



Risk and Protective Factors: What Schools Can Do to Build Protective Factors

Although we often focus on children being harmed or mistreated by strangers, most abuse is perpetrated by a parent or caretaker, someone who is supposed to love and care for the child. When we think of a parent who abuses a child the image is often of an angry, intoxicated person who is physically or emotionally abusive and intentionally harming the child. In most cases the child is actually being neglected. The Children's Bureau (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2010) reported the percent of all child abuse victims who had experienced neglect in 2008 was just over 73%. The image of the intoxicated parent, however, is often accurate, as many parents who neglect and abuse their children are misusing substances. They are also often victims of domestic violence, and were themselves victims of child abuse and neglect. Often, these adults lack parenting skills and the resources or capacity to meet the needs of the children in their care.

Unfortunately, there is no specific indicator that is known to cause child abuse and neglect. Researchers and professionals in the field have identified risk factors impacting families that have been found to increase the probability of child abuse and neglect and poor developmental outcomes for children. Risk factors can be found at the child, parent, family, and community levels. It makes sense really, as risk increases, so does the possibility of child abuse and neglect.

It is important to recognize that the absence of risk does not mean that child abuse or neglect is not possible, or that all families who experience risk factors will abuse or neglect their children. The fact that many children and families succeed despite the accumulation of risk has led researchers to also identify the strengths and supports available to the child and family. These strengths and supports are known as "protective factors" and they help build resilience against risk. Similar to risk factors, protective factors can also be found at the child, parent, family and community levels.

An understanding of risk and protective factors allows children and families to be viewed in the context of their environments, instead of as "bad" or "problematic" individuals. This strengths-based rather than deficit-based approach to working with children and families provides a much better chance of improving the outcomes for the "problems" identified.

Listed below are a number of risk and protective factors that have been identified in relation to child abuse and neglect. Following the list are specific actions that school personnel can take to promote protective factors and build resilience in children and families.

RISK FACTORS

- **Parent/caregiver factors**
 - Personality characteristics and psychological well being
 - Low self esteem
 - External locus of control (i.e., belief that events result primary from factors outside of individual actions – fate, bad luck)
 - Poor impulse control
 - Depression
 - Anxiety

- Anti-social behavior
 - History of abuse or neglect as a child
 - Substance abuse
 - Negative attitudes and attributions about a child's behavior
 - Inaccurate knowledge of parenting and child development
 - Unrealistic expectations of the child's abilities
 - Negative attitude - child looks like ex-husband, child is "bad"
 - Age - younger mothers at the time of child's birth –linked to the following contributing factors such as:
 - Lower economic status
 - Lack of social support
 - High stress levels
- **Family factors**
 - Family Structure
 - Single families - primarily with lower income
 - Families with few social supports
 - Large family or many household members
 - Chaotic homes - household with changing constellations of adult and child figures e.g., a mother and her children who live on and off with various others, such as the mother's mother, the mother's sister, or various boyfriends have been found to be at greater risk of neglect.
 - Marital Conflict and Domestic Violence

Children may witness parental violence -whether victims of abuse or not children exposed to domestic violence experience harmful psychological effects.
 - Stress
 - Stressful life events
 - Parenting stress
 - Emotional distress
 - Parent-Child Interaction
 - Parent seldom recognizes or rewards child's positive behavior
 - Parent has strong response to child's negative behavior
 - Harsh discipline – hitting, prolonged isolations, verbal aggression
 - Parent is less supportive, affectionate and playful
 - Lack of positive parenting skills
- **Child factors**
 - Age –
 - Infants and young children, due to their small physical size, early developmental status, and need for constant care, can be particularly vulnerable to child maltreatment. Very young children are more likely to experience certain forms of maltreatment, such as shaken baby syndrome and non-organic failure to thrive. Teenagers, on the other hand, are at greater risk for sexual abuse.
 - Disabilities - Children with physical, cognitive, and emotional disabilities appear to experience higher rates of maltreatment than do other children.
 - Children perceived as "different" or having special needs, including children with disabilities, children with chronic illnesses or children with difficult temperament are at greater risk of maltreatment.
 - The demands of caring for these children may be overwhelming.
 - Disruptions may occur in the bonding or attachment if the child and parent are separated by frequent hospitalizations.
 - Child may be unresponsive to affection.

- Child may not understand that the abusive behaviors are inappropriate, and is unlikely to escape or defend self.
 - Societal attitudes, practices, and beliefs devalue and depersonalize children with disabilities
- Other Child Characteristics:
 - Premature infant
 - Low birth-weight infant
- These factors may be attributable to higher maternal stress heightened by high caregiver demands, but it also may be related to poor parental education about low birth-weight, lack of accessible prenatal care, and other factors, such as substance abuse or domestic violence
 - Aggression
 - Attention deficit
 - Difficult temperament
 - Behavior problems -or the parental perceptions of such problem
- **Environmental Factors** - often in combination with parent, family, and child factors
 - Unemployment or inability to provide economically
 - Poverty
 - Social isolation
 - Violent communities - in unsafe neighborhoods violence may seem acceptable, especially for those who witness it more frequently.

PROTECTIVE FACTORS

- **Parent/caregiver factors**
 - Nurturing and Attachment
 - Love
 - Acceptance
 - Positive guidance
 - Protection
 - Knowledge of Parenting Skills
 - Respectful communication
 - Consistent rules and expectations
 - Authoritative parenting
 - Knowledge of Child Development
 - Safe opportunities for independence
 - Motivation
 - Encouraging curiosity
 - Parental Resilience
 - Capacity to cope with stress
 - Concrete Supports-ability to meet basic needs
 - Food
 - Clothing
 - Housing
 - Transportation
 - Access to essential services
 - Child care
 - Health care
 - Mental health service
 - Social Connections
 - Emotionally supportive friends, family, and neighbors

- Child factors - Personal Values, Beliefs, and Behaviors
 - Social Competence
 - Responsiveness
 - Communication
 - Empathy
 - Caring
 - Compassion
 - Altruism
 - Forgiveness
 - Problem Solving Skills
 - Planning
 - Flexibility
 - Resourcefulness
 - Critical thinking
 - Insight
 - Autonomy
 - Positive identity
 - Internal locus of control
 - Initiative
 - Self-efficacy
 - Resistance
 - Self-awareness
 - Mindfulness – self-aware, present in the moment
 - Humor
 - Sense of Purpose
 - Goal direction
 - Achievement motivation
 - Educational aspirations
 - Special interest
 - Creativity
 - Imagination
 - Optimism
 - Hope
 - Faith
 - Spirituality
 - Sense of meaning

- Family factors
 - Warmth
 - Cohesion as Family group
 - Positive Relationship with Parent or Parent Figure
 - Physical and Psychological Safety
 - Structure
 - Absence of Stress

- **Environment**
 - Caring Relationships
 - High Expectations
 - Opportunities for Participation
 - Positive Peer Influence
 - Available Mentors
 - Sense of Place/Culture/Identify
 - Sense of Community

- Safe
- Opportunities for Positive Activities
 - Religious community
 - After school programs
 - Safe, enjoyable activities
- Availability of Social Supports

What Schools Can Do to Promote Protective Factors?

Schools have an enormous influence in supporting and strengthening protective factors in the children, families and communities. For children ages 5 to 12 years, the school may play an even more significant role than the family unit. The daily contact schools have with children provides many opportunities for children to acquire internal and external protective factors associated with resilience. Schools provide a critical context in shaping children’s self efficacy and sense of control over their lives. With this, an incredible opportunity to minimize and in many instances, prevent or mitigate future problems for these children.

Recognition of the critical role the school environment can provide in promoting resilience and positive outcomes for children is increasing worldwide. As a result three key factors for developing resilience in children have been identified, these are:

- Caring Relationships
- High Expectations and Academic Standards
- Opportunities for Participation and Contribution

Schools that keep these factors in mind and embed them into the daily interactions with children have been found to improve outcomes for children. When the environment is supportive, challenging, and involving, and the potential of each child recognized, protective factors and resilience are promoted. Every interaction becomes an opportunity to build protective factors and promote resilience.

Teachers don’t need to become experts in psychology, they need only to understand the potential their attitude about children and their interactions with them have. They need to be aware of their words and plan for activities and opportunities to promote the potential in each child. If the teacher conveys optimism about the future, the children will be hopeful, but if the attitude is negative the opportunity to develop hope is lost.

Promoting resilience does not stop with the teachers. Children and families also need to be supported within the school and the school community. Every level of the school can engage in identifying opportunities to develop protective factors.

Protective Factors for 1st Graders –

According to Erikson, children in first grade are learning initiative. At this age the child is actively engaged in play and is busy. Make believe and pretend are what play is about. It is sometimes difficult for these children to separate play from reality. It is not uncommon for a child this age to tell a far fetched story about something that “really” happened. First graders are curious about everything, especially what someone else is doing. They want to help and ask many questions. If the child is dismissed or rejected he or she may feel guilty or bad.

Tips for increasing protective factors and developing resilient 1st Graders

- Provide unconditional love
- Use words to express caring
- Help children label their feelings and express them
- Help children recognize and label the feelings of others
- Help children learn to comfort and calm themselves

- Provide ample praise
- Encourage curiosity and independence
- Provide challenges to children but do so gradually
- Provide a safe environment
- Encourage sharing of ideas and feelings
- Encourage empathy
- Provide recognition to children who act with empathy
- Model problem solving, courage, optimism in the face of adversity
- Maintain positive attitudes and behavior
- Encourage problem solving to resolve interpersonal problems
- Provide clear rules, enforce them with consequences when rules are broken
- Provide firm discipline
- Provide reconciliation when discipline is needed
- Assist children to take responsibility for behavior
- Establish clear rules, set limits, and enforce consequences
- Provide encouragement and guidance when errors are made or failures occur
- Provide comfort and encouragement in stressful situations
- Model appropriate behavior in stressful situations
- Seek help when needed
- Encourage flexibility in responding to different situations and approach to learning

Protective Factors for 3rd through 5th Graders

According to Erikson, children from third to fifth grade are learning about industry. Children are moving from play to mastering life skills and belief in their ability to succeed. This is when many children master reading, writing, and math skills. The child's image of him or herself is important and the child is looking for peer acceptance and approval. If a child in this stage is not successful or hears only about failures, the child will feel insecure and doubt his or her ability to succeed.

Tips for increasing protective factors and developing resilient 3rd – 5th Graders.

- Provide unconditional love
- Express caring verbally
- Encourage independent efforts at problem solving, provide assistance when requested or indicated
- Help the child identify, express, and manage feelings
- Confront and correct negative talk of self or others
- Identify and label community values, model behavior that supports such values
- Provide reasons for rules and expectations, obtain commitment from group to support them.
- Provide ample praise for success and positive behavior
- Practice problem solving for conflicts, school work, and problems
- Encourage open communication
- Discuss feelings
- Set achievable goals for each student, provide feedback and encourage all effort
- Recognize failures as opportunities
- Encourage children to accept responsibility for attitude, behavior and work
- Provide an opportunity for reconciliation when rules are broken and consequence is enforced.
- Model flexibility in responding to challenges and adversity
- Encourage empathy for others

Additional resources

About resiliency for schools, parents and kids can be found at:
<http://www.embracethefuture.org.au/resiliency/index2.htm>

For further information on risk and protective factors
<http://www.childwelfare.gov/can/factors/>

For more ideas for schools for developing protective factors in children and their families. Includes handouts for parents and other resources
Strengthening Families and Communities:2010 Resource Guide

http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/res_guide_2010/

Caring relationships are developed when teachers:

- Have genuine concern for every child in their care
- Are prepared to listen to students' concerns and provide empathy and understanding
- Recognize and believe in each child's potential
- Nurture individual children's strengths
- Provide encouragement
- Challenge negative behaviors
- Model positive behaviors and attitudes
- Reframe negative thoughts about challenging children, try to find a context for the disruptive behaviors
- Encourage cooperation and peer support
- Don't allow put-downs of any kind
- Encourage formal and informal communication between teachers and parents
- Develop strategies for addressing issues with parents

(Geary, 1988; Benard, 1995).

Schools create high expectations and academic standards when they:

- Set achievable goals for improving performance, for the individual child, teachers, classroom and school
- Provide support to students experiencing learning challenges
- Emphasize the importance of academic achievement
- Emphasize reading
- Set high expectations for staff, provide feedback and support to staff so goals become achievable
- Encourage children's active involvement in the learning process
- Provide a positive learning climate by expecting order and discipline
- Set goals for attendance
- Provide basic skills instruction
- Help children learn study skills
- Provide ample use of praise of good performance
- Smaller class room size
- Assign homework regularly
- Provide multiple opportunities for children to take responsibility and be involved

(Cotton, 2001; Howard & Johnson (1998)

Opportunities for participation and contribution

Rutter's (1979) found that successful schools provided many different opportunities for students to take on responsibility and participate in a meaningful way. Offering a variety of options for involvement, children were able to find something that interested them, that fit their skills and ability and they could succeed at. Examples of such opportunities for participation include:

- Use a co-operative learning approach
- Allow students to identify topics for curriculum
- Hold classroom meetings to address and solve problems
- Set goals and encourage student involvement in the assessment of progress
- Allow children to establish classroom rules
- Provide children with opportunities to take responsibility including:
 - mentor younger children
 - organize a school or classroom event
 - create a system to learn skills and take on the responsibility of monitoring the playground and resolve conflicts
 - provide leadership in a learning experience

(Bickart & Wolin, 1997)

Schools can enhance resilience and build protective factors by providing:

- High expectations of students
- Available social supports -school counselors, school resource officer, teachers
- Consistent structure, rules, and routines
- Ample use of praise of good performance
- Smaller classroom size
- Homework assigned regularly
- Firm, but not severe discipline
- Multiple opportunities for children to take responsibility and be involved
- Active involvement in the learning process

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