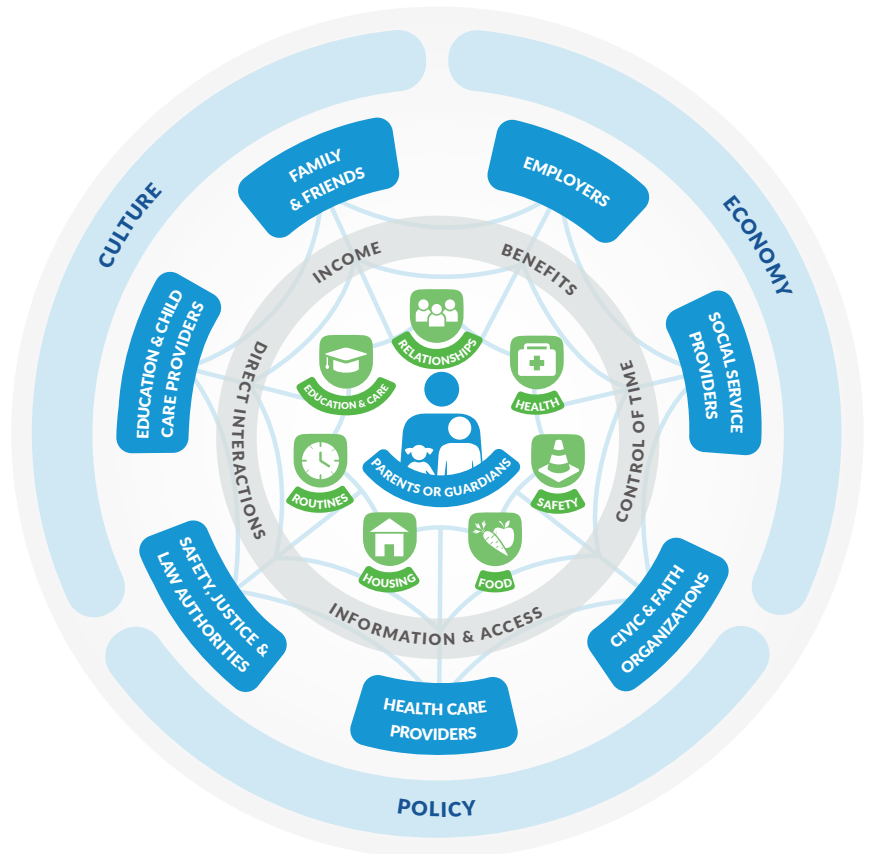
CORE NEEDS

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

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