



Sikh Awareness Society

“Supporting the Youth & Strengthening Families”

Risk factors and protective factors

As they grow up, youth are exposed to a number of factors which may either increase their risk for, or protect them from, problems such as abusing drugs or engaging in delinquent behavior.

“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 categories:

- Individual
- Family
- Peer group
- Community

Risk Factors

Many of the risk factors that make it likely that youth will engage in risky behaviors are the opposite of the protective factors that make it likely that a teen will not engage in such behaviors. For example, one risk factor is family management problems. If parents fail to set standards for their teen’s behavior, it increases the likelihood that the teen will engage in substance abuse or delinquent behavior. Conversely, a protective factor is effective parenting. If parents consistently provide both nurturing and structure, it increases the likelihood that a teen will not get involved with substance abuse or delinquent behavior and will become involved in positive activities.

Exposure to risk factors in the relative absence of protective factors dramatically increases the likelihood that a young person will engage in problem behaviors. 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.

Risk factors function in a cumulative fashion; that is, the greater the number of risk factors, the greater the likelihood that youth will engage in delinquent or other risky behavior. There is also evidence that 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.

Risk factors that predict future risky behaviors by youth are

Individual

- Antisocial behavior and alienation/delinquent beliefs/general delinquency involvement/drug dealing
- Favorable attitudes toward drug use/early onset of AOD use/alcohol/drug use
- Early onset of aggression/violence
- Intellectual and/or development disabilities
- Victimization and exposure to violence
- Poor refusal skills
- Life stressors
- Early sexual involvement
- Mental disorder/mental health problem



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Family

- Family history of problem behavior/parent criminality
- Family management problems/poor parental supervision and/or monitoring
- Poor family attachment/bonding
- Child victimization and maltreatment
- Pattern of high family conflict
- Family violence
- Having a young mother
- Broken home
- Sibling antisocial behavior
- Family transitions
- Parental use of physical punishment/harsh and/or erratic discipline practices
- Low parent education level/illiteracy
- Maternal depression

Peer

- Association with delinquent/aggressive peers
- Peer rejection

Community

- Availability/use of alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs in neighborhood
- Community instability
- Low community attachment
- Economic deprivation/poverty/residence in a disadvantaged 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. First, they may serve to buffer risk factors, providing a cushion against negative effects. Second, they 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. Third, protective factors may 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.

Recent scientific studies have shown that community resources also can influence individual teenagers' positive traits.

Protective factors that protect youth against risky behavior are shown below.

Individual

- Positive/resilient temperament
- Religiosity/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



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Family

- Good relationships with parents/bonding or attachment to family
- Opportunities and reward for prosocial family involvement
- Having a stable family
- High family expectations

School

- School motivation/positive attitude toward school
- Student bonding and connectedness (attachment to teachers, belief, commitment)
- Academic achievement/reading ability and mathematics skills
- Opportunities and rewards for prosocial school involvement
- High-quality schools/clear standards and rules
- High expectations of students
- Presence and involvement of caring, supportive adults

Peer

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

Community

- stable community
- supportive community
- community involvement/availability