

Risk and Protective Factors

Risk and protective factors play serious roles in a teen's ability to turn down the offer of substances. Many risk factors are outside our scope of abilities to change. However, by knowing that certain lifestyles and behaviors are precursors to substance abuse, we can narrow the field of teens practicing high-risk behaviors. Two researchers from the University of Washington, J. David Hawkins and Richard F. Catalano, have spent more than 20 years researching risk and protective factors that contribute to drug abuse. They are divided into specific areas of influence:

INDIVIDUAL/PEER

Risk Factors

- Alienation and rebelliousness
- Friends who engage in the problem behavior
- Favorable attitudes toward the problem behavior
- Early initiation of the problem behavior

Protective Factors

- Belief in generalized expectations, norms, and values of society
- Skills to successfully take advantage of meaningful opportunities to contribute to the community
- Positive temperament
- Religiosity
- Prosocial ability

FAMILY

Risk Factors

- Family history of high-risk behavior
- Family management problems
- Family conflict
- Parental attitudes and involvement in the problem behavior

Protective Factors

- Strong external support system
- Strong parental bonding
- Strong family interaction
- Parent-youth discussion about drugs and alcohol use



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SCHOOL

Risk Factors

- Early and persistent antisocial behavior
- Academic failure beginning in elementary school
- Low commitment to school

Protective Factors

- Strong commitment to school
- Alcohol and drug education curriculum
- School-related activities such as sports, student government, music, drama, and other prosocial involvement

COMMUNITY

Risk Factors

- Availability of drugs
- Community laws and norms favorable toward drug use
- Transition and mobility
- Low neighborhood attachment and community disorganization
- Extreme economic and social deprivation

Protective Factors

- Bonding to a community that promotes healthy beliefs and clear standards
- Involvement in faith community activities
- Involvement in after-school activities
- Meaningful opportunities to contribute to the community
- Reward, recognition, and acknowledgment of efforts³

There are risk factors that we will not be able to control, such as a “family history of high-risk behaviors” and “economic deprivation.” By the time a teen reaches middle school, the chance to alter “academic failure in elementary school” is long gone. On the other hand, many of the protective factors can still be emphasized, such as “meaningful opportunities to contribute to the community” and “reward, recognition, and acknowledgment of efforts.” It is never too late to strengthen certain protective factors, and doing so may keep a young person from intensifying his or her substance abuse or from experimenting with drugs in the first place.