

Risk and Protective Factors for Adolescent Problem Behaviors

Extensive research has identified factors that impact youth problem behaviors such as substance use, violence, suicide ideation, and early sexual activity. Studies have found, the more risk factors an adolescent has, the greater the likelihood of problem behavior. Conversely, youth with more protective factors and a resilient personality *are better able to cope* with risk factors and life challenges; they are less likely to be involved in problem behaviors and more likely to do well in school and in life. See notes, below.

PROTECTIVE FACTORS

Characteristics within the individual or conditions in the family, school or community that help youth cope successfully with life challenges and existing risk factors.

FAMILY

- **Family connectedness** (attachment & bonding)
- Positive parenting style
- Living in a two parent family
- Higher parent education
- High parental expectations about school

SCHOOL

- **Connected to school**
- Caring school climate
- Student participation in extracurricular activities
- Early Intervention and student support services

COMMUNITY

- **Positive connection to *other* adults**
- Safe, supportive, connected neighborhood
- Strong community infrastructure (services for those in need)
- Local, state policies and practices that support healthy norms and child-youth programs
- Range of opportunities *in the community* for meaningful youth engagement

INDIVIDUALS & PEERS

- **Engagement in meaningful activities**
- **Life skills and social competence**
(*Social Emotional/Employability Skills*)
- **Cultural identity and connection**
- Positive personal qualities
- Positive self concept
- Positive peer role models
- Religious identity
- High grade point average

RISK FACTORS

Characteristics within the individual or conditions in the family, school or community that increase the likelihood youth will engage in problem behavior.

FAMILY

- **Experienced child abuse (physical, sexual) or other family violence**
- Family history of the problem behavior
- Family management problems
- Family conflict
- Favorable parental attitudes and involvement in problem behaviors
- Household access to substances or guns

SCHOOL

- Academic failure
- Lack of personal commitment to school

COMMUNITY

- **Availability of alcohol/other drugs**
- **Community norms and laws**
- Availability of firearms
- Transitions and mobility (*moving a lot*)
- Low neighborhood attachment & community disorganization
- Poverty

INDIVIDUAL - PEERS

- **Early initiation of the problem behavior**
- **Feeling depressed or suicidal**
- **Loss of cultural identity and connection**
- Constitutional factors (see definition)
- Childhood media exposure to violence and alcohol
- Early and persistent antisocial behavior
- Friends who engage in the problem behavior
- Favorable attitudes toward the problem behavior (low perceived-risk of harm)
- Older physical appearance than peers
- Paid work more than 20 hrs/week
- Perceived risk of untimely death

Factors in Bold are priority prevention indicators identified by the Division of Behavioral Health's Epidemiological Influences group using four criteria: strength of the research, relevance to Alaska, ability to impact the factor by the community, political will in Alaska to address this factor.

Each factor has been identified through research to have an influence on two or more adolescent problem behaviors. All factors have been cited in two or more studies and published in peer-reviewed journals. The definition of each factor and supporting studies, are available upon request.

Source: Alaska Division of Behavioral Health 2012