

What is Risk and Protective Factor Focused Prevention?

Prevention focusing on risk and protective factors is based on a simple idea: To prevent a problem from developing, we need to identify factors that reduce or, in contrast, increase the chance of the problem. Risk factors increase the chances the problem will occur. Protective factors reduce the likelihood of problems. After identifying these factors, we then need to find ways to reduce risks and increase protection so that better health and wellbeing occur.

You learned about some important Protective Factors that families can influence in the Social Development Strategy introduced in Session 1. Sessions 2-5 will provide specific information and strategies for building protection in your own family.

Below we describe Risk Factors that your children may already have experienced or that increase in the teen years. Guiding Good Choices focuses on reducing 8 specific risk factors that have been found to occur in families, young people, and their peers. Other risk factors described below occur in school and community settings. Parents may be able to work together to reduce risks in their children's schools and their community.

RISK FACTORS INCREASE THE LIKELIHOOD OF TEEN BEHAVIORAL HEALTH PROBLEMS

As our children become teenagers, the chance they'll experience six behavioral health problems increases: substance use, violence, teen delinquency, depression, teen pregnancy, and school dropout.

Risk factors in young people's daily lives at school, in their communities, with their friends, and even at home raise the possibility that they'll experience at least one of these problems. And the more risk factors to which they're exposed, the more likely these problems will occur.

As parents, we want to reduce risks in our children's lives, or offset those risks by building protection, so they'll be healthy and happy, now and as adults. The table on the next page shows the relationship between risk factors and the six most common behavioral health problems experienced by teens. It shows that the same risk factors predict several different problems. The good news is that by reducing risks, you can also reduce the chances of several problems occurring.

Read on for information about risk factors and how you as a parent, or working with other parents, can help reduce risk factors.

SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIALS

BEHAVIORAL HEALTH PROBLEMS

Bold denotes risk factors addressed specifically by GGC.

| | SUBSTANCE USE | DELINQUENCY | TEEN PREGNANCY | SCHOOL DROP-OUT | VIOLENCE | DEPRESSION & ANXIETY |
|---|---------------|-------------|----------------|-----------------|----------|----------------------|
| COMMUNITY RISK FACTORS | | | | | | |
| Availability of Drugs | ✓ | | | | ✓ | |
| Availability of Firearms | | ✓ | | | ✓ | |
| Laws and Norms Favorable Toward Drug Use, Firearms, and Crime | ✓ | ✓ | | | ✓ | |
| Media Portrayals of Violence | ✓ | | | | ✓ | |
| Transitions and Mobility | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | | ✓ |
| Low Neighborhood Attachment and Community Disorganization | ✓ | ✓ | | | ✓ | |
| Poverty/Extreme Economic Deprivation | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| FAMILY RISK FACTORS | | | | | | |
| Family History of Problem Behavior | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Family Management Problems | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Family Conflict | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Favorable Parental Attitudes and Involvement in Problem Behavior | ✓ | ✓ | | | ✓ | |
| SCHOOL RISK FACTORS | | | | | | |
| Academic Failure Beginning in Late Elementary School | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Lack of Commitment to School | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| PEER & INDIVIDUAL RISK FACTORS | | | | | | |
| Early and Persistent Antisocial Behavior | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Rebelliousness | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Gang Involvement | ✓ | ✓ | | | ✓ | |
| Friends Who Engage in the Problem Behavior | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Favorable Attitudes Toward Problem Behavior | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Early Initiation of the Problem Behavior | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Constitutional Factors | ✓ | ✓ | | | ✓ | ✓ |

Individual and Peer Risk Factors

These risk factors reflect individual behavior, qualities that are found in some young people, and risks that occur in their relationships with friends. Peer risk factors become particularly important during the teen years, as youth expand their world and the influence of their friends increases.

FAVORABLE ATTITUDES TOWARD THE PROBLEM BEHAVIOR

During the elementary years, children may say, “Smoking is gross,” or “People who use drugs are stupid.” But when they reach middle school and see some peers begin to participate in these behaviors, their own attitudes may shift. They may start to accept these behaviors as more normal. These new attitudes can increase your child’s risk for participating in these behaviors. And unfortunately, many young people believe nothing bad will happen to them. They also start to want to be different from their parents and have their own identities. All of these feelings and attitudes may lead them to take risks.

What you can do to reduce this risk: Have open and honest discussions with your child, and have them often! Share your hopes for your children’s health and wellbeing that you thought about in Session 1. Talk with them about the potential consequences of substance use and other problems where their choices play a role. Session 2 will help you have these conversations and set family guidelines for teen behaviors. Using the Social Development Strategy will also help keep bonds strong and lines of communication open, even as your children become more independent. This is important because strong bonds increase the chance your children will live within your guidelines. Guiding Good Choices will help you do these things, and if you need more information and tools, please ask your workshop leader.

EARLY INITIATION OF PROBLEM BEHAVIOR

The earlier young people begin using alcohol or other substances, skipping school, getting involved in delinquency or violence, and becoming sexually active, the more likely they are to have problems with these behaviors later on.

What you can do to reduce this risk: Monitoring and supervising young people remains important in the teen years! Teens are more likely to experiment with these behaviors when they are unsupervised.

EARLY AND PERSISTENT ANTISOCIAL BEHAVIOR

Boys who are very aggressive in Grades K-3 are at higher risk for problem behaviors. When early aggressive behavior is combined with isolation or social withdrawal, the risk of problems in the teen years increases. It often shows up in skipping school, misbehaving in school, and getting into fights. Teens who show these behaviors in early adolescence—regardless of gender—are at increased risk for more serious problems later.

What you can do to reduce this risk: Pay attention to aggressive and other “antisocial” behaviors. Try to work with your child’s school to help your child learn how to control aggressive or violent impulses. Behavior management programs that

recognize and reward positive behavior and work to prevent aggressive behavior can be especially helpful. Consider seeking professional help if your child continues to engage in fighting, bullying, skipping school, or other behaviors of concern.

FRIENDS WHO ENGAGE IN THE PROBLEM BEHAVIOR

Young people who spend time with friends who engage in problem behaviors are much more likely to participate in these problems themselves. Even when young people come from close families who set guidelines, monitor, and use consequences to motivate healthy decision making, friends are a powerful influence!

What you can do to reduce this risk: As your child becomes a teenager, it can be tempting to “back off” and become less involved and less familiar with their friends. Your teen will probably push you to do so, but resist this temptation! Remain actively involved in your child’s life, get to know his or her friends, and monitor activities with friends to help reduce the chances that problems will occur. Also help your child learn and practice “Refusal Skills,” which will help them resist peer influences and are the focus of Session 3.

REBELLIOUSNESS

It’s normal for teens to feel defiant at times as they forge their own identities as individuals, but young people who feel they don’t have to follow society’s rules are at higher risk for problems. Rebelliousness may be especially significant in some youth. Youth who feel strongly that they don’t fit into society for any number of reasons are also at higher risk.

What you can do to reduce this risk: Children need to feel supported by their families for the people they are, provided they are not behaving in harmful ways. Try to convey support and appreciation for who your children are early and often. Session 5 will teach you a way to do this called “Strength Bombardment.” If you find this hard to do, you may want to find someone to talk to. You can also try to connect your child with supportive adult role models who have successfully made the transition from rebelliousness to a positive role in your community. This can be especially helpful if your child is reluctant to talk with you.

OTHER INDIVIDUAL QUALITIES

Certain innate qualities with a biological or physiological basis may increase the chances of drug use, delinquency, and violence. They are revealed in some people as heightened sensation-seeking or thrill-seeking, excessive risk taking, and poor control of impulses. Although these behaviors increase in general in teenagers, some young people have a history of these behaviors prior to the teen years. These young people are at greater risk for problems.

What you can do to reduce this risk: Think creatively! If your child shows some of these characteristics, channel them into legitimate, less dangerous activities. Sports and recreational activities may provide a good outlet. If you are feeling very concerned about these behaviors in your child, you might also seek professional help from a counselor. Your school or pediatrician’s office can provide behavioral health resources.

GANG INVOLVEMENT

Most young people don't join gangs, but those who do are at greatly increased risk for substance use, delinquency, and violence.

What you can do to reduce this risk: One of the best ways to reduce the chance your child will become involved with a gang is to use the Social Development Strategy. Build or maintain strong bonds by remaining actively involved in your child's life, and get to know their friends. If you are able to, look for and help build resources in your community that benefit young people. For more information, turn to the "Social Development Strategy" under More Resources for Parents.

Family Risk Factors

These risk factors may occur in individual family members, reflect interactions between family members, or reveal themselves in the family as a unit.

FAMILY HISTORY OF THE PROBLEM BEHAVIOR.

Unfortunately, problem behaviors tend to run in families. Risks may be genetic or modelled in family behavior, or some combination. Whatever the reason, we know the following:

- ▶ Young people whose families have a history of substance use addiction are at increased risk of substance use problems.
- ▶ Young people whose families have had problems with crime are at increased risk of delinquency.
- ▶ Young people born to a teenage mother are more likely to become teenage parents.
- ▶ Young people whose parents did not complete high school are less likely to graduate from high school themselves.

What you can do to reduce this risk: Your children's behavior is not pre-ordained by their family history! You can help buffer your child from this risk by establishing healthy beliefs and clear standards for behavior. You can also help your child develop strong bonds within your family, at school, with friends, and in the community.

FAMILY MANAGEMENT PROBLEMS

Family management refers to the use of clear guidelines, monitoring, and consequences ("GMC") to help shape healthy behavior in youth. Family management problems include lack of clear expectations for behavior, failure to monitor (checking to see if expectations are being followed), and inappropriate consequences for following or not following expectations (inconsistently used or excessively harsh).

What you can do to reduce this risk: Use the principles shown in Session 2 to set clear guidelines, monitor your child's behavior, and apply appropriate consequences consistently, and keep using them throughout the teen years. Session 2 will show you how to apply GMC to underage substance use and also social media use, but the same principles can be applied to a range of behaviors you care about.

FAMILY CONFLICT

When people live together, conflict will happen. But if conflict between parents or parent and youth is persistent or explosive, or leads to behavior like giving the “cold shoulder,” it increases the risk of all types of problem behaviors.

Children raised in families where there is persistent, serious conflict between parents or between parents and children appear to be at increased risk for all types of problem behaviors.

What you can do to reduce this risk: Parents can help by modeling constructive anger management and teaching skills for expressing anger in healthy ways. Session 4 teaches these skills. When family members express anger in a positive way, they give each other important information. By communicating their feelings in a way that others can hear, they are taking steps to solve problems constructively, get along better, and strengthen relationships.

FAVORABLE PARENTAL ATTITUDES TOWARD AND INVOLVEMENT IN THE PROBLEM BEHAVIOR

When parents express attitudes and behavior that are favorable toward substance use, crime, and violence, they influence the attitudes and behavior of their children. For example, parental approval of young people’s moderate drinking, even under their supervision, increases the risk of underage alcohol and marijuana use. Similarly, children whose parents excuse them for breaking rules are more likely to continue to break rules and develop problems with delinquency. And in families where parents are violent toward family members or others, young people are at increased risk for violence.

What you can do to reduce this risk: Monitor your own behavior. Be sure you are not modeling—however unintentionally—attitudes or actions that may negatively influence your child. Pay attention not only to active behaviors, like how much alcohol you consume in front of your child, but also passive attitudes and behaviors, such as watching a violent television show with your child and not talking about the consequences of violence.

School Risk Factors

These risk factors are often, but not always, first identified when a child is in elementary school.

ACADEMIC FAILURE BEGINNING IN LATE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Children who struggle to succeed academically from Grade 4 on are at greater risk for problem behaviors. They may struggle for many reasons. Learning disabilities, ineffective teaching, mental health issues, or stressful family situations are among the most common reasons. Regardless of the cause, school failure increases the risk for problem behaviors.

What you can do to reduce this risk: Try to understand the root causes of your child’s academic struggles so that you can find the proper supports. These might involve, for example, an educational counselor to assess and assist with a learning disability, or a mental health counselor if there are mental health concerns, like anxiety or depression.

LACK OF COMMITMENT TO SCHOOL

Lack of commitment to school means that the young person doesn’t see education as being useful.

What you can do to reduce this risk: To promote school success and help young people stay engaged, schools increasingly encourage parents’ active participation in their children’s education. Your attitude about the value of education can have a strong influence on your child’s commitment to school. You can support their school success by showing your interest in what they are learning and doing in school, setting guidelines around homework, and, if you can, by volunteering at your child’s school.

Community Risk Factors

These risk factors broadly affect those living in a community, or the same geographic area.

AVAILABILITY OF ALCOHOL, MARIJUANA, AND OTHER SUBSTANCES

The more available substances are in a community, the higher the risk of young people using them.

What you can do to reduce this risk: You can control the availability of substances in your home. You can also help reduce illegal availability in your community by reporting dealing or other suspicious activities to the police. Active neighborhood watches may be one way to reduce substance use dealing and other risks.

AVAILABILITY OF GUNS AND OTHER FIREARMS

When young people have easy access to guns and other firearms, delinquency and violence are more likely to occur.

What you can do to reduce this risk: As with substances, you can control the availability of guns and firearms in your home. More communities are adopting safe storage laws and policies. These include keeping all firearms unloaded and locked up, with ammunition stored separately. Controlling availability in the community often requires working with other parents and community members to keep firearms out of schools and community centers and reduce the risk of accidents and tragedies involving youth.

COMMUNITY LAWS AND NORMS FAVORABLE TOWARD SUBSTANCE USE, FIREARMS, AND CRIME

The attitudes and policies a community has about substance use or crime are communicated to young people in a variety of ways: through laws and written policies, through informal social activities, and through the expectations that

parents and other members of the community have for young people. Taxes on alcohol and cigarettes, for example, decrease the rate of use. Failure to An example of a community norm favorable to alcohol use communicated through informal social activities is the presence of “beer gardens” or “beer tents” at street fairs and community festivals frequented by young people.

What you can do to reduce this risk: One way to help set clear norms for your community’s young people is to talk with other parents about the rules and guidelines you have for pre-teen and teen behavior. This is a great way to develop shared norms and avoid young people bargaining by saying things like, “My friends’ parents say it’s ok.”

MEDIA PORTRAYALS OF VIOLENCE AND SUBSTANCE USE

Exposure to violence through media seems to affect young people in at least two important ways: First, they learn violent problem-solving strategies from watching actors model violent behavior. Second, media violence appears to reduce young people’s sensitivity to violence.

What you can do to reduce this risk: As a parent, you can set and enforce guidelines that limit your children’s exposure to violent television, music, video games, and other media.

TRANSITIONS AND MOBILITY

Stability and predictability are important anchors for children, particularly in today’s fast-paced world. Even normal school transitions, such as the move from elementary school to middle school or from middle school to high school, are times of stress for young people. During these transition times, significant increases in problem behaviors can occur. This is one of the reasons why the middle school years are such a high-risk time for young people. In communities where families often move in and out, or even from place to place within the community, there are higher rates of crime, drug use, and dropping out of school.

What you can do to reduce this risk: You can ease the stress of transitions and moves by preparing children in advance for what to expect and by keeping as many things as possible stable and predictable in their lives. A favorite toy, book, or video can be a source of stability when your child moves a lot. You can also join with other neighbors to welcome new arrivals to the neighborhood. It’s a great way to find out who’s moving in and to communicate the neighborhood’s values.

LOW NEIGHBORHOOD ATTACHMENT AND COMMUNITY DISORGANIZATION

In neighborhoods where people don’t feel attached to the community or to each other, youth are at higher risk for problem behaviors.

What you can do to reduce this risk: Grass-roots efforts have helped build community attachment and organize and empowering residents. As a parent, you can increase attachment to your neighborhood by, for example, getting involved in your child’s school, taking part in community activities, getting to know your neighbors, and exercising your right to vote.

EXTREME ECONOMIC DEPRIVATION

Children who live in extreme poverty and poor living conditions are also more likely to develop problems during adolescence.

What you can do to reduce this risk: Efforts to improve neighborhood economic conditions—bringing in businesses to provide more jobs or refurbishing residential areas—can help reduce the risk. You can also encourage your schools and community leaders to work together to develop age-appropriate internships and work experiences that provide opportunities for positive involvement and keep children engaged in school.