A good way to protect children is to make sure their parents have a healthy relationship. Whether they are together as a couple or apart, when parents have a healthy relationship with each other, their family is more likely to be stable and their children have a greater opportunity to flourish, says Kim Brantner, a human sciences specialist with Iowa State University Extension and Outreach.

Safe, stable and nurturing relationships between adults may be especially beneficial for parents who experienced abuse or other adversity when they were children, said Brantner, who specializes in family life issues.

Adverse childhood experiences, often referred to as ACEs, are potentially traumatic events that can have negative, lasting effects on health and well-being. These experiences can include neglect or physical, emotional or sexual abuse, as well as challenges such as parental separation or divorce, or the incarceration of a parent or guardian, Brantner explained.

“ACES can lead to a variety of lasting health problems and risky behaviors in adulthood, from hypertension and heart disease to smoking and drug use,” Brantner said.

However, parents who had their own adverse childhood experiences do not have to repeat the cycle with their children. One key protective factor is a safe, stable and nurturing relationship between parents.

“Parents who experienced harsh parenting as a child, but have a warm, supportive partner who communicates well, are much less likely to respond with harsh parenting to their own children,” Brantner said.

“There is this amazing connection between a nurturing couple relationship, positive parenting practices and healthy outcomes for children. This really reinforces the notion that a stable, nurturing adult couple relationship is the foundation for a healthy family,” Brantner said.

But maintaining a stable couple relationship takes a lot of effort. Sometimes individuals and couples can benefit from additional support.

**ISU Extension and Outreach offers relationship education programs**

ISU Extension and Outreach offers a variety of relationship education opportunities, Brantner said.

- The “Healthy Relationship Education Training” program teaches professionals who work with couples and families the skills and principles that research indicates can build and sustain healthy relationships. The program follows the National Extension Relationship and Marriage Education Model.
- “ELEVATE: Taking Your Relationship to the Next Level” engages younger couples in learning and practicing skills, such as showing kindness, respect and creating meaningful couple time, that have been found essential to maintaining healthy and stable adult relationships.

- “Together We Can” can help to improve the co-parenting relationships of single parents. In this program, parents learn how families, no matter how complicated, can work together to resolve conflict. They also learn how to become more involved in their child’s life.

For more information on relationship education offered by ISU Extension and Outreach in your county, contact Kim Brantner, brantner@iastate.edu. Information on these relationship education programs also can be found at https://www.extension.iastate.edu/humansciences/relationships.