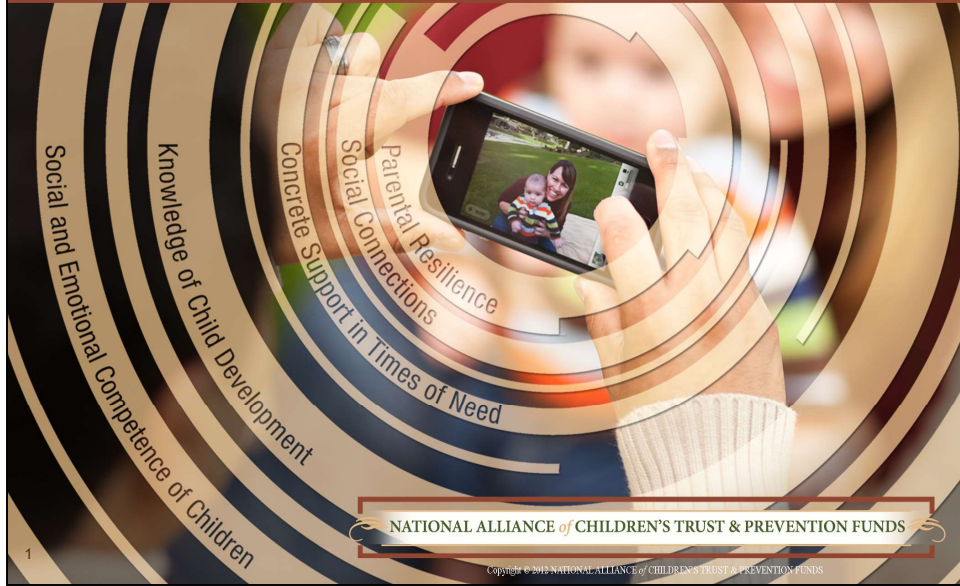


Looking at Families Through a Different Lens  
Bringing the Protective Factors Framework to Life In Your Work



# Social Connections

Bringing the Protective Factors Framework to Life in Your Work – A Resource for Action



## Introduction

My name is Victoria Hilt. I am a certified trainer with the Children's Trust Fund Alliance regarding the Strengthening Families Bringing the Protective Factors to Life in your Work. I am also the Co-Chair for the Alliance National Parent Partnership Council.



### How to Remember the 5 Protective Factors on one hand...

The "five finger posters" was inspired by a parent leadership council with direct input in language. It was created by the Early Childhood Collaborative in Michigan as part of its, "What Makes Your Family Strong?" messaging campaign. It is available for downloading at [www.whatmakesyourfamilystrong.org](http://www.whatmakesyourfamilystrong.org). Since the creation of this poster, the parent leadership council has expanded its messaging campaign to include the website, a community strengthening families guide and additional promotional materials.

The thumb can help you remember Social and Emotional Competence of Children because a "thumbs up" is one of the first ways we learn to communicate our emotions.

Your index finger represents Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development because you are your child's 1<sup>st</sup> teacher!

Your middle finger can help you remember Social Connections because it should never stand alone! We all need a positive social network.

Your ring finger stands for Parental Resilience because your first commitment must be to yourself in order to be strong for others.

Your pinky finger signifies Concrete Support in Times of Need because it is the smallest finger and reminds us that we all need help sometimes.



### **Introduction of Protective Factor:**

Many parents today who have very busy lives are doing their best to raise their kids, but may not prioritize their social life. Often it takes someone else reaching out, to recognize that we might be lacking our own social connection. These social connections can enrich the parent's life as well as their children's lives, and provide support when needed.

This protective factor focuses on social connections. Social Connections help families stay strong, get through the hard times, and enjoy family life.

## Essential Elements / Common Threads

- What are Social Connections?
- The Antidote to Social Isolation
- The Important Role of Communication
- How Social Connections Fits into the Framework (logic model)
- **Everyday Actions that Build Positive Social Connections**
  - Help families value, build, sustain and use social connections
  - Create an inclusive environment
  - Facilitate mutual support around parenting and other issues
  - Promote engagement in the community and participation in community activities

### **Essential Elements/Common Threads:**

What are Social Connections?

The Antidote to Social Isolation

The Important Role of Communication

The Importance of Positive Relationships

Social Connections in the Strengthening Families Protective Factor Framework

Understanding and communicating the importance of how to use the framework everyday

Consider Everyday actions we can take for ourselves and others that build positive Social Connections:

Help families value, build, sustain, and use social connections

Create an inclusive environment

Importance of culture and understanding how this impacts families as they seek to build protective factors that are best for their family, and how our own culture could shape how we individually feel, act, and think.

Facilitate mutual support around parenting and other issues



## Goals

- Understand the value of helping parents and families connect to others in a variety of ways that reduce their isolation and increase their social supports.
- Discuss at least three ways that you can encourage parents to make these connections.
- Create some concrete plans to assist parents in developing new friendships and finding new sources of support – in the workplace or the community.

### **Our goals:**

Understand the value of helping parents and families connect to others in a variety of ways that reduce their isolation and increase their social supports.

Discuss at least three ways that you can encourage parents to make these connections.

Create some concrete plans to assist parents in developing new friendship[s and finding new sources of support – in the workplace or the community.

## What Does It Mean to Have Social Connections?



As one parent put it:

*“Not being alone – realizing  
that other people are there  
and sometimes have the  
same problems.”*

**What does it mean to have social connections?  
“Not being alone- realizing that other people are there and  
sometimes have the same problems.”**

## Social Connections

*“Parents with a social network of emotionally supportive friends, family, and neighbors often find that it is easier to care for their children and themselves. Most parents need people they can call on once in a while when they need a sympathetic listener, advice, or concrete support. Research has shown that parents who are isolated, with few social connections, are at higher risk for child abuse and neglect.”*

~ Child Welfare Information Gateway

### **Social Connections & Child Maltreatment**

Why do we consider social connections to be a protective factor? We can find an answer to that question on the website of the Child Welfare Information Gateway – “Parents with a social network of emotional supportive friends, family, and neighbors often find that it is easier to care for their children and themselves. Most parents need people they can call on once in a while when they need a sympathetic listener, advice, or concrete support. Research has shown that parents who are isolated, with few social connections, are at a higher risk for child abuse and neglect.”



## What do positive social connections look like?

- Family or Friends who provide free childcare when parents need a break.
- Parents with children around the same age who get together to enjoy activities together.
- A friend to take the “night off” with to laugh and relax.
- Parenting friends with whom you can share the ups and downs of parenting.
- Someone who can pick up your child from school or an activity when you have an emergency.
- Neighbors who pass along hand-me-downs clothes and baby gear
- Someone to take a walk with to stay healthy.
- “Virtual friends” through Facebook, Instagram, Blogs or other social media where you can share stories, parenting tips, and photos.

### What are positive social connections?

Families can have many different types of social connections that provide different types of support. No matter the type of connection—it should be positive—something that is there for you, treats you well, and helps you be the best person you can be! Positive social connections can provide support when you need it, help you deal with stress and illness, are a positive influence and bring out the best in you.

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<https://ctfalliance.org/partnering-with-parents/parent-voice/>

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April is a special month where we recognize and elevate the reality of preventing child abuse across the nation. The ANPPC has developed several tools to promote the Strengthening Families Protective Factors and help parents navigate the Coronavirus crisis. Each week the ANPPC Campaign will focus on a different protective factor beginning with Concrete Supports in Times of Need. There are memes and resources available at <https://ctfalliance.org/partnering-with-parents/parent-voice/>. We all CAN be a part of this prevention effort, so I would encourage you to visit the site and share these resources with your social networks.

Additionally, we have created a new tool to help facilitate virtual conversations about how the Protective Factors to help navigate the COVID-19 Crisis. There is a facilitator guide and participant worksheets. Another parent group, The Alliance's Birth Parent National Network (BPNN) has provided a COVID-19 Resource List. Please take a moment and check out those links.

<https://ctfalliance.org/partnering-with-parents/parent-voice/>

## Conversations for a better normal...

- The COVID-19 Crisis is not something any of us planned on. It has brought up many unexpected challenges. What is the most critical support you need right now as a parent?
  - What have you learned about yourself, that might help inform the way you support other parents?
- During this time of social distancing, what are some ways you are finding to sustain your relationships with friends and family?
  - In what ways have you become a support system to others during times of distancing?
- How is your community rising to the occasion in the COVID-19 crisis in a positive manner?
  - What has your community, family and friends done to ensure you are connected to virtual conversations and spaces to learn from others?
  - How is this working for those who cannot connect virtually?

Today, I'd like to ask you a few questions from the tool that was created. Feel free to answer them now, or in the chat box. Some of these questions may be more personal, and so I offer them to you as questions to consider and ask yourself during this time and while we are dealing with the COVID-19 Pandemic.

The COVID-19 Crisis is not something any of us planned on. It has brought up many unexpected challenges. What is the most critical support you need right now as a parent?

What have you learned about yourself, that might help inform the way you support other parents?

**During this time of social distancing, what are some ways you are finding to sustain your relationships with friends and family? (At the same time demonstrating your awareness of the risks involved with those at risk?)**

**In what ways have you become a support system to others during times of distancing?**

How is your community rising to the occasion in the COVID-19 crisis in a positive manner?

What has your community, family and friends done to ensure you are connected to virtual conversations and spaces to learn from others?

How is this working for those who cannot connect virtually?

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## What Do You Miss about "Human Connections"?







Has your perspective around virtual/digital relationships changed since COVID?

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### **The Antidote to Social Isolation**

Let's look at this idea of social connections slightly different, change our lens or our focus --

From a health perspective, social connections are the antidote to social isolation. Social isolation is usually defined as a lack of social networks or a limited amount of communication with others. In some cases, it also means an absence of close ties with others. In some cases, it also means an absence of close ties with others over a long period of time. When parents feel isolated -- whether that is due to living in a dangerous neighborhood, being far away from family, moving to a new place, or having lives that feel too busy for socializing—they can feel closed in and without support. When parents feel disconnected from other family or close friends, their level of parental stress can become overwhelming, undermining their ability to parent effectively, and may potentially lead to abuse and neglect.

Social connections lessen that isolation factor and --subsequently-- lessen the likelihood of child maltreatment.

We often find when we reach out to others is how many things we have in common. This is an exercise that is fun but also teaches us that people we did not think might understand us or identify with us, actually can. Often, we have more similarities than differences.

## Social Connections

### Brook's Choice

- What strengths do you see this mother display, despite her challenges?
- Brook describes her concerns about making this new friendship. What finally makes her bypass her fears and take a chance on this new friend?
- Where did Brook's new friendship lead? How has it lessened the stress she was feeling before she talked with her neighbor?

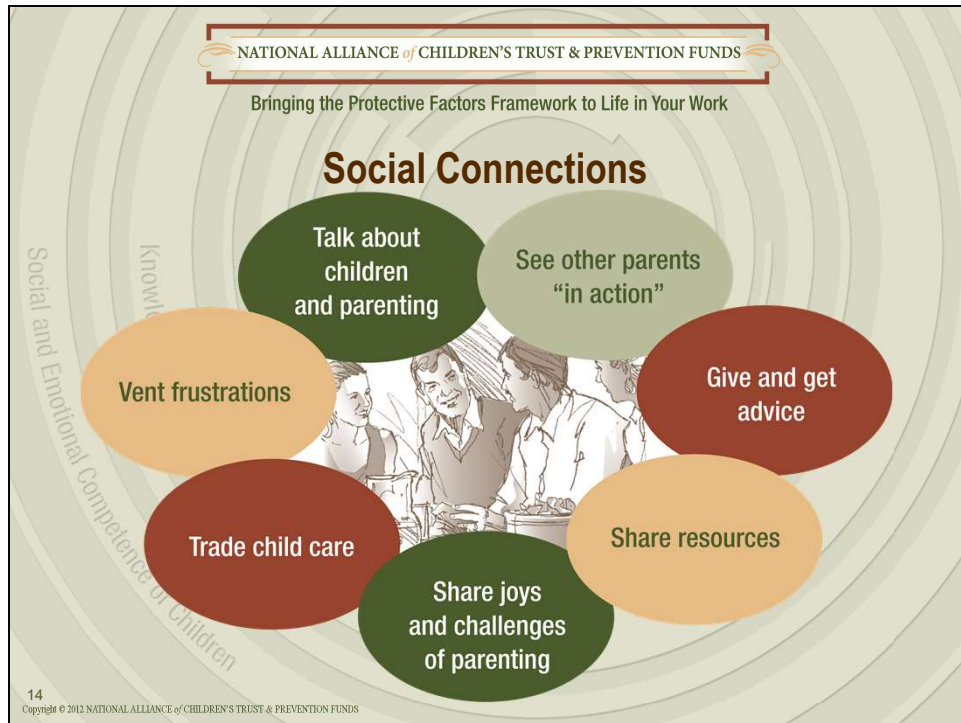
"I'm a mom of three kiddos—ages 5, 3, and 1—and I also watch two other kiddos at my house that are age 4 and another that's the same age as my 1-year-old (they're almost 20 months now), and I adore naptime. My [older] had grown out of naps and she decided that she and I should be playing games together and doing different things – and through that process I realized that I needed that time for myself and looked into different preschool programs that would give her the social connections that I wanted for her. So I signed her up for a preschool class from 12:45 until 3:30, which I thought was perfect. That would allow me time by myself, and would also allow my kids to sleep. And every single day I watched this black truck go by my road right at the exact same time that I was loading up five children before nap to take them to preschool. And I realized that this was my neighbor who lived down the street from me who had three children herself, who has walked by my house many, many, times. And I hadn't wanted to make the connection with her, because I wasn't sure – if I did make the connection—would her kids come over? Would they be nice? Would they come over uninvited? Would they come over every day? Would this become a problem in my home and I just soft of waved every single time she went by. But over and over every day as I was loading up five kids in the car to take them to preschool at 12:45, and often having to wake up an infant or toddler to go and pick up my daughter at 3:30, I

felt that I was out of my integrity and somewhat losing my mind—with the responsibility of loading five children twice a day. So, finally she drove by. I was outside with the children and I waved at her. And she stopped and she pulled in the driveway, and through that conversation I said, “Oh, I see you drive by every single day.” And she said, “Oh yeah, I’m dropping off my kids at New Horizons Preschool.” And I thought, “oooh.” Instantly I just want to, to like, hold her and cry. And we ended up working out a deal – that I watch her kiddo, because she doesn’t get a break either, one day a week. And she drives my daughter back and forth to preschool, the children get to nap. I get the two hour rest and break that I’m looking for—and the relationship has continued to the point where her and I are both going to be sharing the transportation for kindergarten next year, I decided to put my son in the same preschool class as her son, and not only that, but we have decided that her and I would go out and let our husbands watch—and build this relationship even deeper. So I just really appreciated trusting and dropping some of that fear. And it just turned out to be a win-win situation. ”

Sometimes, we do things that are outside of our comfort zone and despite the uneasiness, they end up being very beneficial. In this case, Brook found a new close friend as well as a potential car-pooling mom.

When there are more people around a family, the harder it is to fall.

<Introduce Social mapping>



### The Ability to Communicate

Think for a minute about a professional whose salary depends on their ability to communicate: a newspaper journalist. The journalist works under constant pressure to meet deadlines. Newspaper readers will often determine which stories they read or pay attention to based on the headline of the story. A journalist might feel that writing a good headline is a burden—that the story they have worked so hard on is the important thing. If you think like a reader, however, you will realize that most people scan headlines and photographs, making decisions about what they want to commit more time to as they read the stories that are of interest to them.

Our ability to communicate in everyday life has some parallels to the task of a journalist. We communicate with others in the midst of our busy and harried lives. We can be guilty of communicating with others in "headlines" that can be easily misunderstood. When this happens, we may lose any further opportunity to communicate with the families we serve.

Consider these guidelines given to beginning journalists as they learn to write headlines. Could it be that these might be useful to increase our own ability to communicate?

A Good Headline:

Must be accurate, both in fact and in what it implies.

Must be easily understood.

Must attract attention, using active words.

Must set the tone for what you want to communicate.

How we speak, and what we say, matters. Sometimes, things we say – though unintended—can be misunderstood. Culture plays a role in communication.

### **The Opportunity to Communicate**

In addition to our ability to communicate, our opportunity to communicate is also closely connected to creating those strong social connections that have changed markedly in the past 20 years. If one were to go out in a crowd and ask people what social connections mean to them, more than likely the words “Facebook” and “Twitter” or “Instagram” would be the common response. In many instances, friends are made and relationships maintained in 140 character messages on Twitter. The once-common coffee clatches have been replaced by hours spent “connecting” with friends on Facebook. Where we used to share photos from a wallet or photo album, we now send them online. This change in communication has incredible benefits for parents, for children, for professionals and for the general public; however, it has also resulted in our human interactions being significantly reduced. Although it is debatable whether this dramatic communication change is a good or bad thing, the end result is that families – especially parents – are not communicating in person as much as they used to.



## Who Would You Call?

In case of an emergency, who would call?

If this first person was unavailable, who would you call instead?

And if the first two people were unavailable, who would call as your third option?

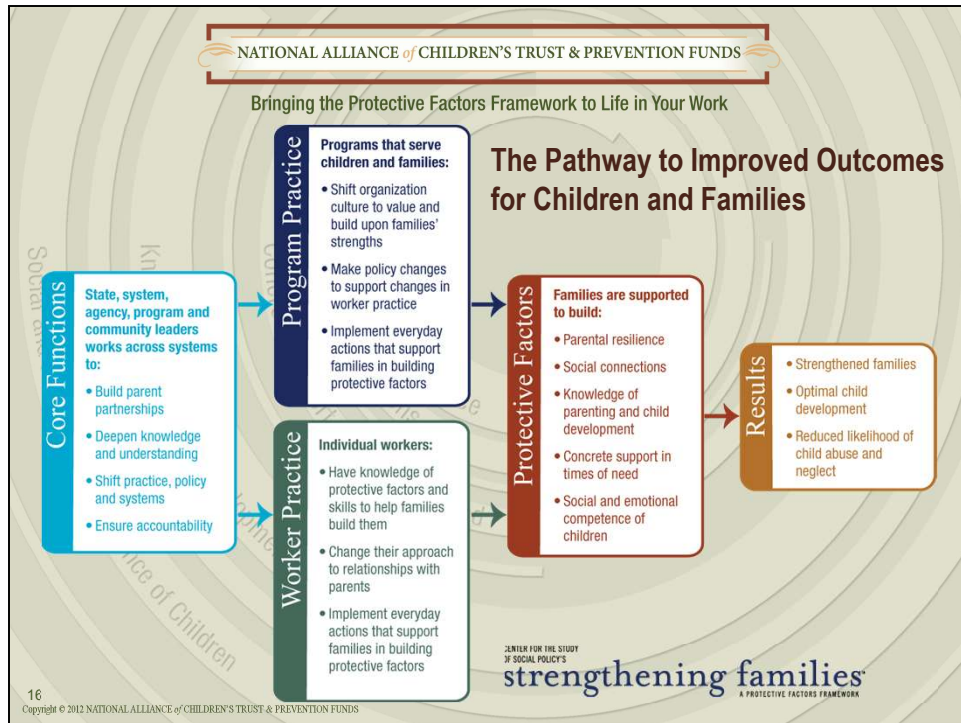
And if all three of these individuals were unavailable, who would be the fourth person you reach out to?

- Recognize situation and context may result in you reaching out to different people.
- Consider how these people are connected to you.
- How important is it to have these people?
- What happens when families do have a system in place, vs. when they do not?



### Who Would you call?

- Who would you call in case of an emergency. Who would you call if they were unavailable?
- And if the first two people you listed were unavailable, who would you call then? And if all three of those people were unavailable, who would you call then?
- How are these people connected to you?
- How important is it to have a stable support system?
- What happens when families do have a support system in place?



Think about how this protective factor—social connections—fits into the framework. There are specific strategies and everyday actions we can take to help build the social connections protective factor.

To help build social connections in the families we serve we need to ensure we are incorporating the following strategy in our everyday life: Facilitate Friendships and Mutual Support: Help parents connect with each other and develop social networks.

The Center for the Study of Social Policy has identified the following “everyday actions” that help support the social connections protective factor:

Help families value, build, sustain, and use social connections

Create an inclusive environment

Facilitate mutual support around parenting and other issues

Promote engagement in the community and participation in community activities

Webster’s dictionary defines a strategy as “a careful plan or method for achieving a particular goal—usually over a long period of time.” The strategy associated with social connections lays out a pathway that will lead families to build stronger social connections. The everyday actions give more details about this might look like. As you consider each of the everyday actions for social connections, consider ways you may already be putting these everyday actions into place. Small but significant steps

can create a powerful action.

Lets use a different lens for a moment and consider that if we needed a recipe for how to recreate the perfect "Social Connection" cupcake, we would make sure we included and measure the 4 everyday actions as the ingredients.

Energy happens when people connect!

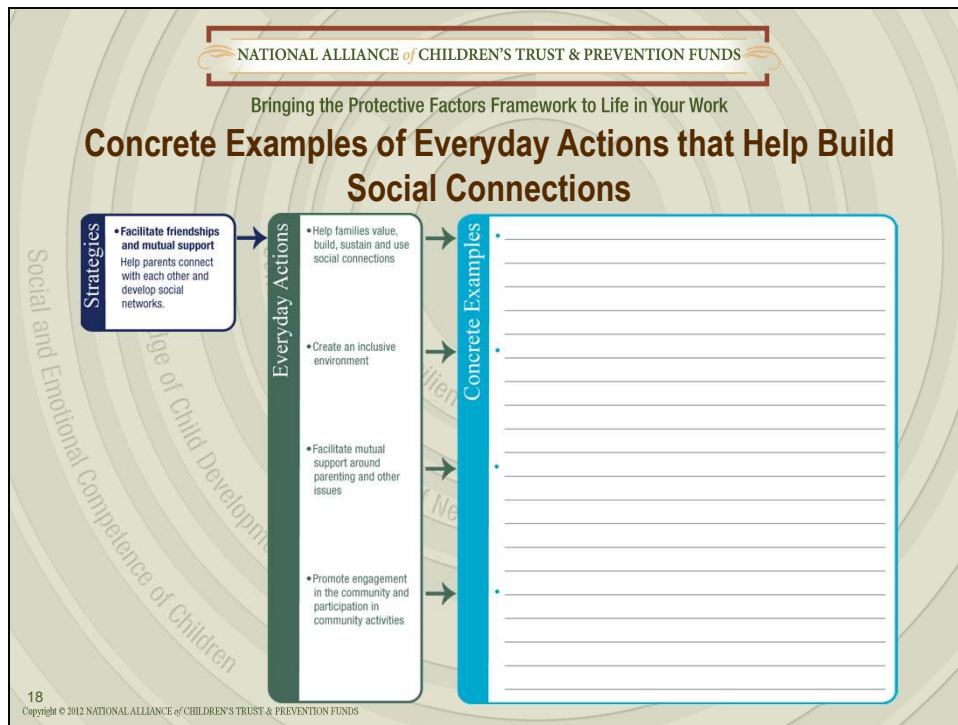


### Where Parents Make Friends

Being a parent can be profoundly isolating. However, it can also open up opportunities to connect with others and to make lifelong friends.

On one hand, new parents suddenly face changes in their lives that may limit their free time, prevent them from participating in activities they previously enjoyed, and make it more difficult for them to spend time with friends.

On the other hand, some of these new experiences introduce them to new connections. Because parenting can be overwhelming, new parents are often eager to make new friends – especially parents going through similar experiences and whose children can be their child's playmates.



Early childhood programs, schools, churches, and community programs are great places for parents to connect with others. Each of those venues can help to strengthen and support the development of strong bonds among participating parents.

Programs that serve children and families can also offer opportunities for parents to get to know each other, develop mutual support systems, and take leadership roles. The activities they offer for parents include sports teams, potlucks, classes, camping and field trips, advisory groups, board leadership, and volunteer opportunities. These programs send messages of welcome and support to the entire family.

For isolated and vulnerable families, community programs can serve as a bridge from the family to the connections and support they need. Program staff have the opportunity to work proactively with isolated families, drawing them into social networks and activities, and helping to link them with other parents who share their interests, have children with similar characteristics, or who can be mentors. They offer – or partner with other programs that offer- family support services, mental health consultation, support groups, or specialized parenting classes to help families develop new social skills and address issues that contribute to their isolation.

Even families who are not vulnerable and isolated are often reluctant to join in with schools, churches, family resource centers, or other

community groups. They often need continued encouragement and a sense that there is a benefit to them to come to a meeting or social get-together. If they can “get something” out of it for themselves or their children, they are much more likely to come.

Consider the following elements in regards to facilitating new social connections with parents:

Environment

Staff reflecting the cultures of the people you are working with

Welcoming Space?

Time and space for parents to talk freely?

Working with families one-on-one to ensure they have social connections, and encouraging them to make positive ones?

In more than 148 studies tracking more than 300,00 people, resulted in a review of the research for the medical community. The researches reported their findings in the journal, Plos Medicine, concluding that, “the influence of social relationships on risk for mortality is comparable with well-established risk factors for mortality.” The researchers concluded that having few friends or weak social ties to the community is just as harmful to health as being an alcoholic or smoking nearly a pack of cigarettes a day. Weak social ties are more harmful than not exercising and twice as risky as being obese, the researchers found.

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**“All alone!  
Whether you like it or not,  
alone is something you’ll be quite a lot!”**

– Dr. Seuss, *Oh, the Places You’ll Go!* and *The Lorax*




## Essential Elements

- What are Social Connections?
- The Antidote to Social Isolation
- The Important Role of Communication
- Social Connections and Parental Involvement
- How Social Connections Fits into the Framework (logic model)
- **Everyday Actions that Build Positive Social Connections**
  - Help families value, build, sustain and use social connections
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**The Children's Trust Fund Alliance:**

- Ensures all states have a strong and effective children's trust or prevention fund capable of leading and investing in strategies, policies and best practices that prevent child abuse and neglect before it occurs.
- Initiates and engages in national efforts that help state children's trust and prevention funds in strengthening families to prevent child abuse and neglect.
- Promotes and supports a system of services, laws, practices and attitudes that supports families by enabling them to provide their children with safe, healthy and nurturing childhoods.

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## Contact

• If you have questions about *Bringing the Protective Factors Framework to Life in Your Work*, please contact the Alliance at:

• **[info@ctfalliance.org](mailto:info@ctfalliance.org)**

• If you are interested in participating in a Training for Trainers for *Bringing the Protective Factors Framework to Life in Your Work*, please contact the Alliance at:

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