STABILIZING CHILDREN'S LIVES

Routines

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Stable routines serve a dual function for supporting children's healthy development. First and foremost, they create a sense of predictability and structure for children's lives that children rely on to feel safe and secure, which is essential for children's ability to learn and grow. Without routines, children must navigate an environment that lacks predictability and structure, and they are at risk for feeling unsafe, ultimately compromising their feelings of security, independence, and trust, which in turn can affect their ability to learn and develop healthily.

Routines also play an important role in allowing children to engage in social interactions that nurture positive child and youth development and to practice healthy habits, and research has shown they have positive effects for children's academic, physical, and social-emotional development. For example, for young children, regular meal times offer rich context for language development and the practice of social and emotional skills that are foundational to healthy development; for older children, similar meal time routines offer parents and caregivers an opportunity to check in on the safety and mental health of their children. Having regular time for homework can be an important way to support older children's school performance. Bedtime routines help children sleep more easily, which is important given the essential role of sleep in affecting children's health and ability to learn. It also can be an opportunity for other important practices, such as reading time—with parents for younger children, or on their own for older children—which is important for language development.

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.

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

A family's ability to ensure that their children have predictable, stable routines 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—factors which also can affect the capacity or willingness of other actors to support families in this area. These can be seen in structural issues that affect what resources families have, 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 routines.

Which Actors Can Affect the Stability of Routines?

Routines can be affected by numerous actors, including *parents or guardians, friends and family, education and child care providers, employers,* and *health care providers.* 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 the most central role in shaping the stability of children's routines. They can work to establish and maintain children's daily schedules and routines and engage with others who care for their children—such as education and care providers or family and friends—to try to ensure that the children's care is predictable. They also can try to buffer children from factors that can destabilize routines, such as by reaching out to friends and family to help stabilize routines if the family faces a crisis or stepping in when child care providers are unreliable.

However, parents may face challenges in their efforts to ensure that their children have stable routines. Parents who face physical or mental health problems, or who are struggling with many other challenges, may have difficulty establishing or maintaining predictable routines with children. Structural issues beyond parents' control can also create challenges for predictable routines. These include, for example, irregular work hours controlled by employers or school schedules that challenge routines (such as summer vacation or holiday breaks), both of which may make it difficult to find consistent, predictable care for children, or being inadequately housed, which can make regular meal times, homework, and going to sleep very challenging. Some of these challenges are affected by other actors who can directly or indirectly destabilize routines as well (as is described in the sections below). Finally, parents may find it difficult to buffer children from outside forces that can make their lives unpredictable, such as unreliable caregivers.

FAMILY AND FRIENDS
Key mechanisms: direct interactions

Family and friends can stabilize children's routines by directly setting routines with the child (e.g., having a regular time or set activities when they are with the child), continuing to carry out established routines in the absence of parents (e.g., maintaining routines while caregiving or babysitting), or actively helping parents who are struggling to establish

routines. They can also provide supports to children whose families are facing significant challenges or instability by offering them some stability and predictability through visits or other supports.

Family and friends can also miss an opportunity to help stabilize children's routines if they fail to recognize the problem or choose not to help stabilize the child's routines when the family is struggling. They can directly destabilize routines by contributing to a household environment of conflict, overcrowding, and general chaos, which may keep children from having predictable routines such as going to bed at the same time each night or getting up and going to school on time. Finally, they can contribute to instability by affecting the parent's ability to establish strong routines and a sense of predictability.

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

Education and child care providers can directly affect the stability of children's routines by establishing a sense of structure and predictability in the classroom. High-quality care providers employ practices that allow children to anticipate the next activity and develop a sense of trust and independence. Education and child care providers may also buffer the effect of other forces on the stability of children's routines by providing the child experiencing instability with extra supports at school, providing their parents with information on the importance of keeping regular routines, and encouraging parents to carry routines over from the classroom into the home (e.g., reading routines). Finally, education and child care providers may also directly reduce the effect of instability by helping families access other services they need to address the core issues causing instability, such as helping refer parents to social services or other supports.

Yet providers' ability to establish strong routines and predictable schedules for children can be challenged by external factors, ranging from funding levels and challenges retaining teachers and keeping down turnover rates to challenges in parents' lives that result in high levels of absenteeism. Providers may not be trained to identify signs of instability or know what to do to help them, and they may be faced with shortages in the services that can help stabilize children and reinstitute predictability in their lives. Further, education and care providers face special challenges in trying to support predictable care settings for children whose parents work nontraditional hours; these children can have less predictable routines because of challenges in finding child care providers during their parents' work hours. Finally, education and child care providers who rely on the use of expulsions and suspensions to manage children's behavior problems risk further destabilizing children's education and exacerbating family instability.

EMPLOYERS
Key mechanisms: benefits, control over time, and income

Employers can affect the stability of children's routines by providing families with a predictable schedule, a stable income, and a work environment that allows for work-family balance. These not only have the potential to support predictable home schedules and routines, but also are likely to foster lower levels of stress and increase flexibility for parents, which in turn will likely make it easier for parents to maintain the capacity to support routines at home. Employers can also buffer against instability for parents who are facing challenges by providing extra supports, such as employee assistance

programs and flexible leave, to help stabilize them and their ability to provide their children with a supportive, predictable environment.

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 providing stable routines for their children, as well as parents' ability to facilitate other routines like regular family meal times and predictable child care routines. These scenarios may also increase parental stress, compromising parents' mental health.

HEALTH CARE PROVIDERS
Key mechanisms: information and access

Health care providers can help stabilize children's routines and sense of security by educating parents on the importance of setting routines (such as regular bedtimes and meal times) for healthy child development during well-child visits and other health-related appointments. Specifically, health care providers may ask parents what routines they have established already, help parents understand the importance of routines and predictable schedules, provide parents with resources on how to set up regular routines in the home, and answer parents' questions about maintaining consistent routines. They can work with parents who are experiencing significant instability and help them think through how to stabilize certain aspects of the child's life.

Although health care providers are unlikely to take actions that destabilize routines, they can miss an opportunity to stabilize routines if they don't have the time or ability to help parents understand the importance of routines in children's development. For example, health care providers who are under time constraints because of the health care system's demands may not have time to ask parents about the home environment, including routines such as regular meal times and bed times. That's a missed opportunity to help parents create predictable routines that can help children feel safe.

Selected Resources

Roche, Kathleen M., and Ghazarian, Sharon R. 2012. "The Value of Family Routines for the Academic Success of Vulnerable Adolescents." *Journal of Family Issues* 33 (7): 874–97.

Spagnola, Mary, and Barbara H. Fiese. 2007. "Family Routines and Rituals: A Context for Development in the Lives of Young Children." *Infants & Young Children* 20 (4): 284–99.

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.
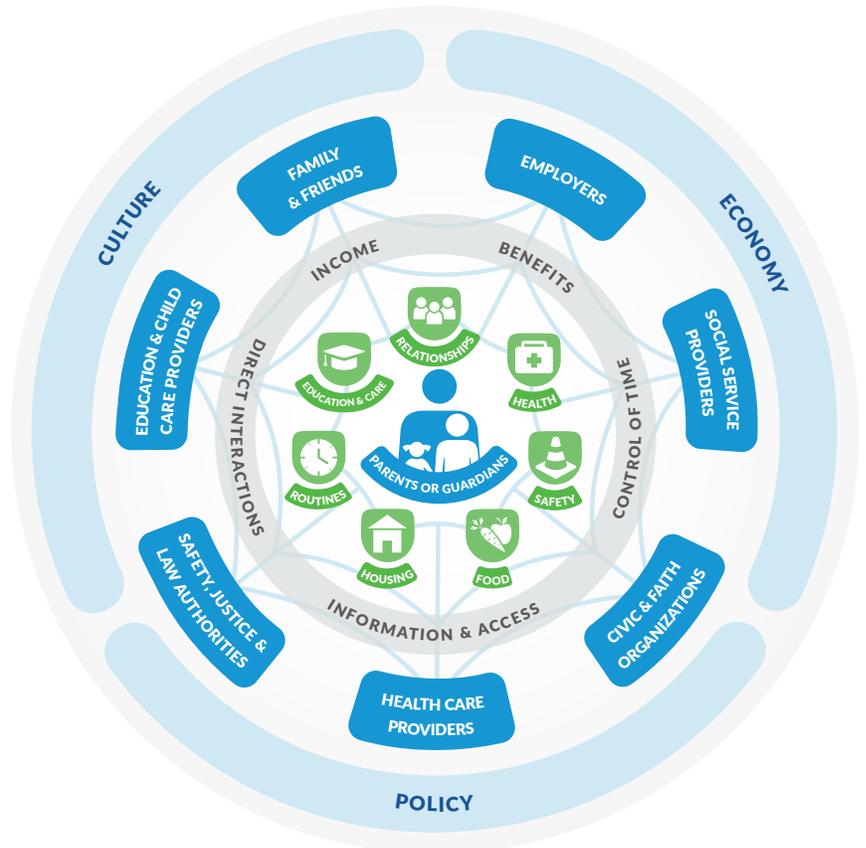
CORE NEEDS

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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