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Tecoria Jones and Edwin Daye are members of the **Birth Parent National Network (BPNN)** and the authors of this issue brief. BPNN members are dedicated parent advocates who share their lived experiences and perspectives with national, state and community leaders and champion prevention strategies and strong, community-based child and family well-being programs.

The BPNN is a dynamic national network of hundreds of parents and organizations working together to strengthen families and communities by engaging the voices of parents. To learn more and join this national network, visit the BPNN website:

[ctfalliance.org/partnering-with-parents/bpnn](http://ctfalliance.org/partnering-with-parents/bpnn)



**Birth Parent National Network (BPNN)**

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# What Parents Say About... Supporting Families to Provide a Strong Start for Their Young Children

By Tecoria Jones and Edwin Daye, Birth Parent National Network (BPNN) Members

During 2020, we have been participating in discussions with Casey Family Programs, Children's Trust Fund Alliance and federal and philanthropic partners on strengthening family-centered primary prevention with a focus on increasing coordination between child and family serving partners. We are pleased to share our thoughts in this paper. We are from different parts of the country – South Carolina and Iowa – and have different parenting experiences. We agree, however, that all families need and benefit from support and that all of us can help ensure a better tomorrow for the children of this country.

This document provides a parent perspective on:

- 1 Access to prevention strategies and the need for more coordination across systems
- 2 Community support for parents in providing a strong, healthy start for their young children
- 3 Special considerations related to COVID-19
- 4 Help from policymakers and leaders in philanthropy, early childhood and the federal government

We believe it is time for us to come together and create a strong foundation for families to thrive. This is going to require change, commitment of multiple partners, funders and accountability. Parents know what our families need. Invite and support us to be key partners in the planning and decision-making processes to develop and implement prevention services for families with a focus on increasing coordination between early childhood/child care and child welfare.

All community partners need to understand the effects of trauma and be able to process it with strength-based language and supports for families. This strength-based language needs to become part of everyday life and systemic practice. The use of a shared strength-based language is how we will promote well-being for all families and communities. It will also help to normalize requests for assistance from parents and caregivers.

We believe we must develop an improved system of coordinated community-based prevention strategies that can help all families with young children access services and

“ **Who are the best system advocates?**  
**The children and families that need support. Just as families are essential, so is meeting our basic needs to be well.** ”  
 Tecoria Jones

resources when they need them. When a family enters the child welfare system, it affects everyone that the family loves and everyone who loves that family. As parents, together with community leaders, we must hold decision-makers accountable for strengthening prevention strategies for families in every community. Coordinated systems need to be developed to assist families in easily navigating the family-strengthening supports and services they need, including early childhood development and child welfare services and resources. We need to look at indicators such as the federal poverty level, Head Start qualifications, and maternal health data and the neuroscience of adversity to better understand service needs and support delivery.

Incorporating the voices of parents with lived experience throughout all of this work will ensure that new and existing prevention strategies respond to the specific needs and build on the strengths of diverse families. We hope that all community leaders and providers will work in partnership with parents, using an approach that is centered on learning and authenticity. In this way, we will move the current child welfare system into a strong child and family centered wellbeing system.

## Issue Briefs with a Parent Perspective

The Alliance’s Birth Parent National Network (BPNN) has developed a series of issue briefs. To learn more about what parents recommend relating to prevention and strengthening families, check out these issue briefs at [ctfalliance.org/partnering-with-parents/bpnn/resources/#parentsay](http://ctfalliance.org/partnering-with-parents/bpnn/resources/#parentsay):

- **What Parents Say About...Keeping Families Together and Strong Through Prevention and Early Intervention Strategies**
- **What Parents Say About...Prevention Strategies that Work to Keep Families Together, Resilient and Strong**
- **What Parents Say About...Building a 21st Century Community-Based Approach to Strengthening Families**

## 1 Access to prevention strategies and the need for more coordination across systems

We believe these things are important because:

- Supportive community partners may prevent families from becoming involved in the child protective system, reduce trauma, keep families intact and reduce costs associated with removal.
- Families bring different backgrounds and experiences and some may carry unresolved trauma or still be experiencing trauma.
- Community partners can help families build on their strengths and develop their protective factors. They can offer immediate judgement-free support where requests for help are normalized and trust is built within communities.
- Improved service delivery and accessibility can be available through community-based centers, with programs that are networked one-stop resource banks that provide a central location for services. For example:
  - Rural and marginalized communities tend to have less access to reliable internet, coordinated transportation and educational support as well as mental health and medical health services. Community-based center staff can offer a listening ear and immediate support to build a trusting relationship with the family in a familiar location.
  - Centers can serve as a hub where information is gathered for a coordinated information sharing system to minimize the delay in meeting the needs of families. This would prevent parents from having to fill out the same forms over and over again and reduce barriers for families in accessing needed and affordable services.
  - Recreational and green spaces are vital. Families who are within walking distance or have access to these spaces are happier and healthier.
- The Family First Prevention Services Act provides an opportunity for states and communities to offer much needed prevention services to strengthen families and keep families together.



## 2 Community support for parents in providing a strong, healthy start for their young children

We know through our own lived experiences, as well as through research, about the risks of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and the importance of protective factors for families. Parents know what their children and families need. We are the experts. It is vital that communities provide needed, equitable and accessible resources and supports to all families such as:

- Timely information about pregnancy and prenatal care, postpartum depression, early child development and infant mental health.
- More resources and supports for fathers. Services are narrowly available and often geared to mothers. Community partners need to provide more supports for fathers who may need help with basic needs such as housing, job skills and guidance when parenting their children.
- Preventative support and early intervention for substance abuse and trauma recovery.
- Community-wide promotion, training and understanding of protective factors as a foundation for families and their children's early growth and development.

## 3 COVID-19 Pandemic Special Considerations

We have learned during the COVID-19 pandemic that it is possible to provide services in new ways. We have seen innovative strategies implemented by children's trust funds, courts, child welfare systems, prevention and family support programs, schools and others.

- Programs are using porch drop-offs when families are unable to come in for services or supplies (e.g., diapers, food, toys, therapy tools, etc.).
- Home visiting programs are providing virtual visits and some family resource centers are providing virtual parent and child interaction training.
- The Children's Trust Fund Alliance holds weekly Caring Conversations for parents to gain peer support and share their concerns and successes.
- Medical providers are offering virtual visits, counseling and other supports.

This shows that service providers within systems are providing flexibility to meet the needs of diverse families and changing situations. Additional funding from government and philanthropy would allow for continuation and expansion of this innovative work.

## Defining the Five Protective Factors

Families are supported to build:

- 1 **Resilience.** The ability to recover from difficult life experiences, and often to be strengthened by and even transformed by those experiences.
- 2 **Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development.** The ability to exercise effective parenting strategies to guide and know what to expect as children develop in multiple domains (physical, cognitive, language and social and emotional).
- 3 **Concrete Resources in Times of Need.** Access to supports and services that reduce stress and help to make families stronger.
- 4 **Social Connections.** The ability and opportunity to develop positive relationships that lessen stress and isolation and help to build a supportive network.
- 5 **Social and Emotional Competence of Children.** Family and child interactions that help children develop the ability to communicate clearly, recognize and regulate their emotions and establish and maintain relationships.

*ctfalliance.org/protective-factors*

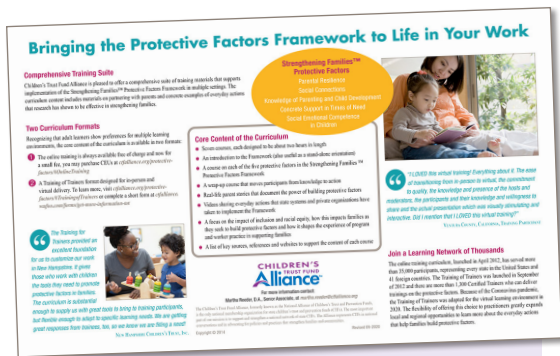
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*The Children's Trust Fund Alliance's Resiliency Project helped me meet some critical basic needs for my family at a time when my own community resources were unavailable to respond due to the COVID-19 pandemic.*  
Edwin Daye  
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*I am a dad who operates a shelter for dads in Des Moines, Iowa to help them strengthen their parenting skills and re-build relationships with their families. I help prepare them for visits with their children. I provide them with age-appropriate materials and supplies such as diapers, wipes and toys to take to their visits with their children. I personally learned the importance of having these supplies during my visits with my own young child. This has helped to strengthen father-child relationships and to help support efforts toward reunification.*

Edwin Daye

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Download this informational flyer and learn more about the protective factors and the Children's Trust Fund Alliance's *Bringing the Protective Factors Framework to Life in Your Work* curriculum, at [ctfalliance.org/protective-factors](http://ctfalliance.org/protective-factors).

#### 4 Help from policymakers and leaders in philanthropy, early childhood and the federal government

When policymakers and leaders in philanthropy, early childhood and the federal government partner with and are informed by parents, they can work together to create laws, agency policies and practices that:

- Remediate child and family poverty
- Promote race equity
- Provide comprehensive supports for families with children with disabilities
- Support father involvement
- Recognize, understand and have empathy for the effects of trauma
- Promote collaboration and accountability
- Build and maintain recreational and green spaces

We offer the following concrete priorities for immediate action through federal, philanthropic and business support and early childhood resources:

- Increase investment in community-based child abuse and neglect prevention programs to build the capacity of communities to provide prevention and early intervention resources to families.
- Establish and support a national training program for consistent development, support and credentialing of home visiting, peer support and parenting education networks and programs so that promising practices receive support along with the established programs.
- Support family resource centers, home visiting programs, peer support and parenting education programs.
- Ensure all families know about and have access to high quality home visiting programs during pregnancy and during the first years of their child's life.
- Encourage families to use prevention services in person and virtually and work to ensure, wherever possible, they are Medicaid billable services.
- Support a national training program, using the Children's Trust Fund Alliance's curriculum, *Bringing the Protective Factors Framework to Life in Your Work*, to help people understand their lived experiences and learn how to build their protective factors.
- Create a specialized parenting education program for substance abuse and trauma recovery that may be associated with ACEs (adverse childhood experiences).
- Increase development of applications (apps) that facilitate engagement with home visiting, peer support and parenting education programs and that can provide incentives (e.g., diapers, clothing, toys, school supplies, educational magazines and learning kits, sports equipment, family time events, etc.) when parents participate.
- Invest in education, recruitment and training of parents and other residents from communities to provide services and supports, such as peer supports, peer advocacy, mutual support groups and home visits.
- Develop a model to review federal child and family programs to identify gaps and overlaps. Encourage states and communities to use the model with families and



communities as key stakeholders to review and analyze funding and programs for children and families.

In summary, across the country, parents are ready to work in partnership with community leaders, state and federal partners, philanthropic partners and others to support strong families and communities. Together, we can help ensure that all parents can provide a nurturing and healthy foundation for their children's early growth and development. There are strengths and talents in all of our hearts and minds. There is joy and love in families and communities. As a collective of citizens, of fathers and mothers, loved ones and caregivers, we must remember that we were all children at one time in our lives. Remember what you needed when you were young as this can guide your actions now.

“  
*Remember that we were all children at one time, and let that memory of what you needed as a child and as a youth guide your actions now.*  
Tecoria Jones  
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## About the Authors



### Tecoria Jones

Tecoria is the mother of six children, ranging from three to 21 years of age. She lives in Columbia, South Carolina. As a child, Tecoria lived with abuse and was moved multiple times – foster care, kinship care and congregate care. Despite these challenges,

she graduated from high school with honors and earned her Bachelor's Degree from the University of South Carolina.

Tecoria became a parent at age 23 years. Although she wanted to provide a better life for her children, Tecoria found being a single parent a challenge. She struggled trying to cover finances and meet the basic needs of her family and became homeless. These difficulties led to her involvement with the child welfare system and her children were placed in kinship care. Child welfare provided Tecoria with a home visitor who had “lived” single parent struggles. Tecoria says the home visitor offered peer support, and “was able to connect and communicate with me, helping me understand that things didn't have to be the way they were. Then I received an education on the way things should be.”

As a volunteer Parent Advocate for South Carolina Children's Trust, Tecoria had opportunities that enhanced her life. She learned about and developed protective factors to become a better parent. Tecoria previously worked as a Referral and Outreach Coordinator for the South Carolina Inclusion Collaborative where she helped parents find child care. She is a founding member of Parent Matters, a local parent advocacy group, and serves on the Child Well-Being Coalition.

Tecoria has testified at the South Carolina Joint Citizens and Legislative Committee on Children about the needs of families and the importance of the Family First Prevention Services Act.



### Edwin Daye

Edwin cares for 10 children ranging from 2 to 24 years of age. He lives in Des Moines, Iowa, where he began his road to fatherhood by raising his infant son and a niece and nephew. During his early years, Edwin served prison time because of gang involvement and substance abuse issues. When he was released, he learned he had a newborn son who was born addicted to drugs. With his son in foster care, Edwin worked two jobs and completed a case plan by participating in substance abuse treatment services, narcotics anonymous meetings, counseling, court hearings, parenting classes and regular visitations. Edwin was successful in turning his life around and gaining full custody of his son, Patron. Edwin has been clean and sober for 12 years.

A licensed foster/adoptive parent, Edwin works several jobs to support his family. A parent partner for eight years with Iowa Department of Human Services (IDHS), Edwin advocates for families who are working to complete their case plan and reunify with their children. He says, “This is a humbling experience because I was once in the same shoes as these families – that makes my role important because encouragement is the key.”

Edwin is a trained facilitator for the 24/7 dad program, and he provides this training to dads at the Newton Correctional Facility. He also opened a Single Father Custody Program called Patron's Hands to help dads regain custody of their children.

Edwin is a member of the IDHS African American Review Team that works to prevent removal of African American children from their families. He received the 2020 Casey Excellence for Children's Award for his strong leadership and contributions to strengthening families.