Using the Overloaded Metaphor to Talk About Preventing Family Stress that Leads to Childhood Adversity

OVERVIEW AND GOALS
Frame prevention as a public health issue: Childhood adversity and involvement with the child welfare system are preventable problems and solvable problems.

WHAT THE METAPHOR CONVEYS
- Advance the idea that social conditions and contexts shape family life and children’s experiences.
- Emphasize the external pressures on families, rather than family or personal dysfunction.
- Offer common sense evidence that suggests that many contextual factors contribute to neglect or involvement with child welfare:
  - Economic insecurity—including housing insecurity, precarious employment, unemployment, and low incomes
  - Lack of access to childcare
  - Inability to receive medical care for a family member
  - Unmet behavioral health needs

HOW THE METAPHOR WORKS
The metaphor of an overloaded vehicle helps people understand how external and multiple pressures on families contribute to neglect: These pressures, or layers of stress, can keep parents from functioning as they would like to in caring for their children.

KEEP IN MIND
- Be creative and express this idea multiple ways (e.g., juggling).
- Connect this metaphor to the collective experience of the pandemic where we have all experienced being overloaded or not having access to resources/supports.
- Don’t use this metaphor to suggest that people are helpless victims of circumstance.
- Don’t use this metaphor to paint a stark, sensationalized portrait of families or communities facing disadvantage.
- When tested, this metaphor was particularly effective with Parents who had experienced childhood adversity themselves because it gave them a way to think about the causes of their parenting styles without shame, guilt, or stigma.

“Just as a vehicle can bear only so much weight before it stops moving forward, challenging life circumstances can overload or overburden parents, making it hard for them to provide the best kinds of care and support. To prevent a breakdown in care, we can focus on services and resources that can help lighten the load on families.”

Sweetland, J., “Reframing Childhood Adversity – Promoting Upstream Approaches,” FrameWorks Institute, commissioned by the Alliance for Strong Families and Communities-Council on Accreditation and Prevent Child Abuse America. Learn more at alliance1.org/within-our-reach-office.