

# CONCRETE SUPPORT IN TIMES OF NEED

## PROTECTIVE & PROMOTIVE FACTORS

All parents need help sometimes—help with the day-to-day care of children, help in figuring out how to soothe a colicky baby, help getting to the emergency room when a bad accident happens, help in managing one's own temper when fatigued or upset. When parents are faced with very trying conditions such as losing a job, home foreclosure, substance abuse, not being able to feed their family or trauma, they need access to concrete support and services that address their needs and help to minimize the stress caused by very difficult challenges and adversity. **Assisting parents to identify, find and receive concrete support in times of need helps to ensure they and their family receive the basic necessities everyone deserves in order to grow (e.g., healthy food, a safe environment), as well as specialized medical, mental health, social, educational or legal services.**

When parents are faced with overwhelmingly stressful conditions they need to seek help, but for some parents asking for help is not an easy thing to do. It may be embarrassing for some parents because it feels like an admission of incompetence; that they don't know how to solve their own problems or take care of their family. Other parents may not seek help because they don't know where to go for help, or the services needed have a stigma associated with them such as mental health clinics and domestic violence or homeless shelters. **Thus, parents need experiences that enable them to understand their rights in accessing services, gain knowledge of relevant services and learn how to navigate through service systems.** Family and child-serving programs must clearly communicate to parents that seeking help is not an indicator of weakness or failure as a parent. **On the contrary, seeking help is a step toward improving one's circumstances and learning to better manage stress and function well—even when faced with challenges, adversity, and trauma. When parents ask for help, it is a step toward building resilience.**

When parents seek help, it should be provided in a manner that does not increase stress. Services should be coordinated, respectful, caring and strengths-based. Strengths-based practice is grounded in the beliefs that:

- It is essential to forge a trusting relationship between parents and service providers and among service providers working with the same families
- Regardless of the number or level of adverse conditions parents are experiencing, they have assets within and around them, their family and their community that can be called upon to help mitigate the impact of stressful conditions and to create needed change
- Parents have unrealized resources and competencies that must be identified, mobilized and appreciated
- Parents must be active participants in the change process and not passive recipients of services
- Parents must first be guided through, and subsequently learn how to navigate, the complex web of health care and social service systems
- In addition to addressing each parent's individual difficulties, strengths-based practitioners must understand—and work to change—the structural inequities and conditions that contribute to these difficulties

A strengths-based approach helps parents feel valued because they are acknowledged as knowledgeable and competent. They develop a sense of self-confidence and self-efficacy because they have opportunities to build their skills, experience success and provide help to others. Thus, access to concrete support in times of need must be accompanied by a quality of service coordination and delivery that is designed to preserve parents' dignity and to promote their and their family's healthy development, resilience and ability to advocate for and receive needed services and resources.

## CONCRETE SUPPORT IN TIMES OF NEED: ACTION SHEET

### Your role

As a professional working with families, your role is not just to provide referrals to needed services, but to identify any barriers the families may have in accessing those services. Helping families overcome those barriers is crucial to ensuring that their concrete needs are met. Such help may entail:

- Encouraging help seeking behavior
- Working with the family to understand their past experience with service systems and any stigma they attach to certain services
- Helping the family to navigate complex systems by explaining eligibility requirements, filling out forms or making a warm handoff to an individual who can help them negotiate getting access to the services they need
- Helping the parent understand their role as an advocate for themselves and their child
- Giving parents opportunities to help meet concrete needs of other families in the program or the community, to encourage reciprocity

### Questions to ask when a family is in need

- What do you need to \_\_\_\_\_ (stay in your house, keep your job, pay your heating bill etc.)?
- What have you done to handle the problem? Has this worked?
- Are there community groups or local services that you have worked with in the past? What has been your experience accessing their services?
- Are there specific barriers that have made it difficult for you to access services in the past?
- How does dealing with these issues impact the way you parent?

### What to look for

- Is the parent open to accessing and utilizing services?
- Has the parent had positive experiences with services in the past?
- Does the parent have specific barriers (literacy, lack of transportation, etc.) that will make it difficult to access services?
- Are there personal behavioral traits (e.g., punctuality, willingness to share personal information, etc.) that the parent could address to more effectively utilize services?
- Does the parent try to buffer the child from the stress caused by the family's concrete needs?

### Activities to do with parents

- Ask the parent to identify one concrete need that, if met, would lighten his or her burden. Come up with a list of at least three possible avenues to get that need met (e.g., agencies to approach, people to ask for help, cutting back on other expenses).
- Talk to the parent about what their family's socioeconomic status was in their childhood and what effect that had on them. Discuss things their parents did or did not do to buffer them from the stress of poverty, to teach them the value of money or to make sure their needs were met.