SOLUTIONS SPOTLIGHT

The Importance of Stability in the Developmental Environment

Find examples of practical steps to support children's development, health, and well-being that you can apply in your own community.

Stability is an essential part of a healthy developmental environment, and promoting stability during pregnancy and early childhood offers a vital opportunity to support development and lifelong health.

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Any family can experience instability. However, instability is more likely to occur and to affect healthy development when a community lacks supportive services that can buffer its effects. A young 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 and difficulty accessing nutritious food. On the flip side, promoting stability in one domain can have a multiplier effect—for example, stable health care also decreases caregiver stress and supports caregiver mental health, which helps them provide a more stable financial and emotional environment for children.

To help our children and communities thrive now and across generations, it is essential that we make decisions that preserve and enhance stability for young children and their caregivers. Practical, actionable solutions exist, and many communities are already successfully implementing such strategies with positive effects. The examples that follow can be replicated in communities across the country to improve stability with broad benefits for children and their caregivers.

Increasing Stability to Support Healthy Development

Reducing Housing Insecurity During Pregnancy

Abrupt, unexpected, and especially frequent moves can be a source of instability and can affect young children and their caregivers, weakening their sense of security and elevating stress levels. Recognizing this, Healthy Start in Housing (HSiH) is helping pregnant Boston residents who are housing insecure or unhoused to find and retain stable housing. This joint initiative between the Boston Public Health Commission (BPHC) and the Boston Housing Authority (BHA) provides BHA housing alongside long-term and comprehensive case management from BPHC. BPHC helps participants develop and implement family health, economic, and education goals, and provides a six-session course on problem-solving. These goals and courses alongside enhanced case management help participants become more independent, eventually enabling them to graduate from the program. When they graduate, they can remain in BHA housing with access to support services, while also allowing their spot in HSiH to open for someone new. **By increasing housing stability during pregnancy and early childhood, this program offers one way to support early development and lifelong health.**

Supporting Families in the Child Welfare System

ZERO TO THREE's Safe Babies is a national program that supports babies, toddlers, and families involved in or at risk of entering the child welfare system, through a team-based, interdisciplinary approach rooted in the science of early childhood development. The approach centers children's urgent developmental needs in all decision-making, connects families with community resources to support child development (including early interventions and developmental screenings), and strengthens caregiver-child relationships. Safe Babies also advances policies and practices for early childhood systems change to reduce stressors on families and improve child and family well-being. **This program helps children stay with their primary caregiver(s) when possible, alleviating stress and promoting stability during the earliest years.**

Increasing Financial Stability to Increase All-Around Stability

Financial instability can lead to instability in other parts of a family's life, including housing and food security. A number of factors can make it challenging for many caregivers to maintain financial stability, particularly in communities that have been marginalized and subject to significant underinvestment over time. The Bridge Project provides low-income families with direct monthly payments during pregnancy and the earliest years of their children's lives, while also connecting families with local community resources. The payment is unconditional, allowing recipients to make decisions that are best for their family's unique needs. Findings from the Bridge Project's cohorts indicate that unconditional cash support decreases housing instability and food insecurity, increases maternal autonomy, and enhances maternal health and well-being during the crucial prenatal and early childhood stages. Mothers also shared that the cash gave them "room to breathe," providing peace of mind, flexibility, and agency to work toward long-term security for their children. **Reducing financial insecurity is a key tool for increasing all-around stability for young children and their caregivers.**

Policy Snapshots: More Examples of Solutions in Action

In Atlanta, Georgia, Our House provides unhoused families with children under five with wraparound support to increase stability, including childcare, job training, and assistance finding permanent housing.

Recognizing the importance of consistent caregiving during early childhood, the New Jersey Safe Babies Court Team works to reunify families in the foster care system and reduce the number of home transfers a child experiences.

Casa Project and Birth to Big Kid combines early childhood development supports (with a focus on safe sleep education) with upstream supports designed to help Massachusetts families find stable housing.

→ Read the full paper

For the full paper on which this guide is based, see From Resources to Routines: The Importance of Stability in the Developmental Environment

Additional sources consulted in the creation of this Solutions Spotlight:

Boston Uses Public Housing to Promote Healthy Birth Outcomes — Health Equity Guide

Healthy Start in Housing Provides Housing and Services to Women with High Risk Pregnancies — Boston Housing Authority

Safe Babies Initiative: Promoting Safety and Well-Being — Zero to Three

The Bridge Project

Our Programs — Our House

New Jersey Safe Babies Court Team

The Casa Project — Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless