

## Shared Risk & Protective Factors Impacting Adolescent Behavior & Positive Development Overview

A full copy of the paper is available from the website below. This paper summarizes the research on the shared influences that impact unhealthy, harmful behaviors among adolescents, which include:

- Suicidal behavior - depression, suicide thoughts, attempts and completions
- Substance use – tobacco, alcohol, marijuana and other drugs
- Violence – bullying, fighting, assaults, sexual violence and dating violence
- Unsafe sexual activity - multiple partners, lack of protection and birth control

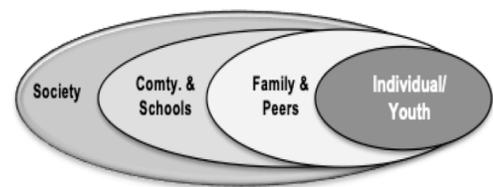
Extensive research demonstrates a strong association between community conditions, relationships, personal characteristics and experiences with harmful behaviors in adolescents (ages 10-19). The research literature refers to these shared influences as *Risk and Protective Factors*. Many harmful adolescent behaviors share the same risk and protective factors; the full document describes this overlap and definitions for each factor.

**Risk factors** are characteristics within the individual or conditions in the family, school, community and society that *increase the likelihood someone will engage in unhealthy, problematic behavior*. The more risk factors present in a child's life, *the greater the likelihood* problems will emerge in adolescence.

**Protective factors** are characteristics within the individual or conditions in the family, school, community and society that are instrumental in healthy development; they build supportive relationships, social competence and resiliency. Resiliency is the process of successfully adapting and recovering from stressful events or crises. When adolescents can effectively negotiate problems and manage their risk factors, they are *less likely to engage in unhealthy, problematic behavior*.

Risk and protective factors are categorized according to the socio-ecological model, below.

While the individual is at the heart of this model, the factors at other levels greatly influence the attitudes and behaviors of youth. Public Health and prevention-science research suggest the most effective way to prevent harmful behaviors among adolescents and increase positive development is through focusing on the shared influences (factors) related to adolescent behavior, at each level of the social ecology.



Some factors (e.g. laws, norms, policies) reside at both the societal and community level; they set the background and climate for either healthy, respectful behavior among residents or unhealthy, harmful, intolerant behavior. While it may take time, community coalitions and partnerships with local and state policy makers can change these factors. Throughout this document, these societal and community factors are identified with a \*.

Some factors may be risk or protective depending on its definition, such as:

- Healthy community norms vs. Unhealthy, intolerant community norms
- Delayed onset of alcohol use vs. Early onset of alcohol use
- Low grades vs. Higher grades

**NOTE: Protective factors are the result of intentional actions; the absence of a risk factor does not automatically convey protection.**

A shared risk and protective factor approach involves prioritizing the factors linked to unhealthy youth behavior in prevention planning, partnership and programmatic efforts, as an alternative to focusing on a single behavior. This approach allows state and community agencies to streamline prevention approaches and services. Breaking down the traditional health “siloes” and moving toward a shared factor approach can provide for more effective coordination between partners and leveraging of resources.<sup>95</sup>

<https://www.strengthbasedstrategies.org>

## Overview: Shared Factors Impacting Adolescent Behaviors

Extensive research has identified a set of factors that impact multiple unhealthy youth behaviors (suicidal thoughts, substance use, violence, unsafe sexual activity.) These influences are called risk and protective factors. The more risk factors youth have, the greater the likelihood of future unhealthy behavior. Conversely, youth with more protective factors *are better able to cope* with risk factors, life stresses and challenges; they are less likely to be involved in unhealthy behavior and more likely to do well in school and life. The factors below are based on national research and meet these criteria: 1) they demonstrate an influence on two or more unhealthy adolescent behaviors and 2) they have been cited in two or more peer reviewed studies, reports or analyses conducted by University of Alaska, State of Alaska or national government agencies.

Risk Factors	Protective Factors
<p>Individual characteristics or conditions in the family, school, community or society that <u>increase the likelihood</u> youth will engage in unhealthy behavior.</p> <p><b>Community &amp; Society</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Unhealthy community norms and laws*</b></li> <li>• <b>Easy availability of alcohol, drugs*</b></li> <li>• Easy availability of firearms*</li> <li>• Low neighborhood cohesion and support</li> <li>• Frequent transitions, turnover and mobility</li> <li>• High neighborhood poverty and inequity*</li> </ul> <p><b>Family</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Family conflict, instability &amp; management problems</li> <li>• Family history of unhealthy behavior</li> <li>• <b>Adverse childhood experiences</b></li> <li>• Parental attitudes favorable to unhealthy behavior</li> <li>• Easy household access to substances or guns</li> <li>• Chronic poverty</li> <li>• Homelessness</li> </ul> <p><b>Peers</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Friends attitudes/involvement in unhealthy behavior</li> </ul> <p><b>Individual</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cognitive impairments</li> <li>• Early and persistent antisocial behavior</li> <li>• Childhood media exposure to violence &amp; alcohol*</li> <li>• Failing grades</li> <li>• Lack of personal commitment to school</li> <li>• Bullying others or being victimized by bullying</li> <li>• <b>Early onset of the unhealthy behavior</b></li> <li>• <b>Loss of cultural identity and connection</b></li> <li>• Personal attitudes favorable toward unhealthy behavior (including low perceived-risk of harm)</li> <li>• Sexual orientation (LGBTQ)</li> <li>• <b>Feeling alone or depressed</b></li> <li>• Older physical appearance than peers</li> </ul>	<p>Individual characteristics or conditions in the family, school, community or society that help youth cope with life challenges and risk factors. Protective factors increase positive development and decrease the likelihood of unhealthy behavior.</p> <p><b>Community &amp; Society</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Positive connection to <i>other</i> adults</b></li> <li>• Safe, supportive, friendly neighborhood/community</li> <li>• Clinical care and therapeutic support services*</li> <li>• Public policies, practices and norms supporting health and safety*</li> <li>• Range of community-based, out-of school time programs and opportunities</li> </ul> <p><b>School</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Connected to school</b></li> <li>• Caring school climate</li> <li>• Student participation in extracurricular activities</li> <li>• Early intervention and student support services</li> </ul> <p><b>Family</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Connected to family</b></li> <li>• Positive, warm parenting style</li> <li>• Living in a two-parent family</li> <li>• Higher parent education</li> <li>• High parental expectations about school</li> </ul> <p><b>Peers</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Positive friends and peer role models</li> </ul> <p><b>Individual</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Engaged in out-of-school-time programs and positive, meaningful activities</b></li> <li>• <b>Social/emotional competence &amp; self regulation</b></li> <li>• <b>Cultural identity and connection</b></li> <li>• Positive temperament</li> <li>• Positive self concept</li> <li>• Feeling valued (mattering to others)</li> <li>• High grade point average</li> <li>• Religious or spiritual beliefs</li> </ul>

The **bold factors** were selected as priority prevention indicators by SPF/SIG Epidemiological Influences group, 2010.  
 \* Societal factors may be impacted through partnerships with community coalitions and state and local policy makers.