Building Community Commitment for Safe, Stable, Nurturing Relationships and Environments

A Supplement to CDC's Essentials for Childhood: Steps to Create Safe, Stable, Nurturing Relationships and Environments

National Center for Injury Prevention and Control
Division of Violence Prevention

Safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments are among the most powerful, protective, and healing forces in a child's life. These relationships—fostered at home, school and in the community—are the building blocks of a child's physical and emotional growth.[1] Children deserve opportunities for these types of relationships from the beginning of their lives onward, so they can thrive and grow into healthy adults who can contribute to their communities in the future.

Further, safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments can promote healthy children's development and can also buffer against the impact of stress and trauma. By ensuring that neighborhoods are safe, nurturing places for children, communities can help protect even the most vulnerable children.

A lack of commitment to act is a significant obstacle to improved community health,[2] and raising awareness is an important step toward creating safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments. This publication introduces nine key elements of successful efforts that raise awareness and build commitment for safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments. They are organized in three clusters: Developing a Vision, Raising Awareness, and Partnering with Others. Relevant examples from the field of injury and violence prevention illustrating each element and a case study including the nine elements are presented.

Developing a Vision

When a group of diverse stakeholders agree on a shared vision for a better future they can operate under the same assumptions and work toward a common goal. Vision statements reflect local principles. They can describe what the community will be or will gain by aspiring to foster a safe context for growing up, and they can clarify the desired outcomes of the effort as a whole.

Elements of Developing a Vision include:

1. Establish a Process for Developing a Shared Vision

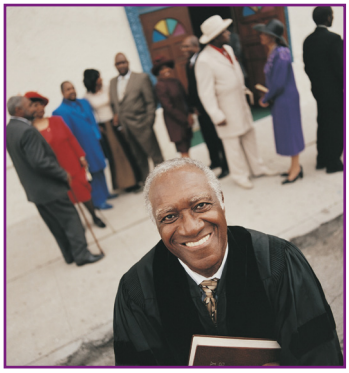
The process for developing a shared vision can be as important as the vision itself. The process facilitates a dialogue on what holds meaning for everyone at the table, what values people hold dear, and which priorities truly matter.[3,4] A process designed to promote buy-in can engage diverse partners in developing a solution and implementing it. Though the process can take time and resources, such an investment can be worthwhile. The steps and tenor of the process can build trusting relationships and cultivate broad support for the vision as it takes shape, which can facilitate more widespread action later. Establishing a process for developing a shared vision may include steps such as:

- Identify a lead agency and single point of contact to facilitate dialogue and coordinate logistics.
- Gather information and orient participants to the issue.
- Ask people to share local examples of an effective process, to say why it worked, and to provide examples of processes that could have been more effective.
- Discuss as a group when and how perspectives will be shared, and how decisions will be made and by whom.
- Adopt the definitions for Safe, Stable, Nurturing Relationships and Environments (www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/childmaltreatment/essentials)
- Develop a common language for sharing the vision related to safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments.

Example:

Tasked with creating a strategic plan to prevent violence, the Minneapolis Youth Violence Prevention Steering Committee began with a commitment to honor all viewpoints. Committee members agreed that partnerships and collaboration were vital to success, and that "a spirit of cooperation, trust and respect will drive our process." In meetings co-chaired by the mayor, the Committee developed a shared vision in dialogue with each other, by exchanging observations, stories and expertise.

2. Engage the Community



It is important to have a strong and transparent mechanism for a diverse population to share its lived experiences and discover common goals and grievances.[5] For example, the input and leadership of community members will ensure that prioritized strategies to promote safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments are relevant to their needs, culturally-appropriate, account for local history and context, and are thus most likely to succeed.[6,7,8] When community members are invested in the process and its outcomes, they are also better able to hold leaders accountable. This facilitates more sustained attention to providing safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments for children.

Community members have an integral role in any effort to promote safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments from developing a vision and initial planning, to implementation and evaluation. Including families and those directly impacted by child maltreatment in developing the vision, for example, is a sign that the community's expertise is clearly respected and valued.[7,8] Working together with parents and families, survivors of abuse, advocates and activists, schools, faith- and community-based organizations, and local businesses and media fosters broad ownership for the shared vision and mobilizes people to contribute to the solution.[7] Engaging the community may involve steps such as:

- Identify influential community members and reach out to them.
- Convene focus groups and community listening sessions.
- Conduct interviews with community members and community groups to gather their input.
- Facilitate community participation by holding meetings in places accessible for community members, assist with transportation to and from meeting sites, arrange for child care during the meetings, ensure adequate translation services, and provide incentives for participation such as honorariums, gift cards and meals.
- Inventory and connect with existing community based efforts to promote safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments including those that prevent or address child maltreatment and other related efforts
- Establish a process and structure for ongoing input and participation, whereby community members are involved in governance and decision-making.
- Ensure that those representing the community as a whole reflect a diverse mix of community characteristics.
- Implement regular mechanisms for sharing information with the community in formats the community has identified as useful.

Example:

More than 30 local agencies, organizations and businesses make up the UP2USNow Child Abuse Prevention Coalition in rural Oregon. Coalition members and partners are influential in the community, and represent the diversity of Douglas County. UP2USNow has also made a point to regularly partner with youth to advance its cause. For example, the coalition sponsors the Youth Media Project, which trains students on prevention, messaging and video production. To raise awareness about preventing child abuse, the young people interview coalition partners and community members about their work, and create public service announcements and videos that are shared online and aired on local television.

3. Use Simple, Straightforward Language in the Vision Statement

Simple, straightforward language means everyone can clearly and consistently communicate the vision to many different audiences. A memorable, common-sense vision statement is more likely to resonate with people, no matter the context. Straightforward language that everyone can use and understand enables all partners to express why safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments are important.[6] Concrete, action-oriented language that asserts it is both possible and worthwhile to create safe neighborhoods can also help counter the inaccurate perception that violence is not preventable. Indeed, clear language can support the fact that violent behavior can be unlearned or not learned at all,[9] which can help reinforce the need and desire for safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments. Landing on simple, understandable language that resonates broadly may involve steps such as:

- Use language directly from interviews and focus groups with community members.
- Ask a group of parents to review and finalize the language.
- Arrange for different sectors and partners to vet the language across sectors, and ensure it resonates for all.
- Remove any language from an aspirational vision statement that emphasizes or only reflects the particular approach of any one sector or professional discipline.

Example:

To raise awareness about its child abuse prevention initiative, Otoe County in Nebraska developed a compelling vision statement. The partners wanted the vision statement to state their goal and also be something everyone in the community could support – "Bright futures begin at birth! Every child will receive the nurturing care essential to become compassionate, contributing members of their communities."

4. Analyze Barriers to Widespread Adoption

Advance planning to address potential problems helps ensure widespread acceptance and smooth operationalization of the vision statement. Analyzing barriers means thinking about why this issue is not already a local priority and deciding how to overcome these challenges. Barriers include disagreements over the role of government or the community in protecting children, especially given the values of individualism and personal responsibility;[5] the widespread attitude that child maltreatment is a private family matter and "not my business"; the notion that safe, stable and nurturing relationships are the sole responsibility of parents; a focus on individual stories and solutions rather than on improving environments to promote safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments; dynamics related to socioeconomic status; and the tension of turf and other obstacles to effective collaboration. Analyzing barriers to widespread adoption involves steps such as:

- Identify constraints related to politics, capacity, funding and other resources, and community trust and readiness.
- Speak with practitioners who have tried to move this issue or related issues in the past and learn what barriers they faced.
- Gather information from local leaders on their current degree of support and consider what might garner additional support moving forward.
- Assess how child maltreatment has been framed in the past, such as whether it is discussed as a parental issue or a community issue.
- Meet with potential funders to hear how they view the issue and what they might be willing to support moving forward.
- Develop a plan to resolve critical obstacles.
- Identify needed training and technical assistance.

Example: One of the goals of First 5 LA is to ensure that children are safe from abuse and neglect. When deciding on priority strategies to meet this goal for Los Angeles County, First 5 LA included feasibility and timeliness in its selection criteria. First 5 LA assessed each strategy's potential benefit for children and families in general, but it also examined how the potential strategies would increase safety specifically, analyzed the likelihood for success, and considered current windows of opportunity for action.

Raising Awareness

Successful efforts to raise awareness help focus the attention of a wider audience on the importance of safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments. They can change how people connect with the issue, which can prompt action.[5]

One important way to advance social change to promote safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments is to watch for strategic opportunities and be prepared to quickly mobilize resources and partners. These windows for action sometimes arise during or after a crisis that captures the attention of the nation, of the state or a local community. Maintaining the capacity to act swiftly and decisively when opportunities arise can facilitate success.

Raising awareness can include disseminating a new frame through several communication channels. Framing is how people use language to create and derive meaning from the world around them, and certain words prompt a particular interpretation of events. It is crucial to reframe both the issue itself and the solutions.[10] For additional guidance, see *Suggested Practices for Journalists Reporting on Child Maltreatment* and *Suggested Steps for Engaging the Media in Child Maltreatment Prevention*, supplemental documents to Essentials for Childhood created for CDC by Berkeley Media Studies Group.

Elements of raising awareness include:

5. Make the Case

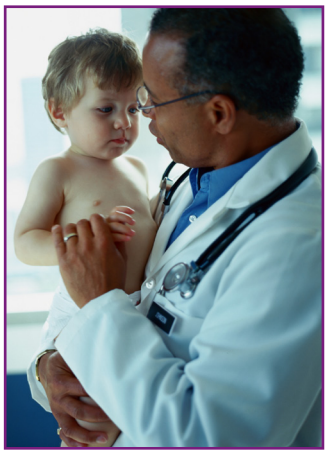
Making the case that people have a personal stake in ensuring that relationships and their neighborhoods are safe, stable and nurturing can draw additional supporters and catalyze momentum for positive change. Sharing new information or repackaging common knowledge is an important step toward improving how communities understand safe, stable and nurturing relationships and environments.

Describing the problem and its solutions in creative, compelling ways can help persuade different types of people to take an active role in creating safe, stable and nurturing relationships and environments.[5] Depending on the intended audience, making the case may involve the following steps:

- Lift up approaches that effectively promote safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments, and describe how they've led to healthier outcomes for children and families.
- Expand the scope of strategies like healthy parenting, so they are understood as important learned skills for everyone.
- Publicize cost-benefit data.
- Articulate the benefits for the whole community.
- Describe how safe environments benefit specific groups of people.
- Provide examples of what has worked, to make sure people know this is do-able.

Example: When San Antonio Mayor Julián Castro launched the Brainpower Initiative, he described early education as critically important to the city's quality of life and economic development. For San Antonio to be globally competitive in the 21st century, Mayor Castro argued, it needed to invest in pre-kindergarten, so that toddlers of today would grow up to be an educated, capable workforce. He made the case that the Brainpower Initiative would promote academic achievement and improve graduation rates, and he presented evidence that the city would gain $7 for every dollar invested in high-quality pre-kindergarten. With support from local business and education leaders and seven former mayors, San Antonio voters approved a funding measure to support full-day pre-K for 4,000 four-year-olds every year, through 2020.

6. Recruit Champions



Champions give voice to the work, and their perseverance and compelling stories keep the issue relevant and in the public eye. Champions often bring credibility, visibility and unity to local efforts. Their personal connection to the issue can cut through turf battles, spur others into action, sustain the movement, and help hold partners accountable.[7] Champions can strengthen momentum for safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments through their obvious dedication to the shared vision. Champions enjoy traction with the audience and can convey positive messages about the importance of safe, stable, nurturing places and relationships for children. They can be survivors, parents, community elders, doctors and nurses, celebrities, public officials and decision-makers who are committed to the issue. Recruiting champions may involve:

- Identify individuals or types of people the audience trusts.
- Look at who is talking about this issue or related issues through local media outlets.
- Talk to community groups, local practitioners and funders who work on this issue or related issues, to identify individuals who are already champions or are potential champions.
- Look at which issues local leaders have prioritized and assess relevance for advancing the community's vision.
- Consider whether these individuals are appropriate role models.
- Gauge the interest and capacity of possible champions to serve as a spokespeople.
- Provide information, opportunities and other supports for champions to excel at this role.

Example: After winning re-election on a platform of reducing methamphetamine abuse, the sheriff of Laurel County, Kentucky, used this opportunity to raise awareness about child abuse and its connection to drug addiction. He hosted community meetings at unlikely venues such as fire stations and Elks Lodges, and invited health educators and children's advocates to travel with him throughout the county. These discussions emphasized that preventing child abuse was a community responsibility, not just the purview of law enforcement, and they highlighted the role of neighborhood organizations and the regional medical center in promoting safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments.

7. Leverage Influential Allies

Influential allies can help legitimatize a movement, boost support, increase assets and resources, and spark additional discussion. While champions may single-handedly drive an issue and partners are key in planning and implementation, influential allies can engage key groups, have credibility with the community or a particular audience, and can hold others accountable for their actions and outcomes. The groups or individuals with influence vary, and can include the business community or a specific employer, the faith community, a local leader, a service organization, or an editorial board. The support of influential allies can prompt specific people to take desired actions to help achieve the vision. Influential allies can raise awareness with specific groups or individuals who are key to success and then use their influence to garner commitment. Steps to identify or engage influential allies may include:

- Schedule presentations at local service clubs and gauge their interest in this issue and the shared vision.
- Work with local organizations to identify long-term donors and supporters who may want to leverage their influence to build support for this effort.
- Identify local leaders who have expressed support for children's issues.
- Meet with large local employers who employ parents.
- Engage health care providers who witness the ramifications of serious child maltreatment.
- Share information about the problem and solutions with local editorial boards and media outlets.
- Share information with the local chamber of commerce that conveys both the costs of child maltreatment to businesses (e.g., lost productivity and work days) and the benefits of supporting safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments.
- Meet with faith leaders and engage them in speaking out about the need for safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments and for holding local systems and leaders accountable.

Example: The violence prevention collaborative based in Breckenridge, Minnesota, engaged influential allies as one of its first steps. It brought together professionals on the front lines, those who witness how violence affects children, such as social workers, schools, law enforcement and emergency room staff. These allies had agreed from the outset to "stay open and listen without preconceived notions," and continued to support the initiative after community input called for the collaborative to shift focus from reducing bullying to strengthening families. The support of these powerful groups added legitimacy to the initiative and increased referral rates for hard-to-reach families.

Partnering with Others

When community members and multiple sectors embrace their roles in fostering healthy development, communities can create safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments for children to thrive. To accomplish this, those working to ensure safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments can coordinate with existing initiatives and planning efforts, and partner with other groups and sectors.[1,11,12] The range of partners may include businesses, funders, government agencies, grassroots organizations, elected leaders, the media, community members, and researchers.

Elements of partnering with others include:

8. Determine Clear, Do-Able Roles for Each Partner

Partners must believe that creating safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments is a realistic, achievable goal. It is important they feel hopeful that their efforts will pay off and benefit the community, and that they appreciate how the shared vision might evolve from an ambitious idea into a tangible reality. One way to establish this sense of optimism is for the roles and responsibilities of each partner to be concrete and specific. Determining roles for each partner may involve:

- Develop specific actions and articulate who is responsible for each strategy prioritized to achieve the vision.
- Establish shared indicators so progress can be tracked and measured across partners.
- Establish an organizational structure with appropriate committees or work groups to support assigned roles and responsibilities.
- Develop and sign memoranda of understanding and other collaborative agreements.

Example: To improve the city's response to children exposed to violence, Chicago Safe Start clearly conveys their respective roles to the advisory board, six implementation teams, two community councils, and incubator projects. The Direct Service Team, for example, oversees service referral systems in four neighborhoods, whereas the Court Action Team advances courts-related practices and policies to better serve children exposed to violence.

9. Create Structures for Accountability

Setting clear expectations for all stakeholders on what each will deliver increases the chances they follow through. Structures for accountability ensure that partners will accomplish what they set out to do. Many stakeholders have one of two common assumptions—no one group is responsible for preventing violence, or everyone is responsible for preventing violence. In either case, this diffuse sense of ownership can too easily translate into a lack of initiative and the effort's eventual failure. Creating structures for accountability may involve:

- Follow agreed-upon methods for communicating with each other, coordinating work, and reporting progress back to the group.
- Develop an evaluation plan, and collect and share data according to the timeline.
- Identify desired outcomes for each evidence-based strategy.
- Document work and measure progress toward goals, including related indicators and intermediate outcomes.
- Establish reporting mechanisms such as to a steering committee, board, commission, city council or board of supervisors, as well as back to the community.
- Secure additional support for the staff time associated with fulfilling agreed-upon responsibilities. Identify which of these responsibilities align with existing funding sources.
- Establish a mechanism for coordination across all the activities, such as through staffing or coalition meetings.
- Consider the use of an indicator report or report card that captures progress toward realizing the community's shared vision, and can be used in communications.
- Garner media coverage for efforts and publicize successes.

Example: As members of the Safe Start Initiative in Morris County, New Jersey, worked more closely together, they realized they were most effective when member organizations agreed to complete tasks that aligned with their existing activities. In order to strengthen the skills of parents and caregivers, the steering committee had to be realistic about how each member organization's mandate and funding overlapped with the coalition's goals. This deeper understanding of member organizations' priorities enabled the coalition to develop short- and long-term objectives, and a multi-year work plan to guide their efforts and hold member organizations accountable.

Case Study:
North Carolina Task Force on Child Abuse Prevention

In its work throughout the state, Prevent Child Abuse (PCA) North Carolina had identified obstacles to creating the conditions for children to thrive (Element 4). For example, the state had largely ignored strategies that prevent child maltreatment in the first place, and efforts across multiple systems and organizations were not coordinated. To spark a dialogue on overcoming these challenges and on opportunities for policy and systems change, PCA North Carolina recruited an influential ally, the North Carolina Institute of Medicine, to co-convene a state-wide task force on child abuse prevention (Element 7).

The Task Force included community members, such as residents, parent representatives and pastors (Element 2), and two champions emerged as co-chairs – Marian Earls, a respected pediatrician and children's advocate, and the North Carolina Health and Human Services Secretary Carmen Hooker Odom (Element 6). Together with several elected officials, various government agencies, foundations, hospitals and community-based organizations, they developed an ambitious vision, whereby "Every child is nurtured, supported and protected within a safe and stable home and community environment" (Element 3).

Over eight months, the Task Force developed 13 priority recommendations, which specific partners agreed to implement and to report on their progress within the year (Elements 8 and 9). As one of many joint projects, the Division of Public Health within the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and PCA North Carolina opted to develop a public education campaign that promotes community responsibility for child well-being. After analyzing commissioned research on the pitfalls of traditional messaging, however, this pair realized it needed to first build communications capacity (Element 4). PCA North Carolina and DHHS shifted gears and instead developed communications tool-kits and formed a learning community. They also offered train-the-trainer workshops on effective framing and on working with the media to raise the profile of this issue with sights on social change. This way, state organizations were equipped to better make the case for safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments and healthy child development (Element 5); convey consistent messages across departments; and impart these valuable skills to their grassroots networks.

As a result of their efforts, DHHS and PCA North Carolina saw a change in media reporting, and enhanced awareness and commitment within state agencies. The DHHS Women and Children's Health Section and its Injury and Violence Prevention Branch now collaborate much more closely, for example. "We're seeing a shift in the way this is being presented in the media," said Sarah Vidrine of PCA North Carolina. After analyzing all relevant media stories, "we were astounded at the 300-percent increase in more effectively-framed stories after one year. The messages are changing." The North Carolina Framing Learning Community now works to replicate these successes at the community level, and to shift social norms and policies in support of safe, stable homes and neighborhoods.

Elements of Building Community Commitment

Developing a Vision

1. Establish a Process for Developing a Vision
2. Engage Community
3. Use Simple, Straightforward Language in the Vision Statement
4. Analyze Barriers to Widespread Adoption

Building Awareness

5. Make the Case
6. Recruit Champions
7. Leverage Influential Allies

Partnering with Others

8. Determine Clear, Do-Able Roles for Each Partner
9. Create Structures for Accountability

Conclusion

Ensuring safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments where children thrive requires collective action to prevent harm before it happens. One goal of raising awareness and building commitment is to engage ongoing commitment from high-level leadership. This can lend sufficient power and impart necessary resources to drive changes. High-level officials have particular influence in convening people and organizations that otherwise may not come together. Their big-picture lens also creates opportunities to connect different initiatives related to education, safety and social services, for example, for greater synergy. Further, leaders can increase accountability and demand a good-faith effort to improve outcomes.

Practitioners can use this list of elements as a planning tool or as a means to identify gaps for initiatives in progress. Together, the elements described here can help establish the necessary relationships and infrastructure across sectors to ultimately change norms, provide information to inform and develop policies, enhance programs and share data, for example. Raising awareness and building commitment lays the foundation for other important strategies to promote safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments.

Additional Resources

- *Suggested Practices for Journalists Reporting on Child Maltreatment* and *Suggested Steps for Engaging the Media in Child Maltreatment Prevention*, supplemental documents to *Essentials for Childhood* created for CDC by Berkeley Media Studies Group.
- *Making the Case for Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention* by FrameWorks Institute (2004) and commissioned by Prevent Child Abuse America: http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/childabuse.html
- *New Directions North Carolina: A Report of the NC Institute of Medicine Task Force on Child Abuse Prevention* by the North Carolina Institute of Medicine and Prevent Child Abuse North Carolina (2005): http://www.nciom.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/10/finalCAPreport.pdf

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