Tips for Nurturing Protective and Positive Childhood Experiences

Exposure to Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) can have lasting impact on infants, children and young people. Exposure to ACEs can increase risk for changes in brain anatomy, mental health challenges, behavioural difficulties and delays in social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development etc. A high ACE score is also linked to longer engagement with services, impacting service costs and capacity to see others. Despite high ACE scores, some young people "do OK". ACEs are only part of a person's life journey and who they are. The question is then, what factors create a level of protectiveness that helped them to 'survive and thrive' despite difficult childhoods?

Positive Childhood Experiences (PCEs) are the activities and experiences that shape a young person's life, development and future health. They are experiences that can buffer against the negative lifelong health effects caused by exposure to ACEs. Young people need experiences that help them to grow, learn and to trust others even when life is uncertain, difficult or frightening. Protective factors, and PCEs, are experiences that can be implemented in multiple environments and settings, and the types of experiences that have the most healing are not ones that can be bought nor need to cost a lot of money.

The ETS Nurturing Protective and PCE Framework, provides empirical evidence-based tangible steps to buffering the negative impact of ACEs. The framework can assist caregivers, support agencies and stakeholders in developing a plan of action. At the centre of the framework are several core messages young people need to hear, and integrate, in order to increase ACE protection and recovery. These messages can be developed, and reinforced, by implementing five (5) core action-oriented protective and PCE actions/behaviours.

Meet individuals and families basic needs (e.g., health, nutrition, exercise, housing, academic, culture)

Everyone has their own unique set of needs. Abraham Maslow's 'Hierarchy of Needs' has been one of the most cited theories of human behaviour and need. At the base of the pyramid is physiological needs (such as food, water and air). In the ETS framework, in addition to Maslow's 'physiological needs', we encourage a core number of other basic human needs (e.g., health, nutrition, exercise, housing, academic, culture). Having these basic needs met helps support and/or promote resiliency and recovery.

Some ideas to nurture these can include:
- Increase actual and perceived safety (environmental, relationships etc)
- Make sure young person has time to have fun and participate in activities they enjoy
- Ensure young person, for instance:
  - gets recommended and sufficient sleep
  - maintains good quality sleep hygiene practices
  - has limited access to technology/smart devices
  - engages in regular recommended level of exercise
  - is eating a healthy balanced diet, inclusive of cultural food, and drinking plenty of water
- Ensuring medical/physical health needs are met
- Increase access to educational/vocational experiences and required supports
- Access to, and residing, in a safe and consistent home environment

- Increase access to requires services to support identified needs
- Increase access to safe, equitable and 'stable' environments to play and learning
- Teaching the importance of basic self-care
- Access to and use of clothing (matched to climate/temperature and needs)
- Access to and use of health and mental health care, including social and emotional wellbeing services
- Access to education that supports identified learning, emotional and developmental needs.
- Connection to culture and access to required Social and Emotional Wellbeing needs
- Teach them to seek help when needed
- Reduce stigma around help-seeking
- Develop an atmosphere where young person/carers can access resources in times of need and for self-care.

Support through nurturing, supportive and positive relationships

Early relationships affect all areas of our development and our internal working models (how we view ourselves, others and the world around us). The quality of the attachment relationship between a young person and their caregiver is crucial and therefore, the capacity of the caregiver to respond in 'sensitive' ways to the young person's 'cues' or signals is paramount. If a caregiver responds and meets the need/s in a meaningful, accurate, and appropriate way consistently, the young person learns to trust that their needs will be met. This leads to greater attachment security, increased sense of self and increased level of protection.

Some ideas to nurture these can include:
- Provide stable, consistent, predictable relationships
- Enhance attachment-based parenting practices
- Offer a warm and nurturing environment
- Increase level of actual and perceived safety (environmental, interpersonal, interactional, cultural etc)
- Recognise trauma-related behaviours in young person so your reaction to their behaviour does not further traumatise the young person
- 'Read' or identify the unique cues and signals from young person – to be aware of their needs and wants
- Interpret the cue/s or signal/s
- Meet the needs the young person is communicating in a meaningful, accurate, and appropriate way
- Develop a sense of belonging and acceptance
- Identify and giving 'space' to play, explore and 'do their own thing'.
- Showing / providing affection and 'delighting in'
- Responding predictably rather than unpredictably
- Build mutual trust
- Listen deeply and nonjudgmentally – use of active or reflective listening skills
- Enhance 'parent'-young person communication
- Provide clear and consistent messages and communication
- Don't betray young person's fragile trust
- Keep your word
- Prioritise time to connect
- Model appropriate apologies (rupture and repair)
- Support relationship where young person can talk about their feelings and difficult situations
- Stand by young person during difficult situations and times
- Acknowledge when situations are stressful
- Acknowledge when challenging emotions arise
- Spend quality time with the young person – it's the quality not the quantity that counts

- Provide clear guidance, structure and rule-setting
- Give young person time and 'be present' when you are with them
- Act as a role model that the young person can look up to.

Recognise that all of this can take time and that there will be changes with age and stage of development.

Create positive environments for social, emotional and cultural wellbeing

Nurturing, supportive and positive relationships is critical, so are the environments young person live/engages in. If an environment is not safe:
- o the survival brain is triggered
- o increased chance of an amygdala highjack (flight/flight/freeze).

Once there is a level of 'safety' then development, growth and positive child experiences are more likely to occur. Critical environments can include home/placement/family, co-tenants, friends/peers, school, community activities, and the personal internal world (spiritual/emotional).

Some ideas to nurture these can include:

Environmental
- Reflective, understanding and adaptive environments and systems
- Create an environment that values the importance of social emotional and cultural wellbeing
- Ensure structure in the environment, including clear and predicable rules
- Provide a flexible and supportive learning environment, e.g., teacher aides, mentors, after-school programs, tailored academic program
- Provide opportunities for the young person to be successful and to have fun
- Give opportunities to learn and practice learnt skills
- Adults regular checking-in with the young person – connection and support orientated
- Accept and celebrate the fact that we are all different
- Ensure there is a predictable routine
- Implement clear and transparent rules
- Enhance teacher-young person connection/relationship
- Adults to model what it looks like to have healthy, supportive relationships with friends, and encourage young person to find the same qualities in friends they choose.
- Adults to listen and respond patiently to young person in a supportive way
- Young person supported to engage in safe and mutual relationships with peers
- Establish environments that values individual contributions, perspectives, differences, and strengths
- Being inclusive of young person's identity, culture, gender and sexuality
- Do fun things together. Choose activities they enjoy
- Help them with homework
- Ensuring it's okay for the young person to express their feelings and thoughts
- Talk about and celebrate their success, strengths, skills and efforts
- Express pride when they take responsibility and follow through on correcting a behaviour/response
- Focusing on developing solutions
- Reduce stigma around help-seeking.

Interpersonal
- Don't assume that the young person is 'doing fine' just because they are not showing obvious signs of distress
- Caregiver/guardian to be involved in young person's education and activities
- Be clear about your expectations
- Adult expectations are tailored to the actual ability of the young person
- Take an interest in what they do/like/don't like etc

- Provide message of hope and that change is possible
- Provide positive messages of cultural
- Promote opportunities that build healthy relationships
- Identify, support and build on young person's strengths
- Improve peer relationships by explicitly teaching skills of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision-making.
- Foster positive relationships (across all levels)
- Refrain from lectures. Use difficult times as opportunities for growth:
  - talk about what can be learned from challenging circumstances
  - support them in making a plan address the situation
- Be prepared to pre-empt and address potential difficulties
  - show rather than tell
  - role model rather than 'doing for'
  - provide adult supervision during critical periods of the days/implementing new skills
- Maintain regular check-ins
- Nurture a space to explore thoughts, feelings and concerns
- Work through problems and stressors together
- Discuss what to do if something seems 'off' or feels uncomfortable
- Act as a role model that the young person can look up to
- Be a resilient adult in the young person's life: adults who know how to solve problems, manage own emotions/stress, have healthy relationships with other etc.

Individual
- Learn to give and take constructive feedback
- Enhance caregiver resilience and supports
- Asking young persons what they want to happen – increase involvement in decision making.
- Ask what they're concerned about and listen without judgment
- Help them learn to set boundaries and practice self-care
- Increase sense of responsibility in different environments.

Engagement
- Identify and ensure access to required support services, including mental health and wellbeing
- Increase relationship with other young person and appropriate adults and/other young people through interpersonal activities
- Encourage and support participation in recreational activities
- Ensure safe and mutual relationships with peers
- Ensure regular participation in social clubs/community groups.

Keep in mind critical 'environments' can include, home/placement/family, co-tenants, friends/peers, school, community activities, and the personal internal world (spiritual/emotional).

Build resilience through learning knowledge/skills needed (e.g., social, emotional, physical, sexual, cognitive, language, academic, cultural)

As a result of compromised early childhood and trauma (including intergenerational and racism), young people often have missed out on critical developmental knowledge and skills (social, emotional, physical, sexual, cognitive, language, academic, cultural, etc) which has wide reaching negative implications. It is important to understand what these are, and to look behind the current presenting 'behaviour' and consider what appropriate knowledge/skills they might have missed out on. Just because they are 10-years old does not mean they are functioning/have the knowledge of a 10-year-old.

Some ideas to nurture these can include:
- Understand/clarify current knowledge and skills (e.g., social, emotional, physical, sexual, cognitive, language, academic, cultural, etc)

- Support development of relevant knowledge and skills gaps by creating/enhancing learning environments that are flexible and supportive
- Provide a flexible and supportive learning environment (e.g., teacher aides, mentors, after-school programs, tailored academic program, cultural plans)
- Give opportunities to learn and practice learnt skills
- Engage young person with mentors and/or after-school programs (e.g., tutoring and homework assistance)
- Help increase skills related to communication, problem-solving, conflict management, empathy, coping, and emotional awareness and regulation
- Foster healthy and positive norms around gender, masculinity, sexuality
- Teach safe dating and healthy relationship skills
- Teach appropriate/prosocial help seeking skills and behaviours
- Explore what is and is not in their sphere of influence/control, and how to responsibly influence what they can
- Increase understanding and knowledge regarding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Emotional Wellbeing
- Enhance Social Emotional Wellbeing and cultural needs
- Engage in developmentally appropriate interactions with young person
- Have an understanding on trauma, impact of, and young person's individual needs (met/unmet)
- Look beyond their behaviour to their 'unmet' needs – be a 'needs detective'
- Helping young person interact in a healthy way with others, manage their emotions and communicate their feelings and needs
- Model taught skills via natural experiences/situations
- Increase consistency across all environments of knowledge/skills that young person is being exposed to. If there is no consistency in language/skills, or these being reinforced, there is an increased chance of confusing the young person and language/skills not being learnt/used.
- Provide a flexible and supportive learning environment, e.g., teacher aides, mentors, after-school programs, tailored academic program
- Provide opportunities for the young person to be successful and to have fun
- Give opportunities to learn and practice learnt skills
- Talk about and celebrate their success, strengths, skills and efforts.

**Grow** positive outcomes by promoting individual development

Although early life development can help shape us as adults, personal development does not stop in the early/formative years. Setting goals helps trigger new behaviours, helps guide focus and helps sustain momentum in life. Goals also help align focus and promote a sense of self-mastery. This also increases the young person's sense of self autonomy and agency. What personal goals/interest do they have? Now and future?

Some ideas to nurture these can include:
- Increase positive beliefs about self:
  - Belief that life has meaning; goals
  - Spirituality and faith; hope
- Increase positive beliefs about cultural self
- Understanding current capacity in critical knowledge/skills will assist individual development.
- Enhance self-awareness
- Increase appropriate help seeking behaviours
- Empower them to try new things and explore their passions
- Connect them with trusted adults and groups/communities who are positive influences
- Encourage an interest, hobby or skill
- Increase perceived sense of control and efficacy

- Recognise young person's talents and interests – sometimes they may not even be aware of these.
- Include the young person in your own goal setting to show how the process works
- Lead by example – how to cope with setbacks etc
- Encourage them to choose goals that are realistic and attainable - be sure that the young person identifies the goal, otherwise motivation to achieve will be limited.
- Brainstorm specific goals that can be measured (e.g., "I want to get to school before the bell,")
- Teach them to break goals into smaller, manageable steps
- Use visual aids so they can check in on goals regularly and mark off steps as they accomplish them
- When small steps and the overarching goal is achieved, celebrate wins
- Make sure they know that while it is important to work towards a goal, it is also okay if they don't achieve their desired result
- Be alert to possibilities
- Increase skills in time management
- Enhance skills to cope with the small setbacks that might stand in their way
- Increase capacity to keep trying and rework steps to achieve goals until they meet them
- Talking about ways they have successfully handled challenges in the past and help them understand that these past difficulties help build the strength to handle future challenges
- Recognise and compliment young person when they take responsible 'risks' and challenge themselves -even, and maybe especially, when they don't achieve the desired results.

What am I going to …
Keep doing?
Stop doing?
Start doing?
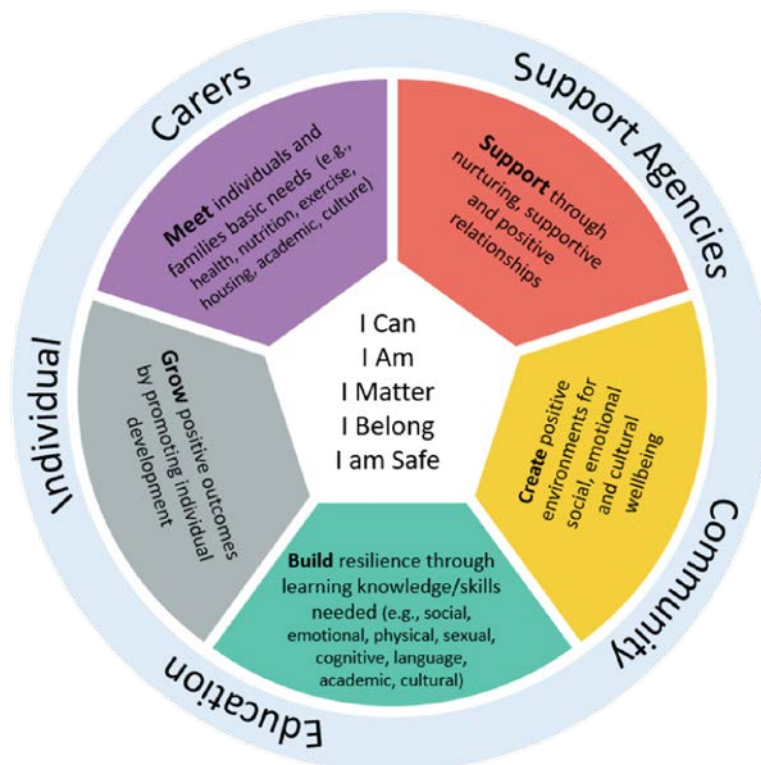
Adapted from Srivastav A, Strompolis M, Moseley A, Daniels K. (2020) *The Empower Action Model: A Framework for Preventing Adverse Childhood Experiences by Promoting Health, Equity, and Well-Being Across the Life Span. Health Promotion Practice.* 21 (4): 525-534), and influenced by the works of Urie Bronfenbrenner, Kim Golding, and Judith