

Introduction to Risk and Protective Factors

“Risk factors” are any circumstances that may increase youths’ likelihood of engaging in risky behaviors. Conversely, “protective factors” are any circumstances that promote healthy youth behaviors and decrease the chance that youth will engage in risky behaviors.

Risk factors and protective factors are often organized into five domains:

- Individual
- Peer
- School
- Family
- Community

Risk Factors

Extensive research on risk factors has shown that they they operate in three ways:

- **Problem behavior is most likely when youth are exposed to risk factors in the relative absence of protective factors.** The most effective approach for improving young people’s lives is to reduce risk factors while increasing protective factors in all of the areas that touch their lives.
- **The greater the number of risk factors, the more likely that youth will engage in problem behaviors.**
- **Problem behaviors associated with risk factors tend to cluster.** For example, delinquency and violence cluster with other problems, such as drug abuse, teen pregnancy, and school misbehavior.

Factors that predict future risky behaviors by youth include the following:

Individual

- Antisocial behavior
- Gun possession/illegal gun ownership
- Early onset of aggression/violence
- Favorable attitudes toward drug use
- Early onset of drug use/drug use
- Intellectual and/or development disabilities
- Victimization and exposure to violence
- Poor refusal skills
- Life stressors
- Early sexual involvement

Peer

- Gang involvement/gang membership
- Peer ATOD use
- Association with delinquent/aggressive peers
- Peer rejection

School

- Low academic achievement
- Negative attitude toward school
- Low bonding/commitment to school
- Truancy/frequent absences
- Suspension
- Dropping out of school
- Inadequate school climate
- Identified as learning disabled
- Frequent school transitions

Family

- Family history of problem behavior
- Family management problems
- Poor family attachment/bonding
- Child victimization and maltreatment
- Pattern of high family conflict
- Family violence
- Sibling antisocial behavior
- Family transitions
- Low parent education level/illiteracy
- Maternal depression

Community

- Availability/use of drugs in neighborhood
- Availability of firearms
- High-crime neighborhood
- Community instability
- Low community attachment
- Economic deprivation/poverty
- Neighborhood youth in trouble
- Feeling unsafe in the neighborhood
- Disorganized neighborhood

Protective Factors

Researchers know less about protective factors than they do about risk factors because fewer studies have been done in this area. However, they believe protective factors operate in three ways.

- **Protective factors may serve to buffer risk factors**, providing a cushion against negative effects.
- **Protective factors may interrupt the processes through which risk factors operate**. For example, a community program that helps families learn conflict resolution may interrupt a chain of risk factors that lead youth from negative family environments to associate with delinquent peers.
- **Protective factors prevent the initial occurrence of a risk factor**, such as child abuse. For example, infants and young children who are easy-going may be protected from abuse by eliciting positive, rather than frustrated, responses from their parents and caregivers.
- **Community resources can influence positive traits**. For example, youth are more apt to be exposed to good adult role models other than their parents when communities have informal sources of adult supervision, when there is a strong sense of community, when neighborhoods are perceived to be safe, and when neighborhood and city services are functioning.

Factors that protect youth against delinquency and substance abuse include the following:

Individual

- Positive/resilient temperament
- Valuing involvement in organized religious activities
- Social competencies and problem-solving skills
- Perception of social support from adults and peers
- Healthy sense of self
- Positive expectations/optimism for the future
- High expectations

Peer

- Involvement with positive peer group activities
- Good relationship with peers
- Parental approval of friends

School

- School motivation/positive attitude toward school
- Positive school connectedness
- Presence/involvement of caring, supportive adults
- Academic achievement
- Opportunities for prosocial school involvement
- Rewards for prosocial school involvement
- Clear school standards and rules
- High expectations of students

Family

- Positive bond with parent(s)/family
- Opportunities for prosocial family involvement
- Rewards for prosocial family involvement
- Having a stable family
- High family expectations

Community

- Economically sustainable/stable communities
- Safe and health-promoting environment
- Supportive law enforcement presence
- Positive social norms
- Opportunities for prosocial community involvement
- Rewards for prosocial community involvement
- Availability of neighborhood resources
- High community expectations
- Neighborhood/social cohesion

Adapted from: Helping America's Youth, Washington, D.C.: The White House. Available at: <http://guide.helpingamericasyouth.org/programtool-factors.cfm>