2025 Strengthening Families Training Institute

"Strong Families Need Strong Communities"
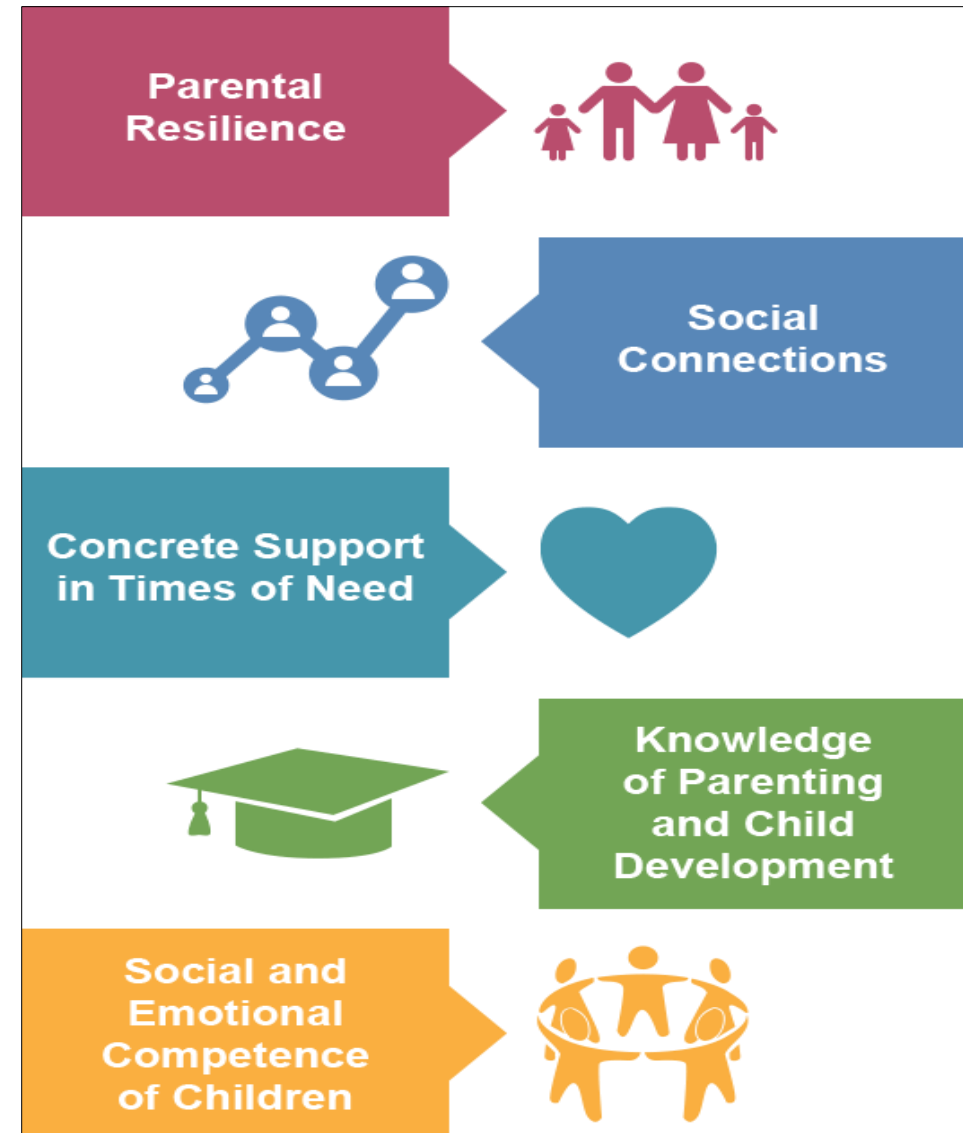
March 13, 2025

Boise, ID

"Expanding Our Understanding of Protective Factors"

Charlyn Harper Browne, PhD

The Protective Factors Framework

- Key Characteristics Often Overlooked:

  ➢ Whole family approach

  ➢ Prevention-promotion strategy

  ➢ PFs are interrelated & cumulative

Parental Resilience

Social Connections

Concrete Support in Times of Need

Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development

Social and Emotional Competence of Children

Whole Family Approach

Child-Focused

CHILD-FOCUSED WITH PARENT ELEMENTS

e.g. early childhood development, parenting skills, family literacy, and health screenings

Whole Family

PARENT-FOCUSED WITH CHILD ELEMENTS

e.g. childcare, workforce programs, food and nutrition, and supports for student parents

Adult-Focused

Common, But Limited, Definitions of Protective Factors

"A characteristic that is associated with a lower likelihood of problem outcomes or that reduces the negative impact of a risk factor on problem outcomes."

National Research Council & Institute of Medicine

"Characteristics associated with a lower likelihood of negative outcomes or that reduce a risk factor's impact."

Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration

"Characteristics that may decrease the likelihood of experiencing negative outcomes."

U.S. Centers for Disease Control & Prevention

The SF Prevention-Promotion Conception of Protective Factors

Characteristics or conditions that:

➢ decrease the likelihood of negative outcomes,

➢ buffer the impact of risk factors, &

➢ increase the likelihood of healing, health, and well-being.

Prevention: strategies to avoid or reduce the impact of adversity

Promotion: strategies to increase the likelihood of healthy outcomes

The SF Prevention-Promotion Conception of Protective Factors, continued

Prevention: strategies to avoid or reduce the impact of adversity

Promotion: strategies to increase the likelihood of healthy outcomes

➤ The prevention-promotion conception of PFs considers peoples' intrinsic value and existing assets, rather than exclusively focusing on their problems and deficiencies.

➤ Building the SF protective factors contributes to both prevention and promotion.

Additional Key Characteristics

The 5 protective factors are **interrelated.**
- Experiences that can strengthen one of the protective factors can help to build other protective factors.
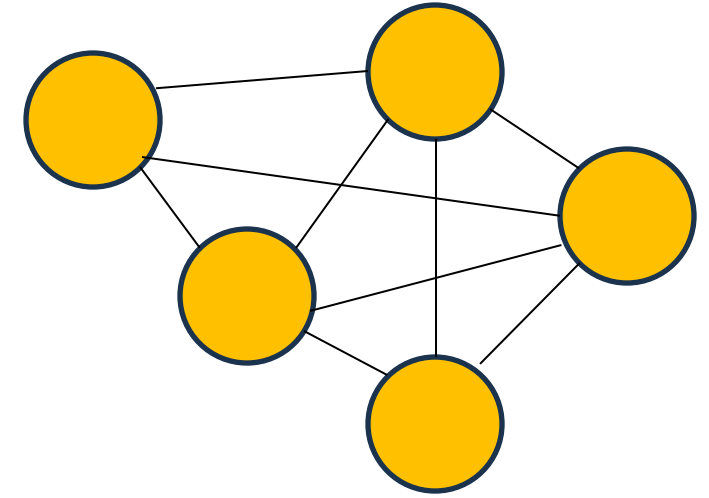
The 5 protective factors can have a **cumulative effect.**
- The presence of multiple protective factors has a substantial positive effect on outcomes.

The Changing Societal Landscape: Examples of Challenges

Major threats to health

Environmental disruptions

Increased burdens on families

Concerns about social media

Political polarization

Increased mass violence

Excerpt from the U.S. Surgeon General's 2021 Report

Vivek H. Murthy, M.D.,

"The challenges today's generation of young people [and their families] face are unprecedented and uniquely hard to navigate. And the effect these challenges have had on their mental health is devastating. . . . All of that was true even before the COVID-19 pandemic dramatically altered young peoples' experiences at home, at school, and in the community. The pandemic era's unfathomable number of deaths, pervasive sense of fear, economic instability, and forced physical distancing from loved ones, friends, and communities have exacerbated the unprecedented stresses young people already faced."

Office of the Surgeon General. (2021). *Protecting youth mental health: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory*. US Department of Health and Human Services. https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-youth-mental-health-advisory.pdf

Expanding Our Understanding

When a flower doesn't bloom you fix the environment in which it grows, not the flower.

Alexander Den Heijer

WHAT WE ARE FIXING

WHERE THE REAL PROBLEM IS

Protective Factors Beyond the Individual Level

"Promoting the health and well-being of children. . . . requires extending interventions beyond the family or individual levels. . . .

In other words, risk and protective factors have to be considered beyond the four walls of parenting to embrace the social, economic, and political forces that affect families and communities."

Barter, K. (2005). Alternative approaches to promoting the health and well-being of children: Accessing community resources to support resilience. In M. Ungar (Ed.), *Handbook for working with children and youth: Pathways to resilience across cultures and contexts* (pp. 343-355). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

Employ a Social-Ecological Approach
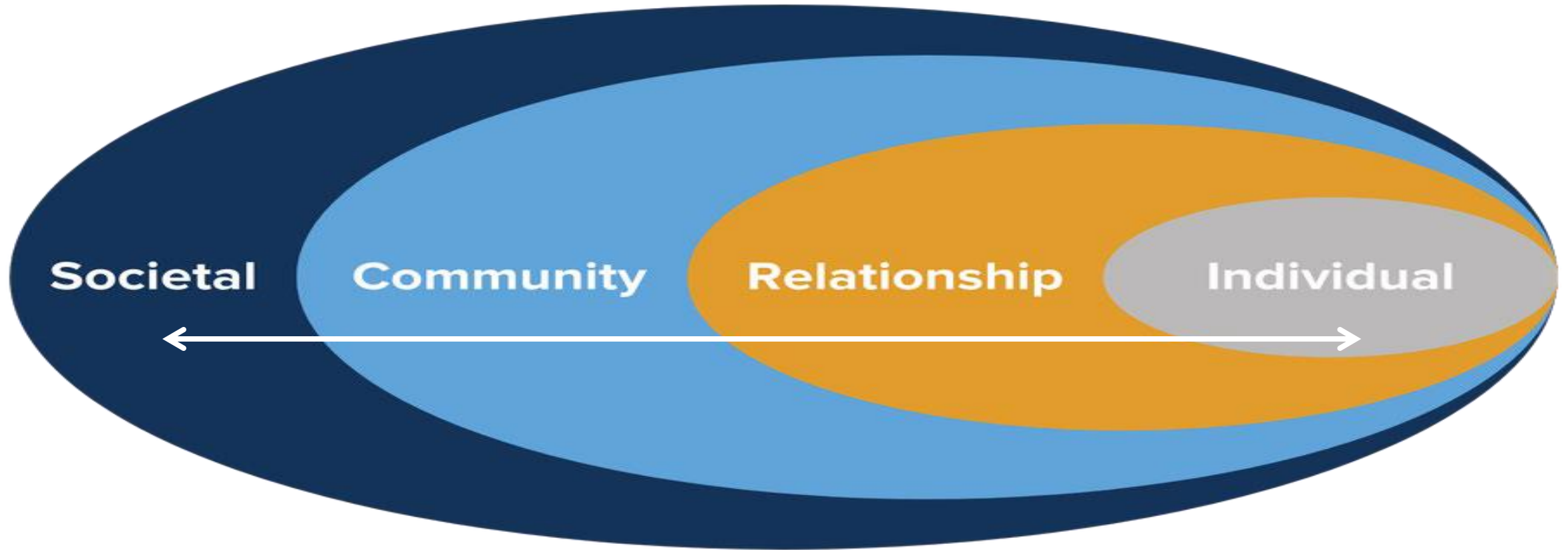
This approach enables a comprehensive examination of processes that:
- build or undermine the Strengthening Families protective factors
- contribute to the root causes of problems and adverse outcomes
- support pathways to care, healing, and well-being

The Social-Ecological Approach

Individual Level

Demographics, beliefs, skills, experiences, needs, strengths, physical health, mental health, and trauma.
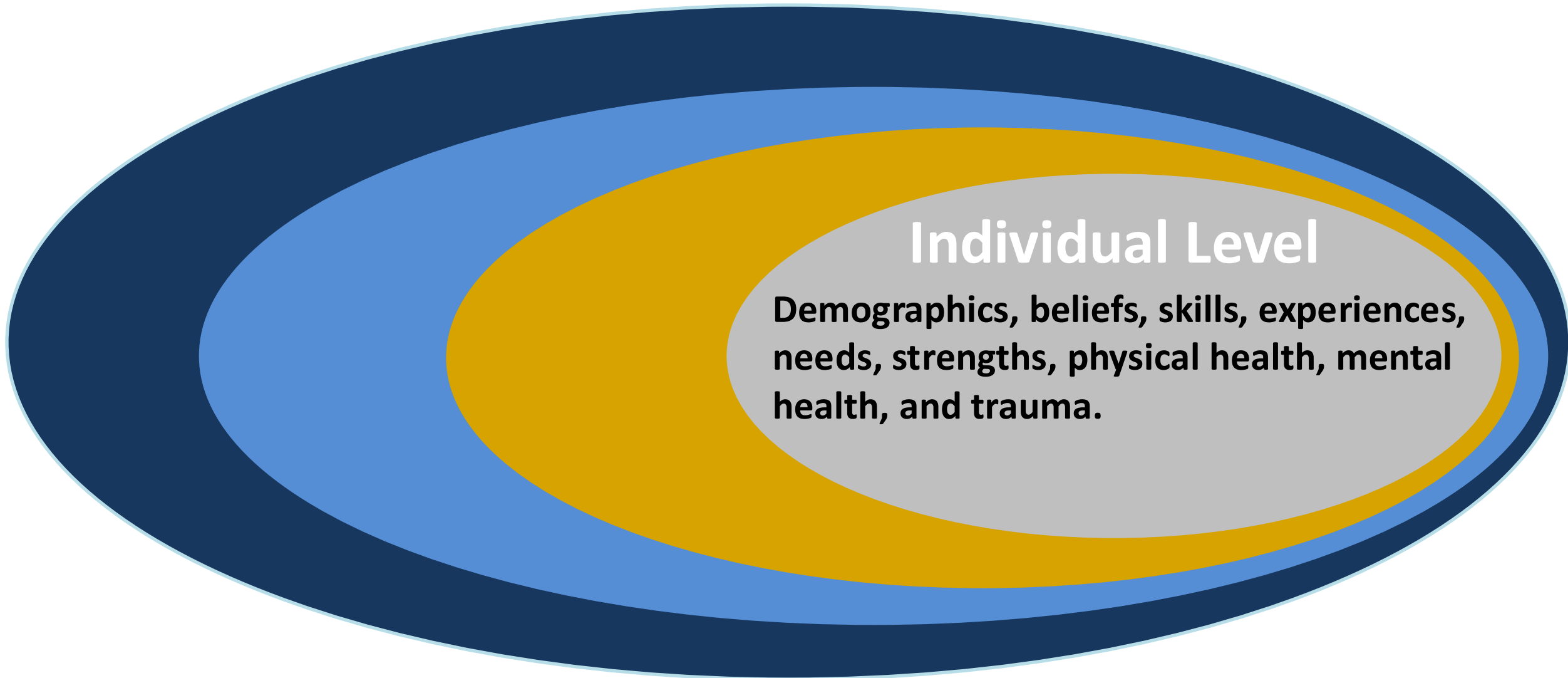
Intersectional Frame of Reference

Consider an intersectional frame to inform a more comprehensive understanding of the experiences and specific needs of children, parents, and families.

The Social-Ecological Approach

Relational Level

Social networks, including people, institutions, and organizations.
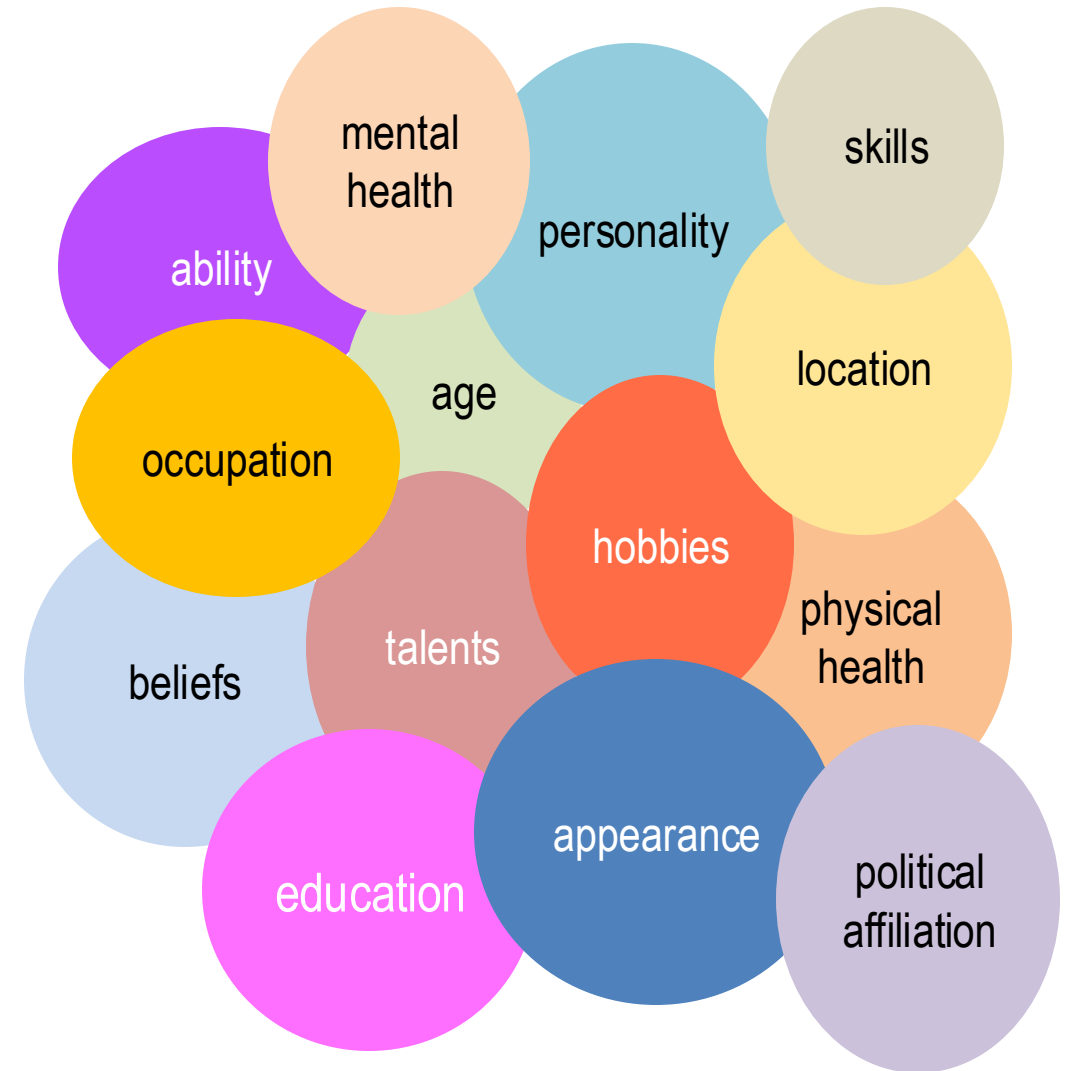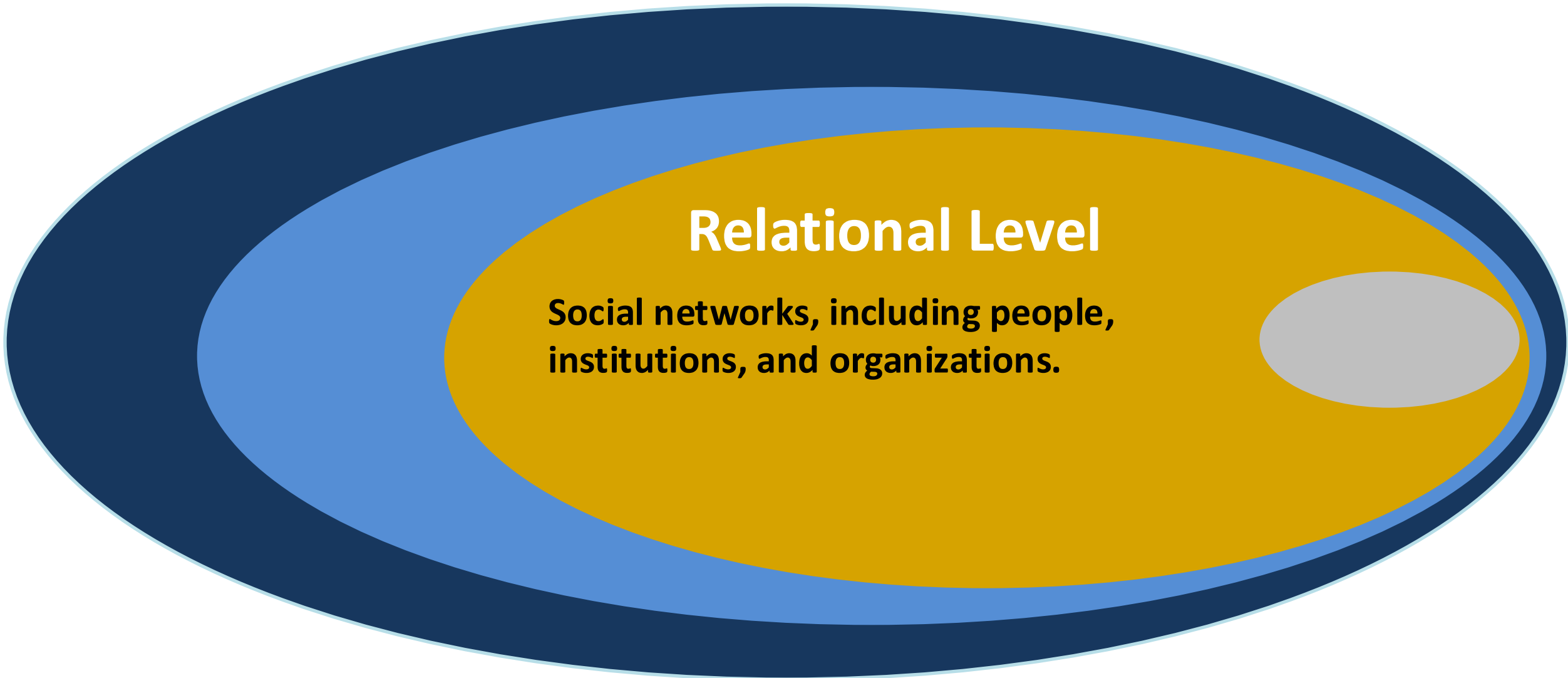
Caregiver Voice and Power

Incorporate caregivers' voice and power in influencing their family's lives, defining their goals, and helping to shape programs, practices, policies, and systems.

The Social-Ecological Approach

Societal Level

Social norms, values, beliefs, laws, policies, systems, and media and technology.

Community **Level**
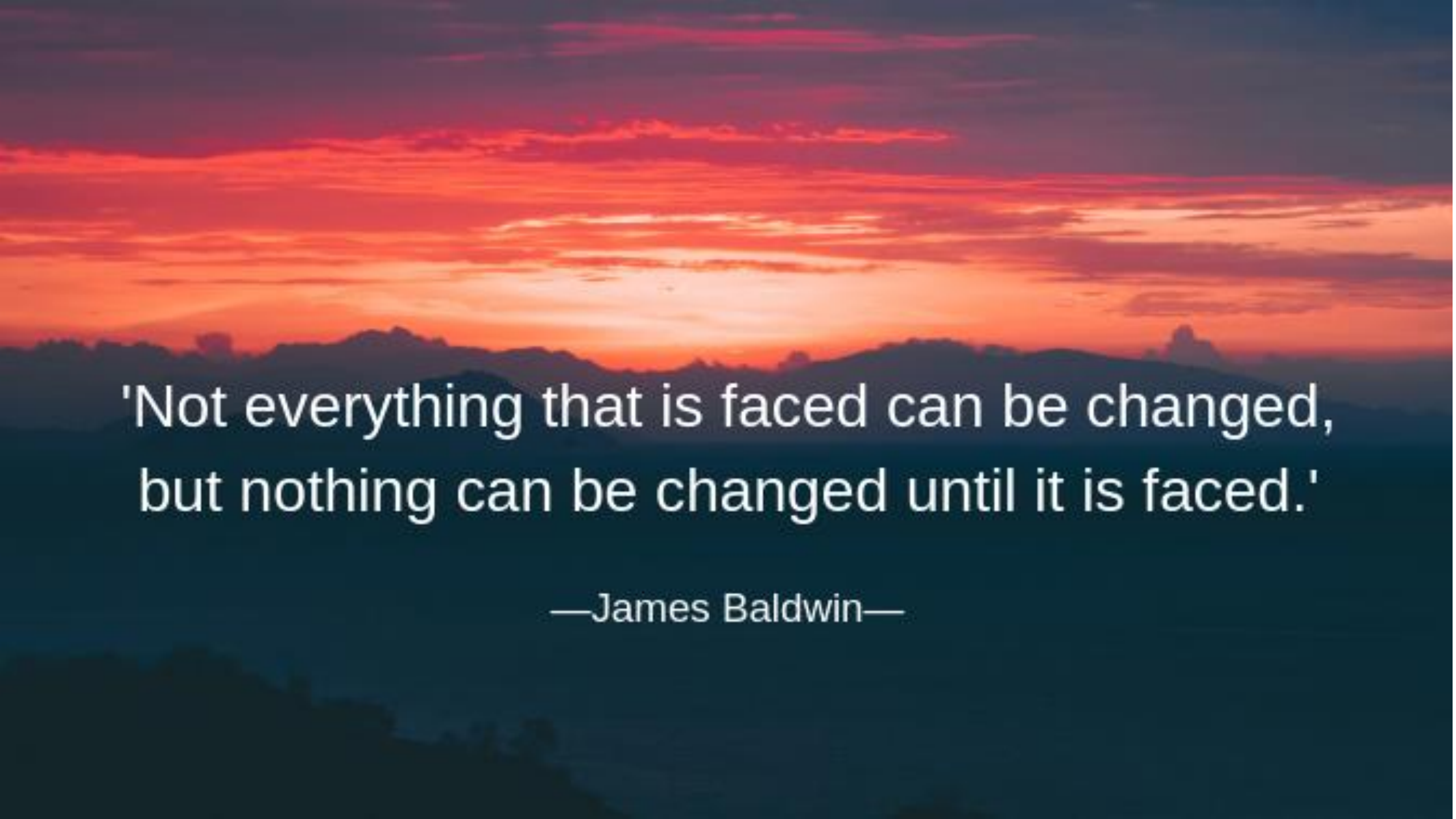
Community conditions; organizations, resources, and services; policies and practices in organizational and community contexts.

The Pair of ACEs

Adverse Childhood Experiences

Maternal Depression

Emotional & Sexual Abuse

Substance Abuse

Physical & Emotional Neglect

Divorce

Mental Illness

Incarceration

Domestic Violence

Homelessness

Adverse Community Environments

Poverty

Discrimination

Community Disruption

Lack of Opportunity, Economic Mobility & Social Capital

Poor Housing Quality & Affordability

Violence
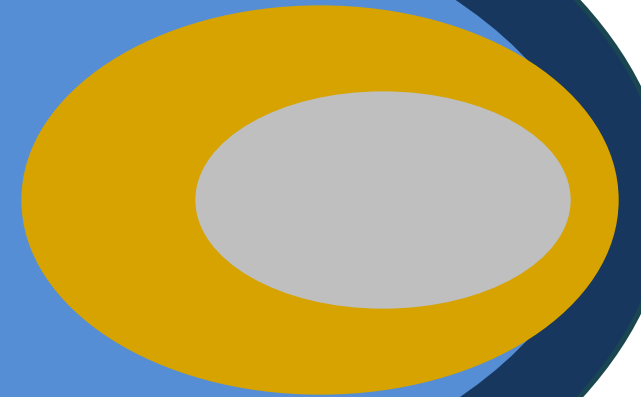
Ellis, W., Dietz, W. (2017) A New Framework for Addressing Adverse Childhood and Community Experience: The Building Community Resilience (BCR) Model. Academic Pediatrics. 17 (2017) pp. S86-S93. DOI information: 10.1016/j.acap.2016.12.011

'Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.'

—James Baldwin—

The Strengthening Families Protective Factors

Poverty

Physical & Emotional Abuse

Lack of Employment Opportunities

Community Violence

Substance Use

Weak Community Sanctions Against Violence

Homelessness

Unsafe Housing

Incarcerated Parent

Domestic Violence

Goals of Building PFs with Individuals & Families

1. Buffering the impact of risk factors

2. Decreasing the likelihood of negative outcomes

3. Increasing the likelihood of healing, health, and well-being

Individual, Relational, Community, Societal Interventions that Build the SF Protective Factors

Social Connections

Knowledge of Parenting & Child Development

Parental Resilience
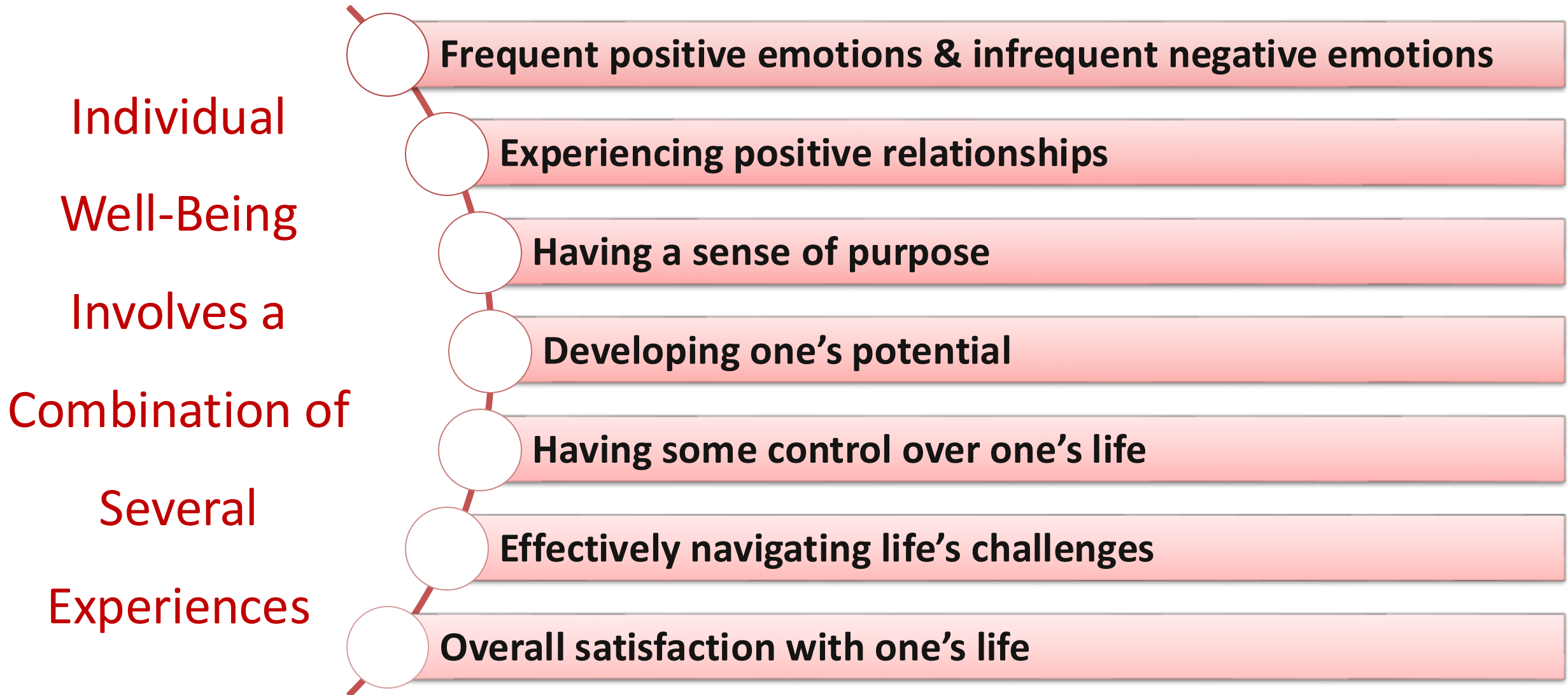
Concrete Support

Social-Emotional Competence

Goals of Building PFs in Communities & Society

1. Counteracting, reducing, or eliminating adverse community and societal conditions, environments, and experiences

Well-Being Domains

WELL-BEING DOMAINS	DEFINITION
Physical	Practicing self-care for the needs of one's body (e.g., adequate nutrition & sleep)
Emotional	Accepting and managing one's emotions; functioning well during difficult times
Relational/ Social	Building healthy relationships and having authentic interactions with others
Intellectual	Desiring to increase understanding, improve skills, and continually challenge oneself
Spiritual	Having a sense of purpose and meaning in one's life
Behavioral	Engaging in lifestyle choices that support other domains of well-being
Economic/ Financial	Having the most basic survival needs met and sustainable assets to prosper
Vocational/ Occupational	Experiencing personal satisfaction and meaning in one's work
Environmental	Valuing the relationship between oneself and the natural and built environments
Family	Members are safe, healthy, productive, and supportive in good and difficult times
Community	Presence of conditions that enable a community to flourish (e.g., political, economic)
Societal	People are able to coexist peacefully and have opportunities to thrive

Individual Well-Being Indicators

Individual Well-Being Involves a Combination of Several Experiences

- Frequent positive emotions & infrequent negative emotions
- Experiencing positive relationships
- Having a sense of purpose
- Developing one's potential
- Having some control over one's life
- Effectively navigating life's challenges
- Overall satisfaction with one's life

Family, Community, & Societal Well-Being Indicators

Family Well-Being:

1. Feeling loved as a family member
2. Communicating, interacting, and experiencing pleasure in other family members' presence
3. Having resources, goods, and services needed to support and maintain the family
4. Providing reciprocal care, support, encouragement, guidance, and hope

Community Well-Being:

1. Safe and clean environments
2. High quality, affordable access to basic needs
3. Economic improvement opportunities
4. Community engagement
5. A sense of collective responsibility
6. A sense of belonging and connectedness
7. Access to spaces that support growth and restoration

Societal Well-Being:

1. Values, laws, policies, & practices that:
   - are compatible with individuals' and communities' well-being
   - enable all to feel connected to the larger society and valued
   - promote a collective sense of purpose and goals

Definitions of the SF Protective Factors

The next slides provide the **original and expanded definitions** of the five (5) protective factors.

Please Note:

1. The original definitions are still valid.

2. The expanded definitions include additional key ideas that should be included when discussing each protective factor.

Social Connections

Protective Factor	Original Definition	Expanded Definition
Social Connections	Healthy, sustained relationships with people, institutions, the community, or a force greater than oneself that promote a sense of trust, belonging, and that one matters.	Healthy, meaningful, trusting, and sustained relationships with people, institutions, communities, or a higher power that promote a sense of connectedness, belonging, and mattering.

Social Connections

Healthy, meaningful, trusting, and sustained relationships with people, institutions, communities, or a higher power that promote a sense of connectedness, belonging, and mattering.

Additional Key Ideas

Connectedness

Feeling socially, emotionally, spiritually, or professionally attached to people or linked with a group/organization

Belonging

Feeling welcomed, accepted, and included as an integral part of a relationship, community, or larger society

Mattering

Feeling significant, important, valued, and appreciated by others for who you are, unconditionally and without judgment

Knowledge of Parenting & Child Development

Protective Factor	Original Definition	Expanded Definition
Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development	Understanding child development and parenting strategies that support physical, cognitive, language, social and emotional development.	Learning about prenatal, infant, and child development, and using developmentally and contextually appropriate parenting practices.

Knowledge of Parenting & Child Development

Learning about prenatal, infant, and child development, and using developmentally and contextually appropriate parenting practices.
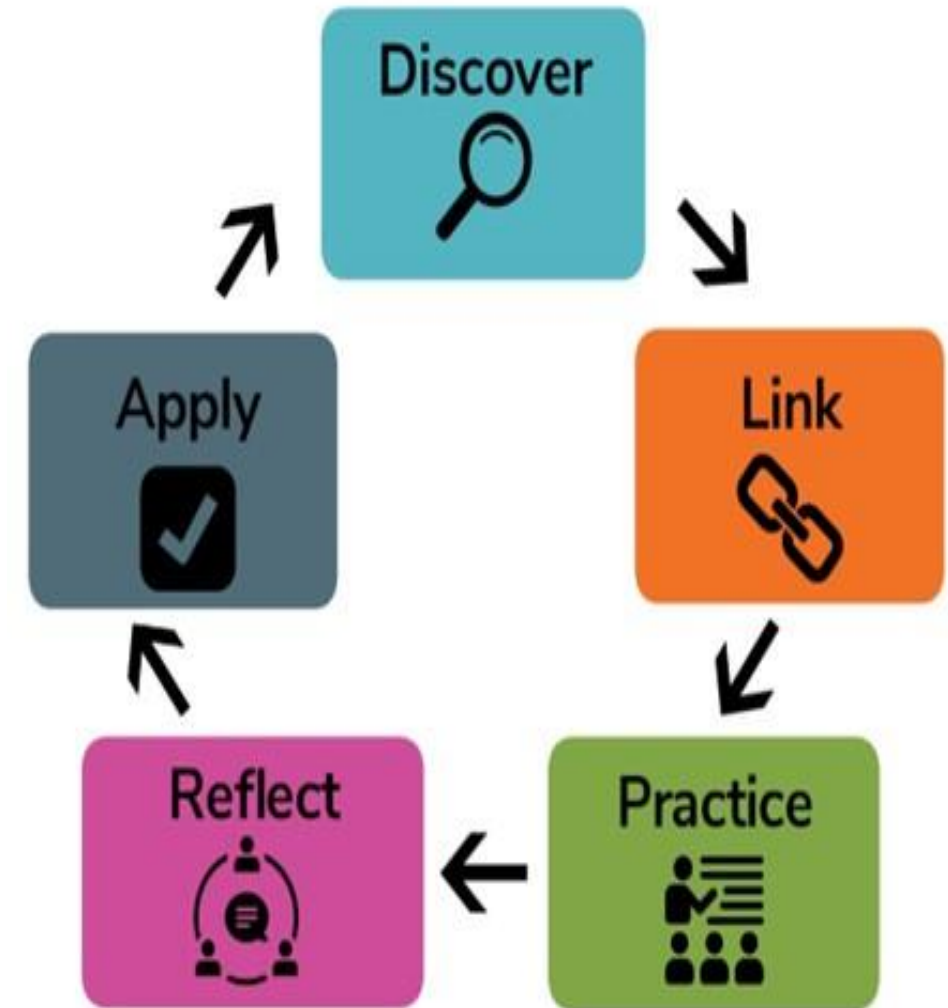
Additional Key Ideas

Attitudes & Efforts that Support **Good Enough Parenting**

1. Understanding there is no single or perfect way to parent, nor should a parent strive to be perfect or expect their child to be perfect
2. Making reflective, rational, and responsible decisions that enable children to develop their unique potential
3. Prioritizing building and sustaining a strong relationship with one's child
4. Accepting and valuing a child unconditionally, consistently communicating a message of belonging, mattering, and "being there" for them
5. Asking questions, talking with, and listening to children
6. Being patient when children make mistakes and having them acknowledge and take steps to correct their mistakes.
7. Acknowledging one's own mistakes, taking steps to correct them, and apologizing.

Social & Emotional Competence

of Children

Protective Factor	Original Definition	Expanded Definition
Social and Emotional Competence of Children	Family and child interactions that help children develop the ability to communicate clearly, recognize and regulate their emotions, and establish and maintain relationships.	Providing environments and experiences that build positive social skills; enable children to regulate thoughts, emotions, and behaviors; and promote effective communication, problem-solving, and decision-making skills.

Social & Emotional Competence of Children

Providing environments and experiences that build positive social skills; enable children to regulate thoughts, emotions, and behaviors; and promote effective communication, problem-solving, and decision-making skills.
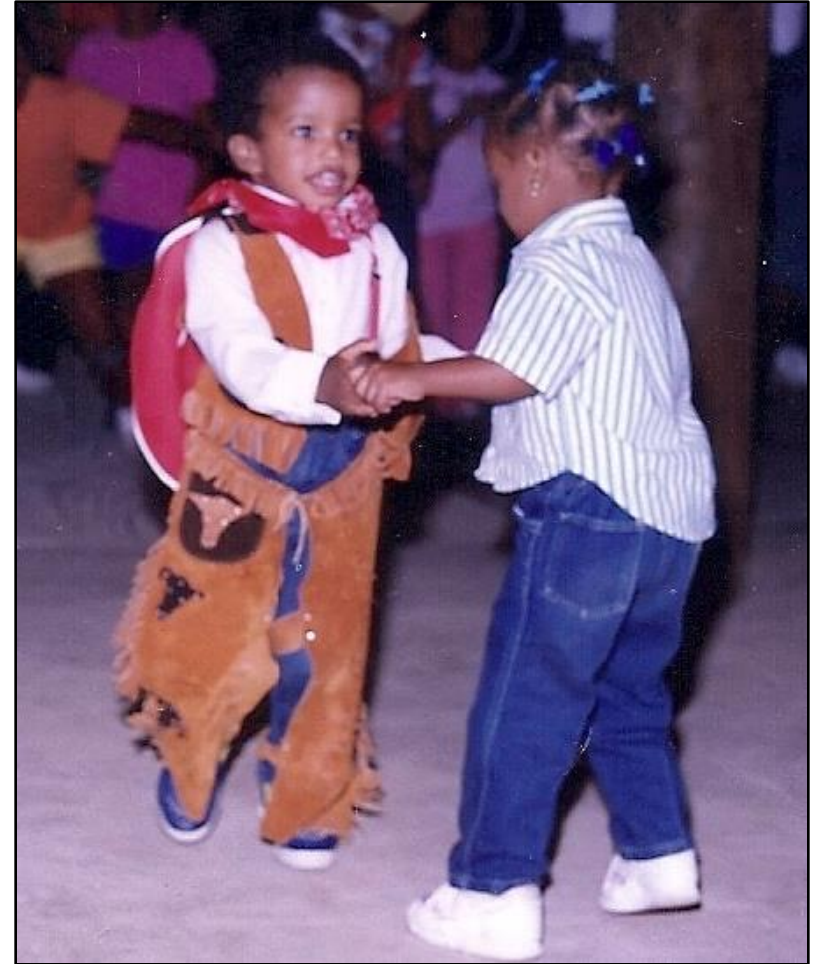
Additional Key Ideas

Importance of Positive Childhood Experiences:

- Influence the structure and function of the young brain

- Help to establish a strong foundation for learning

- Encourage engaging in productive behavior

- Support the ability to cope and thrive

- Promote child and adult mental and relational health

Concrete Support

Protective Factor	Original Definition	Expanded Definition
Concrete Support	Access to concrete support and services that address a family's needs and help minimize stress caused by challenges.	Identifying, accessing, advocating for, and receiving high quality and equitable support including the basic necessities everyone deserves and specialized services to address specific needs.

Concrete Support

Identifying, accessing, advocating for, and receiving high quality and equitable support including the basic necessities everyone deserves and specialized services to address specific needs.

Additional Key Ideas

Barriers to Community Concrete Support

- Lack of local resources altogether
- Uneven distribution of services, resources, and a high-quality workforce
- Services or resources that are not accessible
- Services that are poorly coordinated or integrated

Capacity Building

- Helping communities develop resources
- Strengthening community control
- Implementing coordinated and integrated programs
- Parents:
  - Understand their rights
  - Know how to access services
  - Receive timely assistance
  - Advocate for self and children
  - Learn to navigate through systems
  - Are treated with dignity

Parental Resilience

Protective Factor	Original Definition	Expanded Definition
Parental Resilience	Managing stress and functioning well when faced with challenges, adversity and trauma.	Managing stress and functioning well—facilitated by individual, relational, community, and societal factors—when faced with stressors, adversity, and trauma.

The Need to Redefine "Resilience"

Common Definition: *"Positive adaptation despite adversity."*

- *Positive adaptation* = Adjustments that individuals make to cope with stress and adversity.

- May suggest adaptation / adjusting *to* the adversity.

- Suggests that resilience is *exclusively* the responsibility of the individual.

I no longer see resilience as solely an individual matter.

Parental Resilience

Managing stressors and functioning well—facilitated by individual, relational, community, and societal factors—when faced with stressors, adversity, and trauma.

Parental Resilience

Reduced or eliminated root causes of adverse conditions	Decreased impact of adverse conditions	Access to opportunities and resources that promote well-being	More positive experiences
A sense of connectedness, belonging, and mattering	Ongoing efforts to heal from the effects of trauma	The absence of or reduced maladaptive emotions or behaviors	Seeking a balanced lifestyle
Increased ability to provide nurturing attention to child	Development of resilience in children	Personal growth	Resistance to traumatic experiences

Posttraumatic Growth

Posttraumatic Growth =
Positive change that *may occur* as a result of self-reflection and efforts to cope with challenges, adversity, or trauma.

- Personal strength
- Increased appreciation for life
- Meaningful relationships
- Outcomes of Posttraumatic Growth
- Improved problem-solving skills
- Strengthened spirituality
- New possibilities

Resistance and Resilience

1. Resistance = "pushing back" against traumatic or oppressive experiences.
2. Resistance = a form of resilience that *challenges* adversity, rather than *adapting* to it, such as:
   - standing up for oneself or one's children
   - calling a help line
   - taking action to leave an abusive relationship
3. Resistance can also mean pushing back against challenging internal forces by engaging in self-care. *"Caring for oneself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of resistance." Audre Lorde*
4. The outcome of *"self-care is giving the world the best of you instead of what is left of you." Katie Reed*

Conclusion

- Most of the resilience research and practice has focused on the individual and relational levels of the social ecology. Addressing community and societal factors has been minimized or ignored altogether.

- More researchers, practitioners, and parents are saying that attention must be paid to the structural deficiencies in our society, community conditions, and to the policies that families need to become stronger, function better in adverse situations, and change the adverse conditions for the better.

  "We can't just keep expecting parents to be resilient, to overcome obstacle after obstacle. At some point we must not have so many obstacles." Cailin O'Connor

Suggested Resources

1. Harper Browne, C. (2024, February). *Expanding the Perspectives and Research Foundation for the Strengthening Families & Youth Thrive Frameworks.* Center for the Study of Social Policy. https://cssp.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Expanding-Perspectives-and-Research-Foundation-for-the-Strengthening-Families-and-Youth-Thrive-Frameworks.pdf

2. Harper Browne, C. (2014, September). *The Strengthening Families Approach and Protective Factors Framework: Branching Out and Reaching Deeper.* Center for the Study of Social Policy. https://cssp.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Branching-Out-and-Reaching-Deeper.pdf

3. Harper Browne, C. (2014, September). *Youth Thrive: Advancing Healthy Adolescent Development and Well-Being.* Center for the Study of Social Policy. https://cssp.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Youth-Thrive_Advancing-Healthy-Adolescent-Development-and-Well-Being.pdf

4. Ellis, W. R. & Dietz, W. H. (2017, September-October). A New Framework for Addressing Adverse Childhood and Community Experiences: The Building Community Resilience Model. *Academic Pediatrics,* 17(7), Supplement, S86-S93. https://www.academicpedsjnl.net/action/showPdf?pii=S1876-2859%2816%2930552-6

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