

## STABILIZING CHILDREN'S LIVES

# Employers

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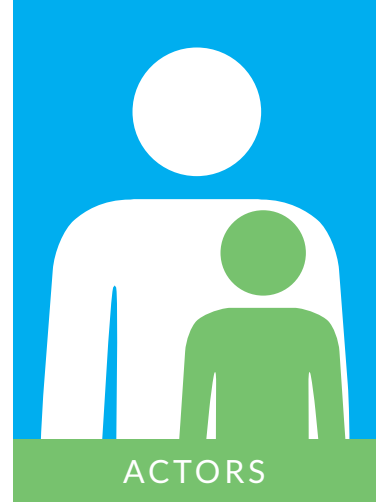
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In this model, employers include anyone who employs parents or guardians to do a job—whether full time, or part time, or otherwise.

### How Do Employers Affect Stability?

Employers can affect both the level and stability of the family's income, as well as whether parents have stable access to key benefits such as health insurance and paid leave. These aspects of income and benefits can individually and collectively affect parents' ability to meet their children's basic needs. Employers can also affect the amount of time parents can spend at home, as well as the stability and quality of that time, through their control over parents' work hours and schedules and the demands they may place on parents' attention outside of work hours. Third, employers affect the quality of the work environment, which affects parental stress and well-being and can in turn affect whether children's basic needs are met in a consistent and stable way. Finally, when parents are struggling in other areas of life, employers' response to these outside stressors can either mitigate or exacerbate instability.

Parents are better able to mentally, physically, and monetarily care for their children and ensure their basic needs are met in a stable and consistent way if they have a stable, sufficient, and predictable income, have stable and predictable work schedules, receive benefits like paid parental leave and health insurance, are afforded flexibility in their work schedules to address family concerns, and have supportive work environments that try to help address their needs. Alternatively, employers who offer low, unstable, or unpredictable wages, minimal or no benefits, irregular schedules, and/or poor-quality work environments can make it challenging for parents to stably meet their children's core needs.



### 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 Employers' Ability to Support Children?

Policies that address challenges at the systemic level directly, or require employers to address them, vary across different localities and states, and small business employers may face different challenges in offering benefits compared with larger employers. The labor market—that is, the balance of the supply and demand for labor—also affects employees' bargaining power, potentially increasing the types of benefits they can advocate for if the market is tight or reducing employees' bargaining power for benefits if there is less demand for workers. Employers also face different incentives for different workers. However, regardless of labor market conditions, the policy context, and workers' characteristics, employers can still take proactive steps to support the stability of children and families—the recent proliferation of predictable scheduling laws shows one such effort to take a different approach.

## What Core Needs Do Employers Affect?

Employers can directly or indirectly affect the stability of several core needs for children, including *relationships*, *routines*, *education and care*, *health*, *food*, and *housing*. Each is described below.



### RELATIONSHIPS

**Key mechanisms:** control over time

Employers may indirectly stabilize children's relationships with parents through the effect they have on the amount, schedule, and stability of the time parents have to spend with their children. Parents who work predictable hours and are afforded more flexibility are more likely to be able to spend regular time with their children, facilitating a healthy, stable parent-child relationship. They also have greater ability to deal with unexpected needs (such as a child getting sick at school), which can support children's sense of security. Employers can also affect the stability of other key relationships in children's lives, such as close friends and family, through similar mechanisms.

Parents working for employers who require nontraditional work schedules, in particular irregular schedules, can face more challenges in trying to spend regular time with their children. Nontraditional schedules can make it more difficult for parents to spend time with their children during the day or find stable, loving caregivers to care for their children during work hours. Irregular work hours—when parents' work schedules can change from day to day and week to week—can create even greater challenges for stable relationships on both fronts: parents not only must work to ensure their time with their children is stable, but also find a caregiver who is willing to accommodate these schedule changes. Employers who don't provide parents with paid leave or predictable schedules can make it harder for parents to engage in basic activities with their children—such as taking care of them when they are ill or being involved in their school—which can build trust and healthy relationships. Finally, unpredictable or challenging work schedules can also add to parents' stress, which can also affect their ability to have stable, healthy relationships with their children.



## ROUTINES

**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 to 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.



## EDUCATION AND CARE

**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.



## HEALTH

**Key mechanisms:** information and access, benefits, income, control over time

Employers can indirectly affect children’s health in several ways. For example, providing a livable wage and offering access to affordable health care insurance can directly affect parents’ ability to access and afford health care for their children. Benefits like paid parental leave, which allows parents to physically care for new babies, stabilizes young children’s healthy growth and development by allowing time for bonding and relationship building. Further, flexible hours and teleworking policies that allow parents to care for sick children or organize children’s schedules and routines around child care, school, and doctor’s visits help parents consistently meet their children’s health needs. These issues and needs are especially intense for parents of children with chronic health conditions or developmental disabilities that require long-term medical attention and care. A positive work environment can also support more positive mental health for parents, improving their ability to support their children.

Parents working for employers who offer low wages, little or no benefits, and inconsistent scheduling are likely to find it more challenging to support their children’s healthy development, as they are less likely to have the means and benefits to adequately meet their children’s health needs. Further, poor job conditions increase parental stress, which may further compromise parents’ capacity to meet their children’s needs, health and otherwise.

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## FOOD

**Key mechanisms:** income, information and access

Employers can affect the stability of children’s access to food, primarily through the income they provide parents. Specifically, jobs where parents are paid livable wages and have a predictable and steady income (i.e., work a consistent set of hours over time) seem more likely to support stable access to food for their children. Moreover, employee assistance programs, though somewhat rare, can connect parents with services that may help them stabilize their access to food, and thus their children’s access to food.

Yet parents working for employers who don’t offer livable wages or who offer inconsistent work hours and wages may face more challenges in ensuring stable access to food because of uncertainty in the amount and regularity of household income. Moreover, employers who cannot or do not offer their employees information or referrals to other programs that might help combat food insecurity risk (e.g., the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program—SNAP— or the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children—WIC) can miss an opportunity to help stabilize families’ access to food.

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## HOUSING

**Key mechanisms:** income, information and access

Employers primarily stabilize children’s access to housing by providing parents with sufficient income. Parents working for employers who provide livable wages are more likely able to rent or purchase homes—in safer neighborhoods and of adequate quality—and meet children’s needs, though the affordable housing shortage in some communities means

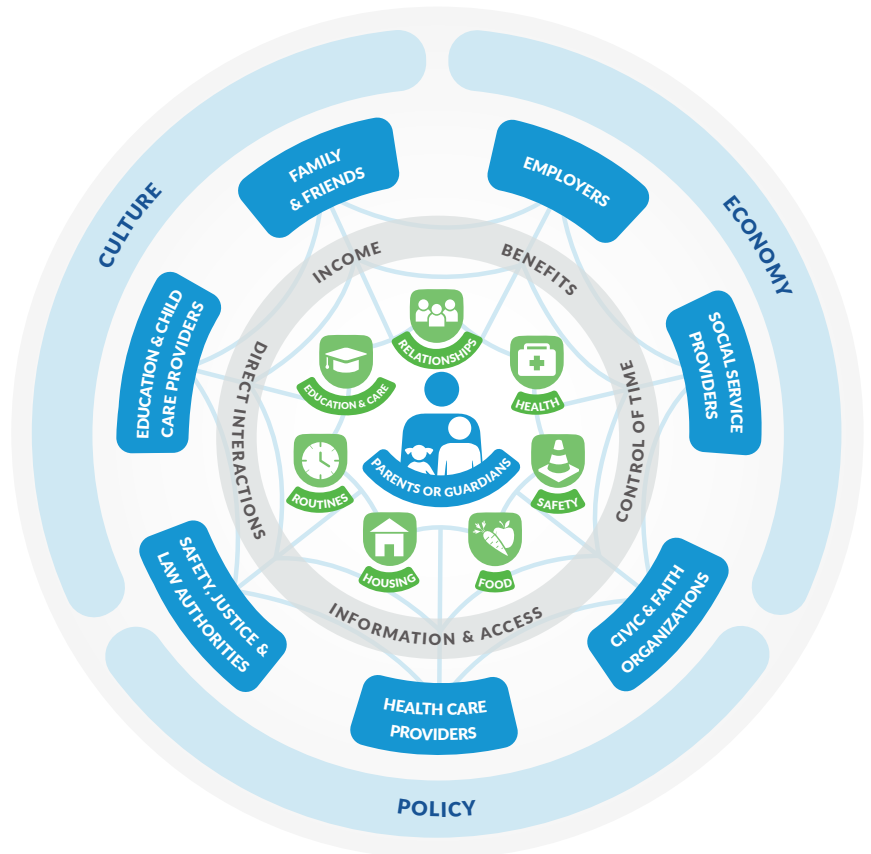
this still may be quite challenging. Employers may also provide information and access to housing information through employee assistance programs, further helping to stabilize parents and children. Moreover, employers' location choices, as well as their openness to teleworking, may allow parents to live in more affordable and stable places.

Parents working for employers who offer low wages are more likely to face challenges in finding adequate resources to rent or purchase sufficient housing, and unpredictable wages may exacerbate challenges in having sufficient funds to pay rent or mortgage, thus leading to housing insecurity. Further, employers who don't or can't offer services like employee assistance programs miss an opportunity to help parents learn about the housing market, housing vouchers, and so on, which could potentially help stabilize children.

# 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.

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