

Protective Factors Help Young People

Protective factors are conditions that buffer young people from the negative consequences of exposure to risks by either reducing the impact of the risk or changing the way a person responds to the risk. Consequently, enhancing protective factors can reduce the likelihood of problem behaviors arising.

Some youngsters who are exposed to multiple risk factors do not become substance abusers, juvenile delinquents, school dropouts, or teen parents. Balancing the risk factors are protective factors – aspects of people's lives that counter or buffer risk. Research has identified protective factors that fall into three basic categories: individual characteristics, bonding, and healthy beliefs and clear standards.

Individual Characteristics

Research has identified four individual characteristics as protective factors. These are characteristics children are born with, or enculturated with early in life, and are difficult to change: gender, a resilient temperament, a positive social orientation, and intelligence. Intelligence, however, does not protect against substance abuse.

Bonding

Positive bonding makes up for many other disadvantages caused by other risk factors or environmental characteristics. Children who are attached to positive families, friends, school, and community, and who are committed to achieving the goals valued by these groups are less likely to develop problems in adolescence. Studies of successful children who live in high-risk neighborhoods or situations indicate that strong bonds with a caregiver can keep children from getting into trouble.

To build bonding, three conditions are necessary: 1) **Opportunities**, 2) **Skills**, and 3) **Recognition**.

Children must be provided with opportunities to contribute to their community, family, peers, and school. The challenge is to provide children with meaningful opportunities that help them feel responsible and significant. Children must be taught the skills necessary to effectively take advantage of the opportunity they are provided. If they don't have the necessary skills to be successful, they experience frustration and/or failure. Children also must be recognized and acknowledged for their efforts. This gives them the incentive to contribute and reinforces their skillful performance.

Healthy Beliefs and Clear Standards

The people to whom youth are bonded need to have clear, positive standards for behavior. The content of these standards is what protects young people. When parents, teachers, and communities set clear standards for children's behavior, when they are widely and consistently supported, and when the consequences for not following the standards are consistent, young people are more likely to follow the standards.

(Excerpted from Developing Healthy Communities, WestCAP, 1998; original source, Communities That Care: Risk and Assessment, 1994)

Risk Factors

Risk factors are characteristics that occur statistically more often for those who develop alcohol, tobacco, and other drug problems, either as adolescents or as adults. Recent research points to a considerable number of such factors, which are divided into "domains" classified as

community, family, school, and individual. You may use this information as a checklist to identify risk factors for your children, family, or self. Contact Lisa Brown or Rusty Butler at 541-444-8286, or 1-800-922-1399, ext. 238, to schedule a time to meet in person or send you information to answer your questions on how these factors can affect you, your community, or family.

Community Environment

- Availability of drugs
- Availability of firearms
- Community laws and norms favorable toward drug use, firearms, and crime
- Media portrayal of violence
- Transitions and mobility
- Extreme economic deprivation
- Low neighborhood attachment and community disorganization

Family Environment

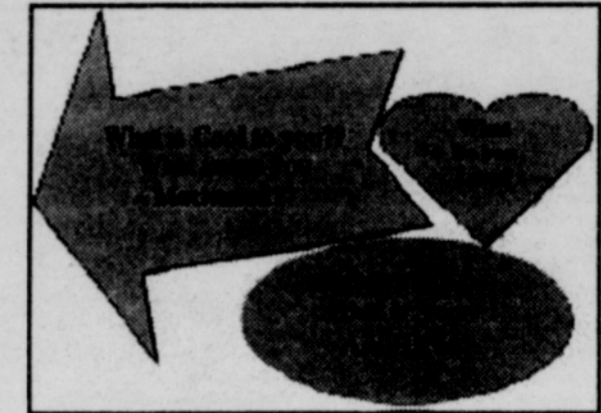
- Family history of problem behavior
- Family management problems
- Family conflict
- Favorable parental attitudes and involvement in problem behavior

School

- Early and persistent antisocial behavior
- Academic failure beginning in late elementary school
- Lack of commitment to school

Individual/Peer

- Alienation and rebelliousness
- Friends who engage in the problem behavior
- Favorable attitudes toward the problem behavior
- Early initiation of the problem behavior
- Constitutional (biological) factors



It's important to recognize that risk factors are only indicators for the potential of problem occurrence. While they can be helpful in identifying children who are vulnerable to developing alcohol, tobacco, or other drug problems, they are not necessarily predictive for an individual child. Children growing up under adverse conditions often mature into healthy, well-functioning adults.

In addition, the use of risk factors to label children poses its own risk. Consequently, there is increasing attention on those factors that seem to protect children from developing alcohol, tobacco, or other drug problems.

There are no simple solutions for helping youth at high risk for developing alcohol, tobacco, or other drug problems. Reducing risk factors and fostering resiliency are part of a comprehensive approach to prevention, and are consistent with a public health approach to reducing problems.

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