

RECOGNIZING PARENTS' NEEDS AND STRESS POINTS

Parental stress impacts individual family members and family relationships. Stress is defined as pressure or tension that is the result of the interaction between 3 factors:

- (1) The nature of the stressor,
- (2) Potential available resources, and
- (3) The meaning that the family assigns the stressor

Though everyone experiences a certain amount of stress, some families may experience multiple or a series of stressors that can lead to feeling overwhelmed and hopeless. When this happens, the stress experienced by a parent can spill over and impact child rearing. This contributes to parents being less responsive and available for their children, which may lead to a variety of negative children's outcomes.

Additionally, many parents, like their children, experienced adversity or Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) in their own childhood. Research has explored how parental history of ACEs can also impact the health and wellbeing of their own children. Results indicate that parental history of ACEs can weaken overall levels of protective factors, specifically resilience and social connections. Childhood exposure to abuse, neglect, and other forms of household dysfunction can have psychobiological effects that are toxic to the developing brain. As these effects accumulate with age, they may undermine parenting and attachment, making it more difficult for parents to handle normal behaviors of young children.

Efforts to elevate family wellbeing must address the impacts of stress, trauma, frustration, and isolation. The National Center for Children in Poverty recommends providing professional development and training for EC professionals on trauma-informed strategies and building partnerships and connections with community service professionals to support children and families. For families with a trauma history, it is often difficult to trust or ask for help. By responding to parents with empathy, professionals can foster trusting relationships with families. Once these relationships are built, families become more hopeful and are more likely to engage in services and ask for help.

What are ACEs or Adverse Childhood Experiences?

The ACE Survey, developed by CDC Kaiser Permanente, (www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/aces/about.html) identified 10 experiences likely to cause stress during childhood. In recent years, additional experiences such as homelessness, food insecurity, and racial discrimination have been added to the list of ACEs.

Ten Initial ACEs

- Physical neglect
- Emotional neglect
- Physical abuse
- Sexual abuse
- Emotional abuse
- Domestic violence
- Incarceration of caregiver
- Parental separation or divorce
- Mental illness in household
- Substance abuse in household

Family Wellness Survey

The Family Wellness Survey developed by The Consortium for Resilient Young Children and Joining Forces for Children (an initiative led by Cincinnati Children's Hospital) offers a means for determining a family's level of resilience and capacity to deal with stress or overcome challenges. This survey is used to help professionals build a deeper understanding and work alongside families to prevent or mitigate the long-term impact of ACEs. Consisting of 4 components, this tool captures the current family stress, their level of resilience, and their access to support. It also collects a retrospective ACE screen from parents.

Through this survey, professionals learn more about the family's history of ACEs and current stress points that may impact their overall health and wellness. Results are used to determine a family's level of potential risk. Families showing in the moderate or high range are referred for a motivational interview so support can be offered and families can be connected to resources such as mental health services, food and housing assistance, or parenting programs.

The Family Wellness Survey (FWS) has been shown to be beneficial across a diverse group of community-based and family-serving organizations. Professionals implementing the tool have reported that the FWS helped them gain a better perspective of families, improved their level of empathy, and fostered stronger relationships.

To learn more about the Family Wellness Survey, go to: www.Resilientchildren.org

Goals for using the Family Wellness Survey:

- To better understand the levels of stress and connections or resources in place that help families overcome challenges.
- To increase the comfort of professionals talking with families about their needs and challenges.
- To engage families in identifying potential solutions, supports, and resources.
- To measure program impact in elevating family resilience and wellness.

Reflection Activity

How would understanding the stress and resiliency level of families benefit your program?

Motivational Interviewing

Motivational interviewing is a collaborative, person-centered form of guiding to elicit and strengthen motivation for change. This trauma-informed practice promotes the use of skills (Elicit, Affirm, Reflect, Summarize) that demonstrate empathy and reflect feeling and meaning.

RCFP encourages the use of Motivational Interviewing as a means of enhancing connection and promoting resilience. Through this connection, families are guided towards needed resources or opportunities for change. Following the administration of the Family Wellness Survey, professionals score the tool and begin to plan for follow-up conversations with families. Skills like perspective taking and curiosity over judgment are encouraged to demonstrate empathy within this critical connection. The use of Motivational Interviewing has been successful in elevating protective factors and family resiliency.