

*Study findings indicate that referrals to **Help Me Grow** and subsequent linkages to community-based programs and services enhance protective factors, and perhaps even mitigate risk factors. By enhancing protective factors, the **Help Me Grow** system successfully promotes children's healthy development.*

Help Me Grow Promotes Optimal Child Development by Enhancing Protective Factors

Successfully Addressing the Needs of At-Risk Children

Undetected childhood developmental and behavioral problems have a profound impact not only on the lives of involved children and their families, but also on society in terms of cumulative costs related to education, mental health, and juvenile justice. Experts agree that early detection of at-risk children offers the best hope for early intervention and optimal outcomes. However, even when needs are identified, connecting children to services often proves difficult and requires knowledge of programs, understanding and meeting of eligibility requirements, and persistence in overcoming barriers.

Now being replicated across the nation, the *Help Me Grow* system promotes the early detection of children at risk for developmental and behavioral problems, provides a centralized call center as a single point of entry for community-based programs and services, and links children and their families with the appropriate resources quickly and effectively. Rigorous data collection allows for continuous quality improvement, while also demonstrating the system's success. For example, since 2002, 85% of children and families referred to Connecticut's *Help Me Grow* have been successfully connected with community-based programs and services.

The *Help Me Grow* National Center, based at Connecticut Children's Medical Center, provides technical assistance in the building, sustaining, and continuous improvement of *Help Me Grow* systems, and conducts research to expand the evidence base in support of *Help Me Grow* replication.

While research has proven the efficacy of *Help Me Grow* in enhancing early detectionⁱ and in successfully linking children and their families to programs and services,ⁱⁱ prior research does not answer the critical question of whether *Help Me Grow* promotes children's healthy development.

Help Me Grow promotes optimal child development by enhancing protective factors.

Enhancement of protective factors leads to healthy child development.ⁱⁱⁱ Intervention studies demonstrate that enhancing children's cognitive and social competence, influencing parenting behaviors, and changing patterns of

interactions in the family can have long-term, cumulative protective effects that lessen the likelihood of poor developmental outcomes.^{iv} The evidence-informed Strengthening Families Framework specifies five protective factors that both reduce the likelihood of abuse and neglect and promote a family environment that fosters optimal child development: parental resilience, social connections, concrete support in times of need, knowledge of parenting and child development, and social and emotional competence of children.^v

Given their strong relationship to increasing parenting capacity, protective factors are an appropriate proxy for evaluating whether children are on a path that leads to healthy development and well-being. In 2012, the University of Hartford Center for Social Research evaluated the impact of *Help Me Grow* on children's healthy development by examining whether the system is enhancing protective factors and facilitating families' successful negotiation of risk factors. Research methods entailed telephone structured interviews, a parent survey, and analyses of intake and follow-up care coordinator case notes.

The survey and interview coding system were modeled on the theoretical underpinnings and five protective factors of the Strengthening Families Framework. Eighty-five families who had accessed *Help Me Grow* Connecticut in 2011 and 2012 participated in the interview and survey. The average score for each survey question of the entire sample was 3.27 (from 0, not at all, to 4, extremely). Cluster analysis of case notes identified three parent subgroups with significantly different profiles of presenting issues and risk levels, but no significant differences in average survey scores.

Parents report *Help Me Grow* positively creates a change in their family circumstances.

During a follow-up interview, a mother of a two-year-old stated, "I don't know what I would have done without Help Me Grow and that is the understatement of my life."

She had called seeking support for her son who was exhibiting aggressive behaviors, both at home and child care. Given his frequent ear infections, she had already taken him to doctors to ensure that he was healthy. The Help Me Grow Care Coordinator referred the family to a community agency that provides mental health consultation services. The provider met with the parents and child care staff, observed the child at home and at the child care center, and provided specific strategies to help with his behaviors.

"I now feel like I am not the only one out there," the mother said. "Now, he is less aggressive at home. Some of his behaviors have stopped and he is not harming himself any longer."

Even among families with differing needs and risks, parents describe the positive impact of HMG-facilitated services on protective factors.

The positive shift in parents' attitudes, knowledge, and behaviors showed an outcome of engaged, supported, and educated mothers and fathers better equipped to meet their children's needs and foster healthy developmental outcomes.

Overall, study findings indicate that support from *Help Me Grow* and subsequent linkages to programs and services enhance protective factors and perhaps even mitigate risk factors. Even among families with differing needs and risks, all responded similarly and positively.

Parents' interviews described the impact of services on protective factors. *Help Me Grow* fostered parental resilience as parents increased confidence in their own abilities to access needed services. Social connections increased as parents acquired new friendships and received mutual support through parenting groups. Care coordination effectively provided concrete support when needed, as families learned where to find resources and how to access them. Parents gained a better understanding of child development and parenting skills through hands-on child monitoring experiences.

Response to Survey Questions	Parent Responses (%)		
	“Extremely” or “Quite a bit”	“Not at all”	N/A
As a result of my call to Child Development Infoline and the information and services I received:			
I have a better understanding of my child’s development.	80%	4%	7%
I am able to better understand and meet my child’s needs.	79%	2%	5%
I have a better understanding of services for me and/or my child.	81%	6%	1%
I am able to access services if I need it.	84%	2%	2%
There are people who can provide me with assistance when I need it.	87%	1%	4%
I have people I can talk to for advice and emotional support.	79%	1%	4%
There is improvement in my family’s day-to-day circumstances.	66%	5%	17%
My relationship with my child has improved.	71%	2%	27%
My child’s behavior has improved (e.g., mood, attitude, play, relationships with other children).	45%	1%	32%
I feel like I can handle things better.	74%	2%	9%

This positive shift in parents’ attitudes, knowledge, and behaviors showed an outcome of engaged, supported, and educated parents better equipped to meet their children’s needs and foster healthy developmental outcomes.

Help Me Grow is an evidence-based system that promotes children’s healthy development.

During the 1990’s, the so-called “decade of the brain,” an explosion of knowledge of early brain development and its implications for child development contributed to unprecedented attention to the promotion of young children’s readiness to learn. *Help Me Grow* has responded with a comprehensive system that ensures that early detection leads to the linkage of at-risk children and their families to community-based programs and services through a single portal of entry, effective care coordination, and cross-sector collaboration.

The current research employing protective factors as a proxy for evaluating whether children are on a path that leads to healthy development provides evidence of the efficacy of *Help Me Grow* in promoting children’s optimal development. This approach is now being replicated in 17 states, with the ultimate goal of building *Help Me Grow* systems in all states to ensure children’s optimal development.

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www.HelpMeGrowNational.org*

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