

The Risk and Protective Factor Model of Prevention

Risk factors are characteristics of school, community, and family environments, as well as characteristics of students and their peer groups that are known to predict increased likelihood of drug use, delinquency, school dropout, teen pregnancy, and violent behavior among youth. Dr. J. David Hawkins, Dr. Richard F. Catalano and their colleagues at the University of Washington, Social Development Research Group have investigated the relationship between risk and protective factors and youth problem behavior. For example, they have found that children who live in families with high levels of conflict are more likely to become involved in problem behaviors such as delinquency and drug use than children who live in families with low levels of family conflict.

Protective factors exert a positive influence or buffer against the negative influence of risk, thus reducing the likelihood that adolescents will engage in problem behaviors. Protective factors identified through research reviewed by Drs. Hawkins and Catalano include social bonding to family, school, community and peers; healthy beliefs and clear standards for behavior; and individual characteristics. For bonding to serve as a protective influence, it must occur through involvement with peers and adults who communicate healthy values and set clear standards for behavior.

Research on risk and protective factors has important implications for prevention efforts. The premise of the risk and protective factor model is that in order to promote positive youth development and prevent problem behaviors, it is necessary to address those factors that predict the problem behaviors. By measuring risk and protective factors in a population, prevention programs can be implemented that will reduce the elevated risk factors and increase the protective factors. For example, if academic failure is identified as an elevated risk factor in a community, then mentoring, tutoring and increased opportunities and rewards for classroom participation can be provided to improve academic performance.

Table 2. Risk and Protective Factor Scale Definitions

| Community Domain Risk Factors | |
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| Community and Personal Transitions & Mobility | Neighborhoods with high rates of residential mobility have been shown to have higher rates of juvenile crime and drug selling, while children who experience frequent residential moves and stressful life transitions have been shown to have higher risk for school failure, delinquency, and drug use. |
| Community Disorganization | Research has shown that neighborhoods with high population density, lack of natural surveillance of public places, physical deterioration, and high rates of adult crime also have higher rates of juvenile crime and drug selling. |
| Low Neighborhood Attachment | A low level of bonding to the neighborhood is related to higher levels of juvenile crime and drug selling. |
| Laws and Norms Favorable Toward Drug Use | Research has shown that legal restrictions on alcohol and tobacco use, such as raising the legal drinking age, restricting smoking in public places, and increased taxation have been followed by decreases in consumption. Moreover, national surveys of high school seniors have shown that shifts in normative attitudes toward drug use have preceded changes in prevalence of use. |
| Perceived Availability of Drugs and Handguns | The availability of cigarettes, alcohol, marijuana, and other illegal drugs has been related to the use of these substances by adolescents. The availability of handguns is also related to a higher risk of crime and substance use by adolescents. |
| Community Domain Protective Factors | |
| Opportunities for Prosocial Involvement | When opportunities are available in a community for positive participation, children are less likely to engage in substance use and other problem behaviors. |
| Rewards for Prosocial Involvement | Rewards for positive participation in activities helps children bond to the community, thus lowering their risk for substance use. |
| Family Domain Risk Factors | |
| Family History of Antisocial Behavior | When children are raised in a family with a history of problem behaviors (e.g., violence or ATOD use), the children are more likely to engage in these behaviors. |
| Family Conflict | Children raised in families high in conflict, whether or not the child is directly involved in the conflict, appear at risk for both delinquency and drug use. |
| Parental Attitudes Favorable Toward Antisocial Behavior & Drugs | In families where parents use illegal drugs, are heavy users of alcohol, or are tolerant of children's use, children are more likely to become drug abusers during adolescence. The risk is further increased if parents involve children in their own drug (or alcohol) using behavior, for example, asking the child to light the parent's cigarette or get the parent a beer from the refrigerator. |
| Poor Family Management | Parents' use of inconsistent and/or unusually harsh or severe punishment with their children places them at higher risk for substance use and other problem behaviors. Also, Parents' failure to provide clear expectations and to monitor their children's behavior makes it more likely that they will engage in drug abuse whether or not there are family drug problems. |
| Family Domain Protective Factors | |
| Family Attachment | Young people who feel that they are a valued part of their family are less likely to engage in substance use and other problem behaviors. |
| Opportunities for Prosocial Involvement | Young people who are exposed to more opportunities to participate meaningfully in the responsibilities and activities of the family are less likely to engage in drug use and other problem behaviors. |
| Rewards for Prosocial Involvement | When parents, siblings, and other family members praise, encourage, and attend to things done well by their child, children are less likely to engage in substance use and problem behaviors. |
| School Domain Risk Factors | |
| Academic Failure | Beginning in the late elementary grades (grades 4-6) academic failure increases the risk of both drug abuse and delinquency. It appears that the experience of failure itself, for whatever reasons, increases the risk of problem behaviors. |

Table 2. Risk and Protective Factor Scale Definitions (Continued)

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| Low Commitment to School | Surveys of high school seniors have shown that the use of hallucinogens, cocaine, heroin, stimulants, and sedatives or non-medically prescribed tranquilizers is significantly lower among students who expect to attend college than among those who do not. Factors such as liking school, spending time on homework, and perceiving the coursework as relevant are also negatively related to drug use. |
| School Domain Protective Factors | |
| Opportunities for Prosocial Involvement | When young people are given more opportunities to participate meaningfully in important activities at school, they are less likely to engage in drug use and other problem behaviors. |
| Rewards for Prosocial Involvement | When young people are recognized and rewarded for their contributions at school, they are less likely to be involved in substance use and other problem behaviors |
| Peer-Individual Risk Factors | |
| Attitudes Favorable Toward Antisocial Behavior and Drug Use | Initiation of use of any substance is preceded by values favorable to its use. During the elementary school years, most children express anti-drug, anti-crime, and pro-social attitudes and have difficulty imagining why people use drugs. However, in middle school, as more youth are exposed to others who use drugs, their attitudes often shift toward greater acceptance of these behaviors. Youth who express positive attitudes toward drug use are at higher risk for subsequent drug use. Young people who accept or condone antisocial behavior are more likely to engage in a variety of problem behaviors, including drug use. |
| Early Initiation of Problem Behavior | Early onset of drug use predicts misuse of drugs. The earlier the onset of any drug use, the greater the involvement in other drug use and the greater frequency of use. Onset of drug use prior to the age of 15 is a consistent predictor of drug abuse, and a later age of onset of drug use has been shown to predict lower drug involvement and a greater probability of discontinuation of use. |
| Friends' Use of Drugs | Young people who associate with peers who engage in alcohol or substance abuse are much more likely to engage in the same behavior. Peer drug use has consistently been found to be among the strongest predictors of substance use among youth. Even when young people come from well-managed families and do not experience other risk factors, spending time with friends who use drugs greatly increases the risk of that problem developing. |
| Interaction with Antisocial Peers | Young people who associate with peers who engage in problem behaviors are at higher risk for engaging in antisocial behavior themselves. |
| Perceived Risk of Drug Use | Young people who do not perceive drug use to be risky are far more likely to engage in drug use. |
| Rewards for Antisocial Behavior | Young people who receive rewards for their antisocial behavior are at higher risk for engaging further in antisocial behavior and substance use. |
| Rebelliousness | Young people who do not feel 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 abusing drugs. In addition, high tolerance for deviance, a strong need for independence, and normlessness have all been linked with drug use. |
| Sensation Seeking | Young people who seek out opportunities for dangerous, risky behavior in general are at higher risk for participating in drug use and other problem behaviors. |
| Gang Involvement | Youth who belong to gangs are more at risk for antisocial behavior and drug use. |
| Peer-Individual Protective Factors | |
| Religiosity | Young people who regularly attend religious services are less likely to engage in problem behaviors. |
| Social Skills | Young people who are socially competent and engage in positive interpersonal relations with their peers are less likely to use drugs and engage in other problem behaviors. |
| Belief in the Moral Order | Young people who have a belief in what is "right" or "wrong" are less likely to use drugs. |