

The Four Building Blocks of HOPE

For Caregivers Who Have Been Incarcerated

Research has shown that Positive Childhood Experiences (PCEs) can help protect against the poor health outcomes associated with Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). These PCEs can be categorized by Four Building Blocks.



Relationships within the family and with other children and adults through interpersonal activities.

Being in nurturing, supportive relationships are critical for children to develop into healthy, resilient adults. Individuals that recall having these types of relationships during childhood experience significantly lower rates of depression and poor mental health

during adulthood. What kinds of relationships are we talking about?

- Foundational relationships with parents who respond to a child's needs and offer warm, responsive reactions.
- Adults outside of the family, like grandparents, teachers, and coaches who take a genuine interest in a child.
- Healthy, close, and positive relationships with peers.

What can you do to promote access to Relationships as you prepare to return to your community?

- Be a supportive relationship! Write letters or draw pictures to mail to your loved ones. Create fill in the blank questions to learn about their latest favorite things. Encourage them to mail their answers back to you.
- Call them regularly, ideally at the same time each week. Have a simple set of open-ended questions to learn about their week such as “What made you laugh today?” “What was one thing you did today that you enjoyed?” or “What was a highlight from your week? Any low lights to share with me?”.

- Connect with the adults who have been supporting your children during your incarceration (i.e. day care providers, teachers, relatives, friends, etc.). Be curious to learn about how your children have been doing, and how they are processing your return.
- Validate the supportive, healthy relationships your children have made with other adults. Assure them that those relationships won't go away when you return. Celebrate those relationships and encourage consistent connection with those individuals.
- Begin looking for resources that might be able to support you and your loved ones when you get home.
- During visitation, play a game with your children. Ask them open-ended questions. Ask them "What questions do you want me to answer?". Thank the person that brought them.

It takes a village, and the larger the village, the more opportunities a child has for connection and support.



Safe, stable, and equitable environments for living, playing, and learning at home and in school.

Children who live, learn, and play in safe, stable, and equitable environments are less likely to experience poor mental and physical health as adults. What do we mean by safe, stable, and equitable environments?

- A safe, stable environment secure in meeting a child's basic needs, including adequate food, shelter, and health care.
- A nurturing home where a child is emotionally secure.
- A stable school environment where children feel valued and receive high-quality education.
- A community environment to play and interact with other children safely and equitably.

How can you promote access to safe, stable, and equitable environments?

- Make sure your children feel safe at school. Directly ask them about bullying and teasing related to your incarceration. If you have concerns, follow-up with their caregiver about contacting the school.
- Ask your children "Who is a safe adult at school or at home that you feel you can always talk to?"

- Consider the safety of your home. Are there people who may want to visit you when you get home who would not be safe for the children to be around? How can you prevent that from happening?
- Research the community resources before going home! There is no shame in accessing support for food, clothing, transportation, and utilities.
- Ask the adults who are taking care of the children about safety issues in the home, including access to guns, medications, alcohol, and drugs. Make a plan to take care of any risks you hear about.
- Be curious about where your children go to play and hang out with friends. Help them identify what makes a safe or unsafe space. Do you know the parents of their friends? Reach out to the parent or trusted adult that will be at the location and ask them about the supervision that will be provided. Ask a trusted person to pop in during one of the playdates or visits to say “hello” and meet everyone. Always have a safe person identified that your child could talk to if they feel unsafe or feel something happened that was upsetting.



Social and civic engagement to develop a sense of belonging and connectedness.

Children need to feel part of something bigger than themselves to develop a sense of mattering. What are some examples of social and civic engagement?

- Being involved in projects, peer mentoring, or community service through one's school or religious organization.
- Participating in family and cultural traditions.
- Joining a music, art, or sports group.

How can you promote access to social and civic engagement?

- Team activities and sports are a phenomenal way for youth to engage socially.

- Youth groups embedded in spiritual communities can be a safe, supportive space for children and youth to develop that sense of belonging.
- See if your city has a group for children of incarcerated parents. Many nonprofits exist to help create community for those with the shared experience of having a parent in jail or prison.
- Encourage your older children to choose a service project and volunteer in the community together.



Emotional growth through playing and interacting with peers for self-awareness and self-regulation.

Children need to have a lot of opportunities to develop their sense of self-awareness, learn how to self-regulate emotions and behavior, and acquire skills needed to respond functionally and productively to challenges. Many of these skills are learned during child-centered play. Some

children will pick up these skills naturally, but others may need adults to help them name and understand their own feelings. Either way, these skills are critical for children to be able to become resilient, emotionally healthy adults. What do we mean by opportunities for social and emotional growth?

- Developing a sense of emotional and behavioral self-regulation.
- Having the ability to respond to challenges in a productive way.
- Developing key social and culturally-appropriate communication and interpersonal skills.

How can you promote social and emotional growth?

- Help children to name their feelings as they talk about them and what they feel like.
- Remember that disagreements with friends are normal and show children how to disagree respectfully and productively. Use “I feel...” statements. Provide a picture of different faces with different emotions that your child can point to. Remind them it is normal to have all these different feelings and that it is okay to share how you are feeling in a kind way.

- Share your own feelings about your return home and what they feel like in your body. Ask if your children want to talk about their own feelings about your return.
- Encourage social connection the same way you encourage eating healthy foods or exercising.
- Demonstrate emotional regulation so your child and other loved ones learn this from you. Instead of yelling or withdrawing when you are feeling overwhelmed or angry, practice getting your emotions regulated first so your words and actions come from your thinking brain not just your emotional brain. Regulating activities include deep breathing, mindfulness, positive sayings, movement (ex. touching your thumb to each finger), pausing and visualizing a place of calm in your mind, etc.

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