

From Resources to Routines: The Importance of Stability in the Developmental Environment

For the full paper on which this brief is based, see [“From Resources to Routines: The Importance of Stability in the Developmental Environment: Working Paper No. 4”](#)

Beginning before birth, children’s health and development are affected by influences from their developmental environment—the full range of experiences and exposures they have in the places where they live, grow, play, and learn.¹ **Promoting stability across this web of interconnected influences can be a powerful tool for supporting early development and lifelong health.**

A child’s world can become unstable without warning, and often instability in one area is connected to instability in others—an unexpected drop in family income, for example, can lead to loss of housing, difficulty accessing nutritious food, and disruption of supportive relationships when families are forced to move.² These factors are shaped by the decisions we make as a society, including decisions in policy realms that at first glance might seem far removed from young children—for example, zoning laws, housing codes, or urban planning. Over time, these decisions have created an unfair distribution of both adversity and opportunity across communities, with some ZIP codes benefiting more than others.³ And while any family can experience instability, instability is more likely to occur and to affect healthy development when a community lacks supportive services that can buffer its effects.

Even when stability has been derailed, ensuring we have policies and programs to restore it offers an opportunity to avoid or even reverse potential harm. **Evidence shows that when children do encounter instability, stabilizing their situations leads to improvements in behavior as well as cognitive and emotional development.**⁴

To help our children and communities thrive now and across generations, it is essential that we make policy decisions that preserve and enhance stability for children and their caregivers.

When Unpredictable Environments Disrupt Stability

If the expected patterns in a young child’s life are frequently disrupted—particularly when the events and behaviors are threatening or associated with a lack of safety⁵—it can negatively affect development. In response to an unpredictable environment, children’s bodies adapt in three key ways:

- **Activation of the stress response system:** For babies, unpredictability is a sign that their world may not be safe, which prompts the release of stress hormones, like cortisol, and immune responses, like inflammation. These responses are protective in the short term, but prolonged exposure without comfort from responsive, stable relationships with adults can affect the brain and other developing biological systems, impacting children’s learning, behavior, and health in the moment and across the lifespan.⁶
- **Hypervigilance to threat:** When unpredictable environments are encountered repeatedly in early childhood, the brain circuits that detect and respond to fear are used more frequently, so they become stronger and develop more rapidly. In the short term, these stronger circuits can be important for handling real threats to our safety or well-being. But, over time, this frequent and rapid activation can make these circuits overactive, leading to a false sense of threat even in neutral situations.^{7,8}
- **Accelerated puberty:** When young children perceive the environment as harsh and unpredictable, the resulting stress can be one of many factors that lead to early puberty.⁷ Early puberty can lead to increased risk of some types of cancers and type 2 diabetes, obesity, shortened adult height, and early menopause, as well as a range of mental health disorders, such as anxiety and depression.⁹

How Different Types of Stability Interconnect

Stability for families and caregivers relies on an interconnected web of supports, such as safe housing, job security, and quality childcare and schools. If one thread of that web breaks, it can strain the others. Losing a job or housing, for example, can disrupt other areas, such as access to high-quality childcare or health care.² **As we think about designing policies and programs to support young children and their caregivers, it is critical that we look broadly across sectors—just as one broken thread can strain the others in this web, strengthening one strand helps hold the web together.**

- 1 **Financial stability:** Fluctuations in family income are common, and job changes alone do not cause poor outcomes for children. But, if unpredictable or forced, they can lead to unemployment, lower income, or the need for multiple part-time jobs that can disrupt family routines.² Historic and current policies have also put Black, Latine, and other communities of color at an economic disadvantage as compared to White communities. **Policies that support financial stability—particularly in communities that have been marginalized and subject to significant underinvestment over time—can increase overall stability in children’s lives.**¹⁰
- 2 **Food security:** In 2023, 6.5 million US households with children—nearly 18%—experienced food insecurity.¹¹ Unstable access to nutritious food can have powerful impacts on children’s learning and health. Children experiencing food insecurity have higher rates of school absenteeism and are more than twice as likely to repeat a grade in elementary school than those who are food secure.² **By designing and implementing policies that promote secure, consistent access to nutritious foods early in life, we can support the physical and mental health of our children—now and across the lifespan.**
- 3 **Foundational relationships:** When children have stability in their relationships with attentive caregivers, they grow in an environment rich with beneficial interactions that promote secure attachment and healthy development.¹ When attentive caregiving is absent, or if its presence is unreliable or unpredictable, healthy brain development can be disrupted. If children face significant instability in other areas of their lives, stable relationships with responsive adults in their home, childcare, school, or other settings can help provide important elements of the safety and security that children need.² **However, caregivers cannot do it alone—policy and programs that help create stable environments for young children and caregivers alike are essential for healthy development.**
- 4 **Housing and neighborhoods:** Abrupt, unexpected, and especially frequent moves are a source of instability and can affect young children and their caregivers, weakening their sense of security and elevating stress levels.² When housing instability is combined with financial instability, families can lose their permanent housing altogether. Although homelessness is often accompanied by many other kinds of adversity, the unpredictable nature of housing when families find themselves in this situation appears to be a key contributor to adverse outcomes for children.¹² **This emphasizes the importance of designing policies and programs that address such sources of housing instability, knowing that stable housing offers a tremendous opportunity to help our children thrive.**
- 5 **Climate change:** Families are increasingly impacted by more frequent and severe extreme weather events caused by climate change, including wildfires, floods, hurricanes, heat waves, and droughts. In addition to catastrophic loss of life, these events can lead to temporary or permanent loss of housing, economic hardship, food insecurity, and disruption of relationships.¹³ **By investing in improvements to current systems and infrastructure, and addressing the root causes of climate change—including shifting to clean energy sources—we can help protect children from the impacts of climate-related instability.**

What We Can Do to Create, Maintain, and Restore Stability

Opportunities to improve stability in children’s lives exist in policies at the local, state, and federal level related to education, health care, employment, immigration, child welfare, housing, food assistance, criminal justice, climate change, and more. Within the web of factors that support stability, each domain can have a multiplier effect on the others because of the interconnected nature of each thread—for example, reformed eviction regulations and improved supply of quality buildings can help ensure stability for children in housing, neighborhoods, and schools. Paid family leave policies can help ensure relationship stability in the critical early months after birth, reduce parental stress, and maintain income stability, which in turn promotes food security.¹⁴

Providers across early care and education, health care, and social services, along with employers, law enforcement, civic and faith organizations, and parents and caregivers all will benefit from improved stability for families and can take action to improve it. And, we can address the systemic inequalities that often lead to disproportionate sources of instability for children living in poverty and children of color.¹⁵

In these and many other ways, we all have a role to play in creating and maintaining stable developmental environments where our children and their caregivers can thrive.

To read more and find resources for taking action, see:

- The full working paper on which this InBrief is based, [From Resources to Routines: The Importance of Stability in the Developmental Environment](#).
- The [Solutions Spotlight](#), which highlights how communities around the country are already implementing practical solutions to promote stability.
- The [Urban Institute’s web of stabilizing supports model](#), which the working paper draws on to illustrate the interconnected factors that influence stability.

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