

RISK AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS

What Does It Mean for Community Prevention Planning?

All across our country, adults concerned about the healthy development of young people are searching for answers to the behavior problems of alcohol and other drug abuse, delinquency, violence, school dropout, and teen pregnancy. How do we step ahead of the problems with solutions which are far-reaching and lasting?

Research has shown there are a number of risk factors that increase the chances of adolescents developing health and behavior problems. Equally important is the evidence that certain protective factors can help shield youngsters from problems. If we can reduce risks while increasing protection throughout the course of young people's development, we can prevent these problems and promote healthy, pro-social growth.

Protective Factors:

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 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: opportunities, skills, and 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 must also 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

Risk Factors - Definitions

Risk Factors:

COMMUNITY RISK FACTORS

Availability of Drugs (Substance Abuse)

The more available drugs are in a community, the higher the risk that young people will abuse drugs in the community. Perceived availability of drugs is also associated with risk. In schools where children just think that drugs are more available, a higher rate of drug use occurs.

Availability of Firearms (Delinquency and Violence)

Firearm availability and firearm homicide have increased together since the late 1950s. If a gun is present in the home, it is much more likely to be used against a relative or friend than an intruder or stranger. Also, when a firearm is used in a crime or assault instead of another weapon or no weapon, the outcome is much more likely to be fatal. While a few studies report no association between firearm availability and violence, more studies show a positive relationship. Given the lethality of firearms, the increase in the likelihood of conflict escalating into homicide when guns are present and the strong association between availability of guns and homicide rates, firearm availability is included as a risk factor.

Community laws and norms favorable toward drug use, firearms, and crime (Substance Abuse, Delinquency and Violence)

Community norms - the attitudes and policies a community holds about drug use and crime - are communicated in a variety of ways: through laws and written policies, through informal social practices, and through the expectations parents and other members of the community have of young people.

One example of the community law affecting drug use is the taxation of alcoholic beverages. Higher rates of taxation decrease the rate of alcohol use at every level of use.

When laws, tax rates, and community standards are favorable toward substance use or crime, or even if they are just unclear, children are at higher risk.

Another concern is conflicting messages about alcohol/other drugs from key social institutions. An example of conflicting messages about substance abuse can be found in the acceptance of alcohol use as a social activity within the community. The "Beer Gardens," popular at street fairs and community festivals frequented by young people, are in contrast to the "Just Say No" messages that schools and parents may be promoting. These conflicting messages make it difficult for children to decide which norms to follow.

Laws regulating the sale of firearms have had little effect on violent crime and those effects usually diminish after the law has been in effect for multiple years. In addition, laws regulating the penalties for violating licensing laws or using a firearm in the commission of a crime have also been related to reduction in the amount of violent crime, especially involving firearms. A number of studies suggest the small and diminishing effect is due to two factors: the availability of firearms from other jurisdictions without legal prohibitions on sales or illegal access, and community norms which include lack of proactive monitoring or enforcement of the laws.

Media Portrayal of Violence (Violence)

The effect of media violence on the behavior of viewers (especially young viewers) has been debated for over three decades. Research over that time period has shown a clear correlation between media violence and the development of aggressive and violent behavior. Exposure to media violence appears to impact children in several ways. First, children learn from watching actors model violent behavior, as well as learning violent problem-solving strategies. Second, media violence appears to alter children's attitudes and sensitivity to violence.

Transitions and Mobility (Substance Abuse, Delinquency, and School Dropout)

Even normal school transitions predict increases in problem behaviors. When children move from elementary school to middle school or from middle school to high school, significant increases in the rate of drug use, school misbehavior, and delinquency result. When communities are characterized by frequent non-scheduled transition rates, there is an increase in problem behaviors.

Communities with high rates of mobility appear to be linked to an increased risk of drug and crime problems. The more often people in a community move, the greater the risk of both criminal behavior and drug-related problems in families. While some people find buffers against the negative effects of mobility by making connections in new communities, others are less likely to have the resources to deal with the effects of frequent moves and are more likely to have problems.

Low Neighborhood Attachment and Community Disorganization (Substance Abuse, Delinquency, and Violence)

Higher rates of drug problems, juvenile delinquency, and violence occur in communities or neighborhoods where people have little attachment to the community, where the rates of vandalism are high, and where there is low surveillance of public places. These conditions are not limited to low income neighborhoods; they can also be found in wealthier neighborhoods.

The less homogeneous a community is in terms of race, class, and religion, the less connected its residents may feel to the overall community, and the more difficult it is to establish clear community goals and identity. The challenge of creating neighborhood attachment and organization is greater in these neighborhoods.

Perhaps the most significant issue affecting community attachment is whether residents feel they can make a difference in their lives.

If the key players in the neighborhood--such as merchants, teachers, police, human and social services personnel--live outside the neighborhood, residents' sense of commitment will be less. Lower rates of voter participation and parental involvement in schools also indicate lower attachment to the community.

Extreme Economic Deprivation (Substance Abuse, Delinquency, Violence, Teen Pregnancy, and School Dropout)

Children who live in deteriorating and crime-ridden neighborhoods characterized by extreme poverty are more likely to develop problems with delinquency, teen pregnancy, school dropout, and violence. Children who live in these areas--and have behavior and adjustment problems early in life--are also more likely to have problems with drugs later on.

FAMILY RISK FACTORS

Family History of the Problem Behavior (Substance Abuse, Delinquency, Teen Pregnancy, and School Dropout)

If children are raised in a family with a history of addiction to alcohol or other drugs, the risk of having alcohol and other drug problems themselves increases. If children are born or raised in a family with a history of criminal activity, the risk of juvenile delinquency increases. Similarly, children who are raised by a teenage mother are more likely to be teen parents, and children of dropouts are more likely to drop out of school themselves.

Family Management Problems (Substance Abuse, Delinquency, Violence, Teen Pregnancy, and School Dropout)

The risk factor has been shown to increase the risk of drug abuse, delinquency, teen pregnancy, school dropout, and violence. Poor family management practices include lack of clear expectations for behavior, failure of parents to monitor their children (knowing where they are and who they are with), and excessively severe or inconsistent punishment.

Family Conflict (Substance Abuse, Delinquency, Violence, Teen Pregnancy, and School Dropout)

Persistent, serious conflict between primary caregivers or between caregivers and children appears to enhance risk for children raised in these families. Conflict between family members appears to be more important than family structure. Whether the family is headed by two biological parents, a single

parent, or some other primary caregiver, children raised in families high in conflict appear to be at risk for all of the problem behaviors. For example, domestic violence in a family increases the likelihood that young people will engage in delinquent behaviors and substance abuse, as well as become pregnant or drop out of school.

Parental Attitudes and Involvement in Drug Use, Crime, and Violence (Substance Abuse, Violence and Delinquency)

Parental attitudes and behavior toward drugs, crime, and violence influence the attitudes and behavior of their children. Parental approval of young people's moderate drinking, even under parental supervision, increases the risk of the young person using marijuana. Similarly, children of parents who excuse their children for breaking the law are more likely to develop problems with juvenile delinquency. In families where parents display violent behavior towards those outside the family, there is an increase in the risk that a child will become violent.

Further, in families where parents involve children in their own drug or alcohol behavior - for example, asking the child to light the parent's cigarette or get the parent a beer from the refrigerator - there is an increased likelihood that their children will become drug abusers in adolescence.

SCHOOL RISK FACTORS

Academic Failure Beginning in Elementary School (Substance Abuse, Delinquency, Violence, Teen Pregnancy, and School Dropout)

Beginning in the late elementary grades, academic failure increases the risk of drug abuse, delinquency, violence, pregnancy, and school dropout. Children fail for many reasons. It appears that the experience or failure--not necessarily ability--increases the risk of problem behaviors.

This is particularly troubling because, in many school districts, African American, Native American, and Hispanic students have disproportionately higher rates of academic failure compared to white students. Consequently, school improvement and reducing academic failure are particularly important prevention strategies for communities of color.

Lack of Commitment to School (Substance Abuse, Delinquency, Teen Pregnancy, and School Dropout)

Low commitment to school means the young person has ceased to see the role of student as a viable one. Young people who have lost this commitment to school are at higher risk for substance abuse, delinquency, teen pregnancy, and school dropout.

In many communities of color, education is seen as a "way out," similar to the way early immigrants viewed education. Other subgroups in the same community may view education and school as a form of negative acculturation. In essence, if you get education, you have "sold out" to the majority culture. Young people who adopt this view are likely to be at higher risk for health and problem behaviors.

INDIVIDUAL/PEER RISK FACTORS

Alienation/Rebelliousness (Substance Abuse, Delinquency, and School Dropout)

Young people who feel they are not part of society, are not bound by rules, don't believe in trying to be successful or responsible, or who take an active rebellious stance toward society, are at higher risk of drug abuse, delinquency, and school dropout.

Alienation and rebelliousness may be an especially significant risk for young people of color. Children who are consistently discriminated against may respond by removing themselves from the dominant culture and rebelling against it. On the other hand, many communities of color are experiencing significant cultural change due to integration. The conflicting emotions about family and friends working, socializing or marrying outside of the culture, may well interfere with a young person's development of a clear and positive racial identity.

Early and Persistent Antisocial Behavior (Substance Abuse, Delinquency, Violence, School Dropout, and Teen Pregnancy)

Boys who are aggressive in grades K-3 are at higher risk of substance abuse and juvenile delinquency. However, aggressive behavior very early in childhood does not appear to increase risk. When a boy's aggressive behavior in the early grades is combined with isolation or withdrawal, there is an even greater risk of problems in adolescence. This increased risk also applies to aggressive behavior combined with hyperactivity or attention deficit disorder.

This risk factor also includes persistent antisocial behavior in early adolescence, like misbehaving in school, skipping school, and getting into fights with other children. Young people, both girls and boys, who engage in these behaviors during early adolescence are at increased risk for drug abuse, juvenile delinquency, violence, school dropout, and teen pregnancy.

Friends Who Engage in the Problem Behavior (Substance Abuse, Delinquency, Violence, Teen Pregnancy, and School Dropout)

Young people who associate with peers who engage in problem behavior - delinquency, substance abuse, violent activity, sexual activity, or school dropout - are much more likely to engage in the same problem behavior. This is one of the most consistent predictors that research has identified. Even when young people come from well-managed families and do not experience other risk factors, just hanging out with friends who engage in the problem behavior greatly increases the child's risk of that problem. However, young people who experience a low number of risk factors are less likely to associate with friends who are involved in the problem behavior.

Favorable Attitudes toward the Problem Behavior (Substance Abuse, Delinquency, Teen Pregnancy, and School Dropout)

During the elementary school years, children usually express anti-drug, anti-crime, and pro-social attitudes. They have difficulty imagining why people use drugs, commit crimes, and drop out of school.

However, in middle school, as others they know participate in such activities, their attitudes often shift toward greater acceptance of these behaviors. This acceptance places them at higher risk.

Early Initiation of the Problem Behavior (Substance Abuse, Delinquency, Violence, Teen Pregnancy, and School Dropout)

The earlier young people begin using drugs, committing crimes, engaging in violent activity, dropping out of school, and becoming sexually active, the greater the likelihood that they will have problems with these behaviors later on. For example, research shows that young people who initiate drug use before the age of 15 are at twice the risk of having drug problems as those who wait until after the age of 19.

Gang Involvement (Substance Abuse, Delinquency, and Violence)

Research has shown that children who have delinquent friends are more likely to use alcohol or other drugs and to engage in delinquent or violent behavior than children who do not have delinquent friends. But the influence of gang involvement on alcohol and other drug use, delinquency and violence exceeds the influence of delinquent friends on these problem behaviors. Gang members are even more likely than children who have delinquent friends to use alcohol or other drugs and to engage in delinquent or violent behavior.

Constitutional Factors (Substance Abuse, Delinquency, and Violence)

Constitutional factors are factors that may have a biological or physiological basis. These factors are often seen in young people with behaviors such as sensation-seeking, low harm-avoidance, and lack of impulse control. These factors appear to increase the risk of young people abusing drugs, engaging in delinquent behavior, and/or committing violent acts.

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