



# The Protective Factors

An E-Book Series for Supervised Visitation Programs



## Supportive Social Connections

The Fourth Protective Factor in a Series of Six



# Introduction

Research indicates that children of parents who have supportive social connections are at reduced risk for child abuse and maltreatment. The presence of supportive family members, friends, and neighbors helps keep families emotionally healthy and encourages positive parenting practices. When parents have supportive social connections they are better able to cope with the many challenges of parenting.

## Objectives

After completing this training, social service providers and supervised visitation personnel should:

- Understand what supportive social connections look like in family settings and be able to describe different examples in the home.
- Recognize the importance of supportive social connections and the positive effects for children and families.
- Explore strategies to help parents build supportive social connections.
- Understand the specific ways supervised visitation personnel can help parents develop supportive social connections.
- Identify resources available for social service providers and families looking for more information on supportive social connections.

# The Importance of Supportive Social Connections

Supportive social connections help parents stay emotionally healthy and feel satisfied in their roles as parents. Parents who are able to spend time exploring their interests and working with others are better able to process stress and provide a healthy growing environment for their child. When parents feel socially connected, their children benefit through a more positive parent and stable environment.

## PARENTS WITH SUPPORTIVE SOCIAL CONNECTIONS:

Experience greater levels of satisfaction with life.



Are more willing to seek and accept help when needed.



Feel more competent in their roles as parents.



Are less likely to have consistent, negative interactions with their children.

## PARENTS WITHOUT SUPPORTIVE SOCIAL CONNECTIONS:

May feel more restricted by their role as a parent.



Are more vulnerable to the negative outcomes associated with stress.



Are more likely to experience symptoms of depression.



May be less able to meet their child's emotional needs.



# Supportive Social Connections in the Home

**BELOW ARE SEVERAL EXAMPLES OF WHAT SUPPORTIVE SOCIAL CONNECTIONS MAY LOOK LIKE IN THE HOME:**

A woman helps take care of her neighbor's children while he works overtime.



Parents leave their two young children with their grandparents while they go out on a date.



A brother speaks with his sister about problems she is having with her son.

A single-mother of a newborn gets together with other parents for weekly outings.



Parents in the same neighborhood take turns car-pooling their children to school.

**BELOW ARE SEVERAL INDICATORS THAT SUPPORTIVE SOCIAL CONNECTIONS MAY NOT BE PRESENT IN THE HOME:**

An overwhelmed father cannot think of anyone to talk to.



A mother is called into work, but is unable to go in because she cannot find anyone to watch her children.



A father works every day while his 12 year old daughter cares for his three youngest children.



A mother experiencing abuse wants to leave her abusive partner but has nowhere to go.



**Think about it....**



Now that you know about the importance of understanding a child's developmental stages, what are the risks to families with parents who do not know about them? How might the child, parent, or family as a whole be affected by this lack of knowledge?

# Strategies for Working with Families

Social service providers are in a unique position to help parents recognize the importance of supportive social connections and expanding their social networks. There are many different opportunities for social service providers to discuss supportive social connections with parents, including:

- 1 Talking with parents during intake and follow-up procedures.
- 2 Opening up the dialogue with parents when they express concerns related to social ties.
- 3 Discussing parents' interests and activities during supervised visitation.
- 4 Communicating with parents about the occupational, educational, and social resources they currently participate in or are interested in joining.
- 5 Chatting with parents during pick-up, drop-off, or parent-teacher meetings about their interests and activities.
- 6 Helping to identify additional local supportive social services to help fill gaps and connect parents to needed assistance.

# Skill Building

In order for parents to create lasting, meaningful social support systems, they should be prepared to develop the following necessary social skills:

## LEARN ABOUT PRE-EXISTING SOCIAL NETWORKS



- Work with the parent to identify social support systems they may already have. Discuss the possibilities of family members, friends, neighbors, or acquaintances serving as social support networks.
- Talk with parents about who they look to for advice, emotional support, or other concerns.
- Encourage and work with parents to explore volunteering opportunities or parent-involved roles at their child's school.
- Support parents in starting conversations with other parents in a variety of environments, such as the playground, community events, or at church.

## EXPLORE INTERESTS, AND IDENTIFY RELEVANT ACTIVITIES

- Talk with parents about their interests, hobbies and what they like to do for fun. Work together to find activities in the community to foster the interest.
- Encourage parents to explore activities they like to do with their children in the community. By engaging in a mutual interest, the parent and the child will both benefit, and can connect with other families who have similar interests.
- Look into activities such as volunteering, joining a gym, attending interest groups at the public library, going to the community center, or attending faith-based institutions to further expand their social networks.



## IDENTIFY ADDITIONAL SUPPORTIVE SOCIAL NETWORKS IN THEIR COMMUNITY



- Talk with the parent about any gaps in his or her resource network and work to identify social networks that may be helpful in filling these gaps.
- Refer the parent to external support networks where they can meet peers and mentors with which to build healthy relationships.

## EXPLORE POTENTIAL BARRIERS TO SUPPORTIVE SOCIAL CONNECTIONS

- Explore current barriers to social involvement. For example, does the parent lack access to reliable childcare? Do they lack adequate social skills or self-confidence? Are they uncomfortable asking for help? Is there a language barrier?
- Assist parents when possible in overcoming obstacles inhibiting supportive social connections and help them to develop the confidence and skills needed to create these connections on their own.



### A Note on Communication Competency...

The ability to communicate clearly is important when working with families. Communication styles differ from person to person and culture to culture, making it easy to misinterpret another person's behaviors or social cues.

**Consider how communication styles can vary in the following ways: personal space, silence, volume, dominance behaviors, touching, eye contact, interruption and turn-taking behaviors, gesturing, and facial expressions.** It is okay to have a conversation with the client about what he or she is most comfortable with. **Remember to include accommodations for persons of limited English proficiency, those who have low literacy skills or are not literate, and individuals who are differently-abled.**

It is always important to practice **humility**. No one will ever completely understand every experience or every family. However, social services providers can work with each client individually to understand their perspective. Just remember, each family is unique. Never assume that any family is exactly like another family. Be sensitive, and give each family the time it needs to explain its own traditions, dynamics, and practices.

# Case Example

**Read the case example below and answer the following questions.**

Joy is a stay-at-home mother of 12 year old twins. She is also a new resident in a mid-sized city that her family moved to a month ago. During the day, while her family is gone, Joy has been feeling lonely. In her old town, she had plenty of friends and kept busy in her free time by volunteering at community and school events. Now she doesn't know anyone in the city and is unsure of how to meet people.

## **Questions:**

1. What are some suggestions you could give to Joy to help her learn about social activities within the community?
2. If the twins were 2 years old and at home with Joy all day, how would your suggestions change?

## **Possible Answers:**

1. Joy has a good amount of options, especially since her children are at school for part of the day. She could look into volunteering opportunities at her children's school or get involved with an organization or group related to one of her interests, such as: art class, crossfit or other fitness activity, book clubs, cooking classes, YMCA, dance classes, language classes, etc.
2. You could recommend activities where Joy could connect with other adults that also accommodate her children. For example, Joy could join a group of parents getting together regularly for fun family activities. Another option could be assisting Joy with finding reliable, safe childcare for a day or two a week, allowing her time to participate in a social activity.



# Supervised Visitation Chart

The chart below describes how supervised visitation personnel can take advantage of opportunities with parents to help them build supportive social connections. The chart also describes how the supervised visitation worker gently builds rapport with the parent, shows respect for the parent, and recognizes that the parent is the expert about the family dynamics and history. Understanding and guiding the parent helps to build supportive connections and improves the positive outcomes for the child.

<b>Opportunities for Supervised Visitation Personnel</b>	<b>What the Parent Can Do</b>	<b>Positive Effect on the Child</b>
<b>During intake, talk with the parent about who they turn to when handling a stressful situation.</b>	<b>Parents can identify people they go to during difficult times or when advice is needed.</b>	<b>The child is not unnecessarily exposed to adult stressors, and learns that it is okay to ask for help.</b>
<b>During intake, ask parents about their interests and hobbies.</b>	<b>Parents can work with personnel to locate activities and events they find interesting and make plans to attend.</b>	<b>Parents model how to develop and pursue healthy interests and relationships.</b>
<b>During follow up, encourage parents to continue developing supportive social connections.</b>	<b>Parents can share what is going well with their new social systems and also bring up concerns for problem solving.</b>	<b>Parents model effective help-seeking behaviors.</b>



# Case Example

**Read this case example and answer the following questions.**

A father is waiting to see his daughter. He is at his first supervised visit. During intake, he shares he is a recovering alcoholic and discloses that he has left his daughter at home alone in order to go drink with his friends in the past. He says he stopped drinking when his daughter was taken away, but all of his friends are alcoholics and he is trying to avoid them to minimize the temptation to drink. He is attending A.A. meetings, but he wants to make new friends who do not remind him of drinking.

## **Questions:**

1. How could the supervised visitation monitor begin to assist the father?
2. In what ways could the father's new social life benefit his daughter?

## **Possible Answers:**

1. The monitor could ask the father if there are people in his life he does not drink with and what activities they do together. If he can't think of anyone, the monitor could help him to explore his interests and brainstorm ways he can engage with others. Together, they can develop a list of people and groups that could serve as potential positive social connections for him in the future.
2. The child sees her parent taking steps to finding healthy social activities. He is modeling and fostering positive social connections while also modeling goal-setting and working to accomplish a goal. These positive skills benefit children as they learn to interact with their social environment.



# Other Resources

- **Meetup:** This website allows parents to find local and virtual groups based on an array of interests.  
<https://www.meetup.com/>
- **Nextdoor:** This website/app allows parents to find community events, places to go, and services – like recommendations for a good babysitter.  
<https://www.nextdoor.com/>

## References

Armstrong, M., I., Birnie-Lefcovitch, S., & Ungar, M., T. (2005). Pathways between social support, family well being, quality of parenting, and child resilience: What we know. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 14(2), 269-281.

Ceballo, R. & McLoyd, V., C. (2002). Social support and parenting in poor, dangerous neighborhoods. *Child Development*, 73(4), 1310-1321.

Hashima, P., Y., & Amato, P., R. (1994). Poverty, social support, and parental behavior. *Child Development*, 65(2), 394-403.

Jackson, A., P. (1998). The role of social support in parenting for low-income, single, Black mothers. *Social Service Review*, 72(3), 365-378.

Sullivan-Bolyai, S. & Lee, M., M. (2011). Parent mentor perspectives on providing social support to empower parents. *The Diabetes Educator*, 37(1), 35-43.

### **Next Step:**

Read about **Concrete Community Supports**, the fifth protective factor in the E-Book Series for Supervised Visitation Programs.