URBAN INSTITUTE

STABILIZING CHILDREN'S LIVES

Education and Care

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Children young and old are learning and growing all the time and spend a significant portion of their day in education and care settings with adults who are responsible for supporting their learning and supervising their care. Although the type of education and care may differ based on myriad factors including child age, location, socioeconomic status, care versus a school setting, and time of day, education and care settings offer a place for children to grow, develop, and learn in the company of adults tasked with providing their education and care. The core need of education and care, though ever-present, is a moving target, with young children's needs looking somewhat different than older children's. For example, infant and toddler education and care must encompass the basic tenets of nurturing safety and security, meeting children's basic physical needs, and helping children learn basic skills. Education for adolescents must include academic instruction and support their development of prosocial skills, all while preserving their strong need for autonomy at this developmental stage. Many children also need to be in supervised settings with adults during other times when their parents are working or in education or training—settings that must support children's learning and growth and meet their other basic needs if the parents' activities are during evening or overnight time periods. Further, children with disabilities or chronic health concerns and those learning in a new language have similar education and care needs, though the ways in which these needs are met may require more intensive and specialized supports.

Children need education and care to give them the tools to succeed in life and support their safety while they are away from their parents. Education and care include formal classroom education and the teaching of academic content, but also the development and practice of social and emotional approaches to learning skills, which help children learn how to relate to others and

ABOUT THIS MEMO

This document illustrates part of a conceptual model (see last page) showing how a child's healthy development depends on the stability of seven core needs. Whether those needs are stably met depends on the actions of key actors, including parents or guardians, who are part of a stabilizing web of supports, which is also shaped by larger contextual forces. For more information, visit https://www.urban.org/stabilizing-children to see the conceptual model and documents about each core need and each actor.

acquire knowledge. Education and care also must meet children's basic needs for safety, food, and relationships when parents are not present. Education can create opportunities to stabilize access to other future needs, and a large body of research has demonstrated the effects of education on future health, housing, employment, and social and psychological skills and outcomes. However, when children experience low-quality education and care, or when children's access to education and care is unstable, the stability of other needs may also be compromised in both the short and long term. The inverse is also true: instability in housing, food, routines, or health may also affect and destabilize children's access to education and care. For example, absenteeism and school mobility is particularly high among children whose families face challenges around unstable housing and parental mental health, and children facing food insecurity or inadequate routines (such as getting sufficient sleep or having regular times for homework) can find it harder to learn.

How Does the Larger Economic, Political, and Cultural Context Shape Children's Education and Care?

A family's ability to ensure that their children have stable education and care can be affected by a range of factors, some of which are personal to the family and others shaped by the larger economic, political, and cultural context in which they live. These factors can also affect the capacity or willingness of other actors to support families in this area: for example, the significant shortages of both quality affordable child care and early education programs as well as high-quality schools, particularly in communities with lower incomes, are related to policy decisions about investments and allocation of public education and child care resources. Separately, the disconnection between the labor market's demands for workers to work at all hours and schedules and the consistent daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly schedules of most formal education and child care programs do not align with these larger labor market demands. This misalignment leaves many parents struggling to help their children be in settings where they can learn and be safe. These contextual issues and others can affect what resources families have, the characteristics of the communities in which they live, how they spend their time and with whom they spend it, what services and supports they have access to from other actors, and the quality of those services and supports—all of which can affect parents' ability to help their child have predictable and stable education and care.

Which Actors Can Affect the Stability of Education and Care?

Education and care can be affected by numerous actors, including *parents or guardians, education and child care providers, family and friends, employers, social service providers, civic and faith organizations*, and *safety, law, and justice authorities*. Each is described below.

PARENTS OR GUARDIANS
Key mechanisms: direct interactions
For simplicity, we use the term "parent" to refer to both parents and guardians.

Parents play a key role in shaping the stability of children's education and care. Aside from being a main source of education and care for their children, parents are responsible for enrolling their children in the education and care settings that best meet their children's needs for both education and supervision. They may also try to enroll children in extracurricular educational and care opportunities to further develop their skills and abilities. Parents may also support and stabilize children's need for education by helping them with homework or accessing extra help when their children

are struggling or by partnering with the school to identify how to best meet their children's needs. This can include, for example, parents working to get an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) that allows their child to get the extra learning supports that he or she may need if they face special challenges. IEP's are important for parents whose children have physical or developmental disabilities or learning challenges.

However, parents can face significant challenges in trying to ensure that their children's needs for quality education and care are met in a stable way. In some cases, this is because of parents' personal issues, such as physical or mental health challenges that make it hard for them to effectively support their children's education. However, many larger structural challenges related to economic, policy, and cultural forces can shape parents' ability to meet their children's need for stable access to quality education and care. The public child care system and larger child care market does not provide parents with many options for quality care during nontraditional work hours, leaving parents who work evenings, nights, and weekends struggling to make sure their children receive care. Policies and investment levels shape the education and care options that parents have—for example, current funding levels and policy decisions for child care assistance are such that only a fraction of eligible families can get help paying for child care, and school resources and services vary widely between communities with higher and lower incomes. Inadequate resources can affect schools' ability to meet children's extra learning needs, making it challenging for parents in communities with fewer resources to get an IEP or disability-related services for their children. Other realities that parents face, such as housing mobility or food insecurity can also threaten their ability to meet their children's education and care needs.

EDUCATION AND CHILD CARE PROVIDERS
Key mechanisms: direct interactions, information and access, control over time

Education and child care providers directly affect the stability of children's access to education and care. High-quality providers foster interactions that allow children to thrive, facilitating the development of both their content knowledge and social and emotional skills. Education and child care providers may also buffer the effect of other forces on the stability of children's education by providing the child experiencing instability with extra supports at school, developmentally appropriate instruction, after-school tutoring, and individualized education and care. For children with developmental disabilities, providers may tailor instruction, develop alternate lesson plans, or integrate classroom procedures that support the learning of all children, regardless of ability. Finally, education and child care providers may also directly reduce the effect of instability by referring parents to resources within or adjacent to the school setting such as counselors, school psychologists, free meal programs, subsidized after-school activities, or other supports, all of which can support children's learning.

However, education and child care providers' ability to provide a safe, engaging environment for children to learn and grow can be constrained by more systemic challenges around funding levels and policies that challenge their ability to flexibly meet family's needs and/or limit their ability to attract and retain highly qualified staff or invest in training or other quality-improvement activities. As a result, education and child care providers can destabilize children's learning by not having adequate care and high-quality instruction. And an absence of providers willing or able to provide certain services—that is, to provide care during nontraditional hours or meet children's special needs—can result in missed opportunities to stabilize children's access to learning. Moreover, providers may not be given any information or training around identifying signs of instability or what to do if they see such signs, and they may live in communities where extra

supports (e.g., tutoring, referrals for individualized services) to help buffer children against instability are not available. Finally, education and child care providers not supported in understanding how to help children facing challenges can also exacerbate the consequences of instability for children—for example, expulsions and suspensions may further destabilize children's education and contribute to additional family instability.

FAMILY AND FRIENDS
Key mechanisms: direct interactions, information and access, control over time

Family and friends can stabilize children's education and care by providing care on a formal or informal basis for young children and during after-school hours for older children. They can also participate in children's academic pursuits, such as helping with homework or tutoring. They may also facilitate access by helping with transportation to and from education and care settings or provide parents with information about high-quality education and care settings. Family and friends may also buffer against instability by filling gaps in care when needed or lending aid, such as loaning parents a car to help take the child to school or money for education and care when resources are tight.

However, family and friends may also miss the chance to help stabilize children's access to education and care if they fail to recognize the problem or don't or can't share pertinent information around high-quality education and care. If they are the caregiver, they can also directly destabilize education and care by providing low-quality care, characterized by an inadequate understanding of how to support children's healthy development, a lack of vigilance, harsh or punitive discipline, and/or an unsafe environment. They may also exacerbate parents' ability to facilitate high-quality education and care by draining parents' mental, emotional, and economic resources.

EMPLOYERS
Key mechanisms: income, control over time, and information and access

Employers mainly stabilize access to education and care by affecting the hours that parents need to work, which in turn affects parents' need for child care for younger children as well as out-of-school time for older children. Because of quality child care's high cost, adequate wages can make it easier for parents to pay for stable and high-quality child care arrangements. Regular work schedules that maintain flexibility also facilitate parents' ability to find child care, and in instances when children are sick parental leave allows parents the flexibility to work remotely or take time to care for their children. Finally, albeit uncommon, employers may buffer against instability by helping employees with their child care needs through employee assistance programs. These programs may help parents find adequate education and care for their children, help eligible parents access public subsidies, provide transportation subsidies to help parents get to and from their education and care provider, and/or provide direct subsidies to help parents pay for care or provide on-site care.

Alternatively, employers who have irregular, nontraditional, or short-notice work schedules and/or who don't or can't provide leave or flexibility for parents to meet their children's needs may contribute to parents' challenges in trying to find stable, quality care. Employer policies around work schedules and parental leave also can make it harder for families to participate in their children's education, which is an important aspect of supporting children's success. Further, parents

working for employers who pay low wages can face greater challenges in ensuring that their children's needs for stable education and care are met.

SOCIAL SERVICE PROVIDERS
Key mechanisms: information and access, benefits

Social service providers can help stabilize children's access to quality education or child care by helping parents find care and/or making referrals to education and care providers and settings. They may also provide or help parents access benefits, such as subsidies, scholarships, and other financial aid that make certain education and care settings more affordable and attainable.

Yet social service providers may also fail to stabilize children's education and care if they don't or can't offer parents in need the information and access to education and care services their children are eligible for. They also can face challenges in stabilizing access to education and care if they are unable to connect eligible families with financial aid and subsidies they qualify for, if services are not available, if the program's policies and practices make parents jump through too many hoops to access supports, or if policies result in parents being moved quickly to terminate benefits. These challenges can sometimes be caused by the social service providers but often are related to larger structural challenges around funding, resources, and policies.

CIVIC AND FAITH ORGANIZATIONS
Key mechanisms: information and access, direct interactions, benefits

Civic and faith organizations may stabilize children's education by directly providing high-quality education and care services, such as preschools, after-school programs, drop-in programs, and so on, providing free or low-cost space for such programs to operate, or providing staff to help care for children. They may also be a source of information and connect parents with education and care services. Further, in some instances, these organizations may provide public programs or benefits such as subsidies or funding that parents can use.

Alternatively, civic and faith organizations may destabilize children's education by providing low-quality or unstable care if they directly provide the care. In some cases, civic and faith organizations that provide or sponsor education and care services with insufficient oversight may expose children to dangerous, predatory adults and compromise both the quality of care and children's healthy development and education.

SAFETY, JUSTICE, AND LAW AUTHORITIES
Key mechanisms: direct interactions

Safety, justice, and law authorities stabilize children's access to education by providing children and families the safety they need to commute to school, have safe outdoor places to play, and foster a safe environment free from danger where

children can learn and grow. From the crossing guard to the school resource officer, these authorities simultaneously affect multiple needs (e.g., safety, education). By helping children feel safe and secure in their communities, neighborhoods, and places of education and care, these authorities foster an environment where children can learn and flourish both in school and at home. Agencies that ensure the basic health and safety of the learning environment, such as the child care licensing agency or the facilities oversight component of the school system, also can play a role in ensuring that children are safe from harm while they are at school, thus facilitating their ability to learn.

Alternatively, safety, justice, and law authorities can contribute to instability in children's learning environments if they don't or can't actively work to keep children's environments safe and healthy—which can make it harder for children to learn and grow. Exposure to community violence affects children's educational outcomes, and the presence of police officers in schools, as currently implemented, has sometimes been correlated with harsher student treatment— in particular of Black students. Moreover, school resource officers may miss an opportunity to stabilize children if they do not have access to resources (such as counselors). Further, when safety, justice, and law authorities directly intervene in ways that children experience as harsh or punitive or racially biased, children's sense of safety is affected, which in turn can affect their ability to learn.

Selected Resources

Henly, Julia R., and Gina Adams. 2018. *Increasing Access to Quality Child Care for Four Priority Populations.* Washington, DC: Urban Institute.

Morrissey, Taryn. 2019. "The Effects of Early Care and Education on Children's Health." Bethesda, MD: Health Affairs.

Yoshikawa, Hirokazu, Christina Weiland, Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, Margaret R. Burchinal, Linda M. Espinosa, William T. Gormley, … and Martha J. Zaslow. 2013. "Investing in Our Future: The Evidence Base on Preschool Education." New York: Foundation for Child Development.

Stabilizing Children's Lives—A Web of Stabilizing Supports

Stability in children's environments, relationships, and basic needs being met is critical for their healthy development and well-being. Instability—defined as the experience of abrupt and/or involuntary change in individual, family, or community circumstances—can create significant barriers to meeting these foundational needs, particularly if the disruption is negative, frequent, or not buffered by an adult. The extent to which children experience instability is related to the actions of various **actors**, with **parents and guardians** primary among them, who together play an important role in the stability of meeting children's **core needs** and can buffer children from instability through different **mechanisms**. However, all relationships and interactions demonstrated in the model, and the ability of different actors to actively support stability in meeting children's core needs, are shaped by the greater contexts of the **economy**, **policy**, and **culture**. Finally, the model's different elements are highly **interconnected**, as they are all part of the child's **web of stabilizing supports**.

For more information, visit https://www.urban.org/ stabilizing-children to see the conceptual model and documents about each core need and each actor.
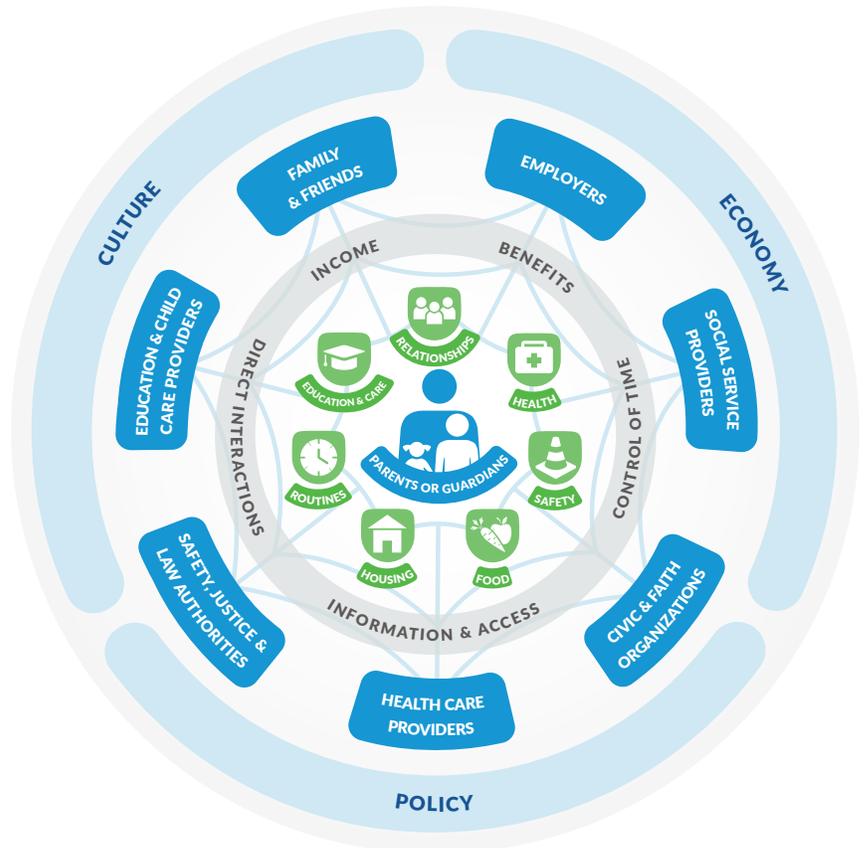
CORE NEEDS

All children need stability in three core areas: **relationships** with at least one loving, caring adult, access to basic resources (**food**, **health**, **housing**, **education**), and daily life (**routine**, **safety**). The **parent or guardian** directly or indirectly helps children access most core needs and serves as a child's central buffer against stress and instability.

MECHANISMS

Children's core needs can be stabilized or destabilized through different mechanisms, or the ways in which different actors affect core needs. Key mechanisms include **income**, **benefits**, **direct interactions**, **information and access**, and **control over time.**

ACTORS

Although **parents or guardians** are the central actors affecting a child's core needs, other actors can affect the stability of these needs being met through mechanisms that affect children directly, or indirectly through parents. Key actors include but are not limited to **employers**; **social service providers**; **health care providers**; **civic and faith organizations**, **safety**, **justice**, **and law authorities**; **education and child care providers**; and **family and friends**.

CONTEXT

The ways in which actors in the model affect children's core needs are shaped by the **cultural**, **economic**, and **political** climate in which all actors live. These overlapping contexts affect what resources families have,

how they spend their time and with whom they spend it, their communities, what services and supports they have access to from other actors, and the quality of those services and supports—all of which can be stabilizing or destabilizing for children. These contextual factors also shape the ability of key actors to support stability in children's lives.

THE WEB OF INTERCONNECTIONS

All actors and core needs in the cycle of family stability are interrelated, as illustrated by the **web** in the model. The impact of one actor on a child's life can not only affect the stability of a child's core needs being met, but can also reverberate back out and affect the stability of that child's relationship with another actor. Moreover, the stability of any given core need can affect the stability of other core needs.

Acknowledgments

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