



STRENGTHENING FAMILIES: COLLABORATING WITH FAMILIES OF YOUNG CHILDREN IN ASSESSMENT AND SAFETY PLANNING LEARNING COLLABORATIVE

SEPTEMBER 2025
FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS AND ISOLATION

Family Relationships

Family relationships, either healthy or dysfunctional, impact children from birth to age five greater than other age categories because of the critical developmental period.

Healthy Family Relationships

Healthy family relationships can support Parent/Caregiver Protective Capacities, such as parents/caregivers who feel confident in being responsive to children's needs, able to nurture their children, provide consistent routines, and be emotionally available. They can also lean on support from extended family and their community. When this exists, the results for young children include secure attachments, improved stress regulation, enhanced language development, and the ability to trust others.

Dysfunctional Family Relationships

Dysfunctional family relationships can occur when there is chronic conflict, domestic violence, or emotional neglect. It can result in inconsistent caregiving when coupled with substance use, mental health, and stress. The impact this has on children from birth to five can be delays in emotional regulation, anxiety, withdrawal, aggression, or developmental delays.





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Being a parent of a young child often limits opportunities for social engagement, leading to feelings of isolation and a reduced support network. CPS Professionals should assess whether isolation is a contributing factor to issues that challenge the parents' capacities to ensure the children's needs are met and provide a safe environment.

Isolation Comes in Many Forms

- **Social isolation:** lack of friends and/or family nearby.
- **Cultural isolation:** language or cultural barriers
- **Economic isolation:** poverty, lack of transportation, unsafe neighborhoods.)
- **Geographic isolation:** living far from family or in a remote area.

What CPS Can Look For

- Signs of caregiver stress or helplessness
- Minimal child-adult interaction
- No connection to community (play groups, church, family visits)
- Children who show extreme clinginess or avoidance (lack of secure attachment)
- Developmental delays, especially not talking, poor coordination, or flat affect..

Integrating the Understanding of Relationships and Isolation into Assessment

Relationship Quality

- **Observation:** Watch how caregivers and children interact. Pay attention to eye contact, tone or voice, and responsiveness.
- **Ask questions such as:** What's your favorite thing to do with your child? When your child is upset, how do you comfort them?
- **Warning Signs:** Caregivers who rarely speak to the child or use mostly commands. Young children who avoid or ignore their caregivers. Caregivers who appear unaware of the child's needs or cues. **Geographic isolation:** living far from family or in a remote area.



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Integrating the Understanding of Relationships and Isolation into Assessment Continued

Isolation Indicators

- **Observation:** Does the home show signs of outside connections (toys from others, pictures, evidence, or visitors)?
- **Ask questions such as:** How often do you see family/friends/neighbors? Who helps you take care of your child? When you need advice or help, who do you talk to?
- **Warning Signs:** No identified support network. Parents or caregivers saying they “don’t trust anyone”. No participation in community or family activities.

Integrating into Intervention Strategies: Building Parent/Caregiver Protective Capacities

Strengthen Relationships

- **Model and praise positive parent-child interaction** (I saw how you hugged your child when they were upset).
- **Suggest daily connection routines** like story time, eating meals together.

Reduce Isolation

- **Identify existing supports** by asking questions such as “If you had an emergency contact list, who would be your top three?”.
- **Suggest groups or community activities, such as** family resource centers, parent cafés, community centers, and places of worship, to facilitate connections.



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Reflection on Content

Think about a time when you felt isolated from support. How did it impact your stress level and decision-making?

Action Item

What questions can you incorporate into your assessment to engage in conversation about isolation? What interventions do you have in your area that supports parents in connection to the community and other parents?