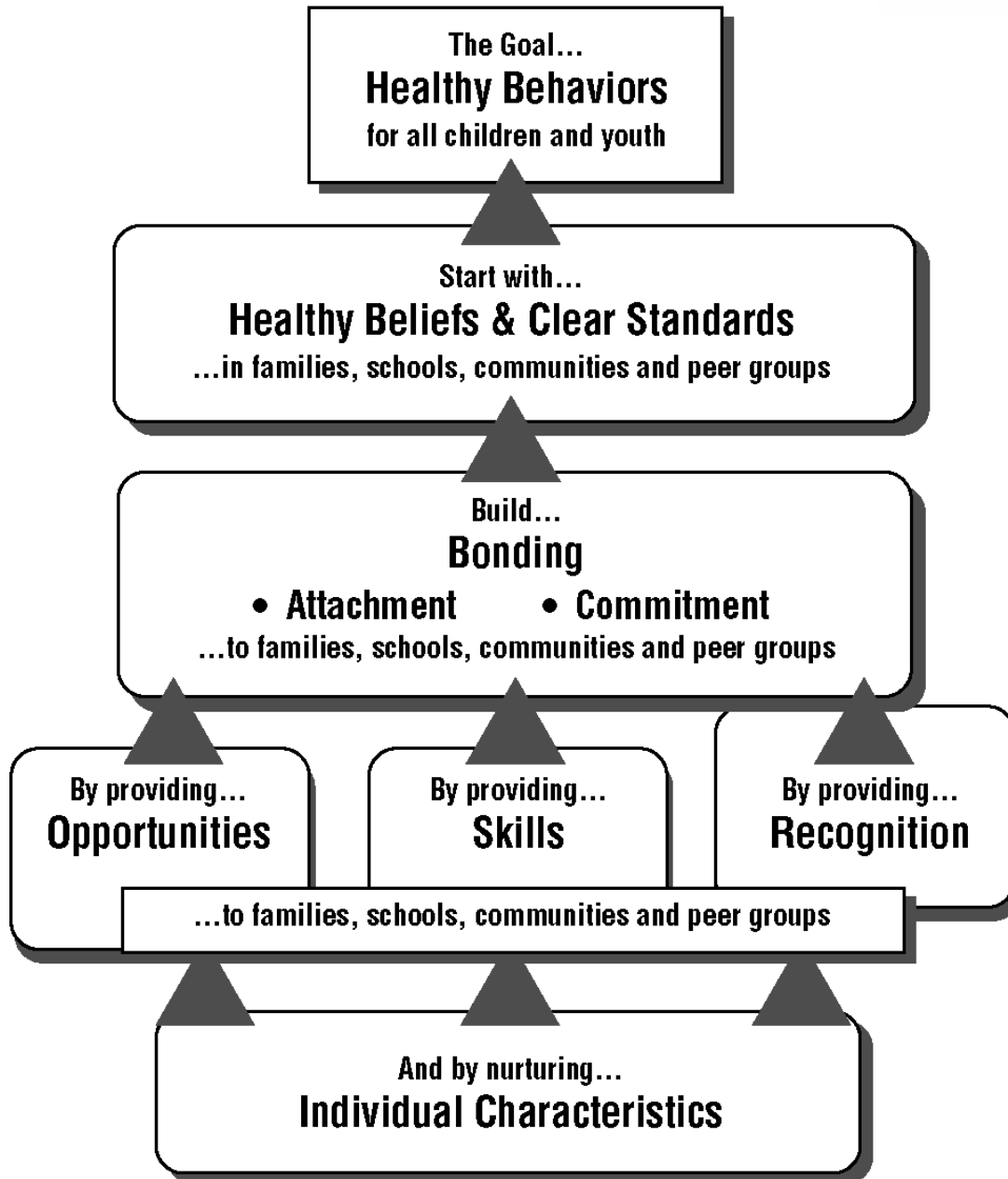


# Building Protection: Social Development Strategy



## PROTECTIVE FACTORS AND THE SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY INFORMATION SHEET

Some young people who are exposed to multiple risk factors do not become substance abusers, juvenile delinquents, school dropouts, or teen parents. Balancing the risk factors are factors that protect young people from exposure to risk, either by reducing the impact of risk factors or by changing the way young people respond to risks. The importance of protective factors cannot be overstated because they promote positive behavior, health, well-being, and personal success. 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 three individual characteristics as protective factors. These are characteristics children are born with and are difficult to change: 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 communities, families, peers, and schools. The challenge is to provide children with opportunities that they consider meaningful 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 with whom young people have bonds need to have healthy beliefs about substance use and other problem behaviors, as well as 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 these standards 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.

The Social Development Strategy shows how protective factors work together to help young people engage in healthy behaviors. Families, schools, and communities encourage young people's healthy behaviors by communicating healthy beliefs and clear standards, or expectations, for their behavior in relation to substance use and other issues.

Young people are more likely to follow these standards if they have strong bonds with their families, schools, and communities. These bonds can be kept strong by offering young people opportunities for meaningful involvement in their families, schools, and communities; by teaching them the skills they need to be successful in their involvement; and by recognizing them for their efforts and accomplishments. And finally, certain individual characteristics, such as a positive social orientation and a resilient temperament, support young people in taking advantage of the opportunities they are offered and may even help define the types of opportunities that will be meaningful to them. For more information on the risk and protective factor theory, consult Hawkins, J. D., Catalano, R. R., & Miller, J. Y. (1992) and Hawkins, J. D. (2002).

Actively Creating Healthy Communities Research supports the importance of a community focus.

- Risk and protective factors are found in all aspects of the community: schools, families, individuals, and the community. Community efforts can affect the entire local environment, including community norms, values, and policies.
- Because substance abuse is a phenomenon influenced by multiple risk factors, its prevention may be most effectively accomplished with a combination of interventions.
- A community-wide approach promotes the development of strong bonds to family, community, and school.

Because community approaches are likely to involve a wide spectrum of individuals, groups, and organizations, they create a base of support for behavior change. The firm support of community leaders and their involvement in a prevention effort are likely to lead to long-term behavior change. This reallocation of resources to reduce risk factors and enhance protective factors becomes feasible with support from community leaders. Programs and strategies gradually become integrated into the regular services and activities of local organizations and institutions. The community-wide focus creates a synergy; the whole is more powerful than the sum of its parts. Because many attempts to change families, schools, and other institutions have operated in isolation, they have had limited success. For meaningful change to occur, multiple interconnected forces within the community must begin to share a vision and agenda. Six strategies for creating a comprehensive community approach to prevention will be discussed later in this section.

Portions of the Risk Factors/Protective Factors Approach were reprinted with permission from Developmental Research and Programs, Seattle, WA, developers of *Communities That Care*,<sup>®</sup> an operating system for risk- and protective-factor-focused prevention.

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## **RISK & PROTECTIVE FACTOR FRAMEWORK INFORMATION SHEET**

Prevention according to the risk factors/protective factors theory is based on a simple premise: To prevent a problem, we need to identify the factors that increase the risk that the problem will develop and then find ways to reduce the risk. At the same time, we must identify those protective factors that buffer individuals from the risk factors in their environments and then find ways to increase the protection.

Risk-and protective-factor-focused prevention is based on the work of J. David Hawkins, Ph.D., Richard F. Catalano, Ph.D., and a team of researchers at the University of Washington in Seattle. In the early 1980s, they conducted a review of 30 years of youth substance abuse and delinquency research and identified risk factors for adolescent drug abuse and delinquency. They have continually updated this review. Other researchers—including Joy Dryfoos, Robert Slavin, and Richard Jessor—have reviewed the literature on behavior problems, such as school dropout, teen pregnancy, and violence, and the identified risk factors of these problems. Recently, risk factors have been identified for a sixth adolescent problem behavior, depression, and anxiety. Young people who are at risk of juvenile delinquency, substance abuse, school dropout, teenage pregnancy, violence, or depression and anxiety are more likely to be at risk in other ways as well. Furthermore, all of these teen problems share many common risk factors.

Before looking at the risk factors and the problems they predict, it is important to establish a working definition of the terms “delinquency” and “violence.” For our purposes, delinquency is defined as “crimes committed by juveniles younger than 18.” Violence is defined as “acts against a person that involve physical harm or the threat of physical harm.” The primary focus of substance abuse prevention programs is reducing substance abuse; however, since problem behaviors—including substance abuse, violence, delinquency, teenage pregnancy, school dropout, and depression and anxiety—share many common risk factors, reducing common risk factors is likely to reduce multiple problem behaviors. The following is a summary of the research-based risk factors and the problem behaviors they predict.

### **Community Risk Factors:**

- **Availability of Drugs - Substance Abuse and Violence**

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.

- **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 how community law can affect 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.

*Community Risk Factors – continued*

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 at 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 small effects 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. Some studies suggest that 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 that include lack of proactive monitoring or enforcement of the laws.

- Transitions and Mobility - Substance Abuse, Delinquency, School Dropout, and Depression and Anxiety

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 nonscheduled transitions, problem behaviors increase. 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. Communities of diversity must pay special attention to creating a shared community identity and common goals, as well as creating attachment and organization within subgroups. Perhaps the most significant issue affecting community attachment is whether residents feel they can make a difference in their communities. If the key players in the neighborhood—such as merchants, teachers, police, and human and social services personnel—live outside the neighborhood, residents’ sense of commitment may not be strong. Lower rates of voter participation and parental involvement in schools also indicate lower attachment to the community.

### *Community Risk Factors – continued*

- 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, Violence, Teen Pregnancy, School Dropout, and Depression and Anxiety

If children are raised in a family with a history of addiction to alcohol or other drugs, the risk that the children themselves will have alcohol and other drug problems 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 become teen parents, and children of dropouts are more likely to drop out of school themselves.

- Family Management Problems - Substance Abuse, Delinquency, Violence, Teen Pregnancy, School Dropout, and Depression and Anxiety

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, School Dropout, and Depression and Anxiety)

Persistent, serious conflict between primary caregivers or between caregivers and children appears to increase children's risk for all of the problem behaviors. Whether the family is headed by two biological parents, a single parent, or some other primary caregiver appears to matter less than whether children experience much conflict in their families. 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, Delinquency, and Violence

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 that the young person will use 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, children are at greater risk of becoming violent. Further, in families where parents involve children in their own drug or alcohol behavior—for example, by asking them to light their cigarettes or bring them beer from the refrigerator—children are more likely to 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 (grades 4-6), academic failure increases the risk of drug abuse, delinquency, violence, pregnancy, and school dropout. Children fail for many reasons, social as well as academic. The experience of failure—not necessarily lack of ability—appears to increase 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 with white students. Consequently, school and instructional improvement and reducing academic failure for all students are particularly important prevention strategies for ethnic minorities and can involve culture-specific strategies.

- **Lack of Commitment to School - Substance Abuse, Delinquency, Violence, Teen Pregnancy and School Dropout**

Low commitment to school means the young person has ceased to see the role of student as a valuable one. Those who do not have 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,” just as it was among the early immigrants. Other subgroups in the same community may view education and school as a form of negative acculturation; young people who adopt this view are likely to be at higher risk for health problems and problem behaviors.

## **Individual/ Peer Risk Factors**

- **Early and Persistent Antisocial Behavior - Substance Abuse, Delinquency, Violence, Teen Pregnancy, School Dropout, and Depression & Anxiety**

Boys who are aggressive in grades K through 3 are at higher risk of substance abuse and juvenile delinquency. However, aggressive behavior before Kindergarten in very early childhood does not appear to increase risk. When a boy’s aggressive behavior in the early grades is combined with isolation or withdrawal, the risk of problems in adolescence is even greater. 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 of drug abuse, juvenile delinquency, violence, school dropout, and teen pregnancy.

- **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. Children who consistently experience discrimination may respond by removing themselves from the dominant culture and rebelling against it. On the other hand, many minority communities are experiencing significant cultural change because of integration. The conflicting emotions that children in these communities feel when family and friends work, socialize, or marry outside of their culture may well interfere with their development of a clear and positive racial and cultural identity.

### *Individual/ Peer Risk Factors continued*

- 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.

- 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.

- Favorable Attitudes Toward the Problem Behavior - Substance Abuse, Delinquency, Teen Pregnancy, and School Dropout)

During the elementary school years, children usually express antidrug, anticrime, and prosocial 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.

- Constitutional Factors - Substance Abuse, Delinquency, Violence, and Depression & Anxiety

Constitutional factors may have a biological or physiological basis. These factors are often seen in young people who engage in sensation-seeking and low harm-avoidance behavior and those who demonstrate a lack of impulse control. Fetal alcohol and drug exposure, environmental poisoning, and brain injuries are some other examples of constitutional factors. These factors appear to increase the risk that young people will abuse drugs, engage in delinquent behavior, and commit violence.



## Generalizations

- **Risks exist in multiple domains.**  
Risk factors exist in all areas of life—community, family, school, and individual/peer relations. If a single risk factor is addressed in a single area, problem behaviors may not be significantly reduced. Communities should focus on reducing risks in all areas.
- **The more risk factors are present, the greater is the risk.**  
While exposure to one risk does not condemn a child to problems later in life, exposure to a greater number of risk factors increases a young person's risk exponentially. Even if a community cannot eliminate all the risk factors, reducing or eliminating even a few risk factors may significantly decrease problem behaviors of young people in that community.
- **Common risk factors predict diverse problem behaviors.**  
Since many individual risk factors predict multiple problems, the reduction of risk factors is likely to reduce a number of different problems in the community.
- **Risk factors appear to consistently affect different races and cultures.**  
While levels of risk may vary in different racial or cultural groups, the way these risk factors work does not appear to vary. One implication for community prevention is to prioritize prevention efforts for groups with higher levels of risk exposure.
- **Protective factors may buffer exposure to risk.**  
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 that problem behaviors will arise.