

The Risk and Protective Factor Model framework was developed through research conducted by the Social Development Research Group (SDRG) at the University of Washington.

What is a risk factor?

Risk factors are characteristics of school, community, and family environments, and of individuals and their peer groups, that are known to predict an increased likelihood of engaging in problem behaviors such as substance abuse, delinquency, and violent behavior among youth.

What is a protective factor?

A protective factor exerts a positive influence that reduces the likelihood that a youth will engage in problem behaviors such as substance abuse, delinquency, and violence. Protective factors identified through research include individual characteristics; social bonding to family, school, community, and peers; and healthy beliefs and clear standards of behavior.

How do protective factors help protect against risks?

They protect by reducing the impact of risks, or by changing the way a person responds to risk factors in their life. However, increasing protective factors without also attempting to improve elevated risks may not be sufficient to decrease problem outcomes.

What is a domain?

Research evidence suggests that risks and protective factors exist within each of the social contexts in which social interaction occurs, as well as within the individual. These social contexts are called “domains.” There are four domains described in the Risk and Protective Factor Model: School, Community, Family, and Peer/Individual.

What is an outcome or outcome measure?

In the context of this model, an outcome - sometimes called a “problem behavior” - is what risk factors are thought to predict. They are negative behaviors such as substance abuse, delinquency, or violent acts.

Will exposure to a risk factor always predict the development of one or more of the negative outcomes or problem behaviors associated with it?

Not exactly. Exposure to one risk factor does not *necessarily* mean a child will also engage in problem behaviors. However, research suggests that the more risk factors a youth faces, the greater the likelihood or probability of engaging in one or more problem behavior. Even if a community cannot eliminate all the risk factors that are present, reducing or eliminating even a few risk factors may significantly decrease risk for young people in that community.

Will targeting one elevated risk factor create a significant change?

Risks exist across the domains specified in the Risk and Protective Factor Model. If a single risk factor is addressed within a single domain, (e.g., school or family) then negative outcomes or problem behaviors may not be significantly reduced. In examining data related to the Model, it may be important to look across domains to identify the most elevated risk factors. This might lead to programs that address a variety of issues. Additionally, efforts should be made to increase protective factors to further buffer the effects of risks.

Do risk factors cut across cultural, ethnic, racial or socioeconomic groups?

While levels of risk may vary in different racial, cultural or socioeconomic groups, the way in which these risk factors work does not appear to vary. One implication for community prevention is to prioritize prevention efforts for groups with higher risk exposure.

Why is this model important in the area of prevention?

Research on risk and protective factors has important implications for prevention efforts. The model states that, in order to promote positive youth development and prevent negative outcomes or problem behaviors, it is necessary to address those factors that predict the problem. By measuring risk and protective factors in a population, specific risk factors that are elevated and widespread can be identified and targeted by preventative interventions that also promote related protective factors.

What is the “Communities that Care” strategy?

This community-based approach to prevention grew out of years of research conducted at the University of Washington. What researchers learned was that because risk is not simple, a comprehensive approach to preventing drug, alcohol, and other negative behaviors is needed. The strategy incorporates program elements that effectively reduce risk by promoting protective factors.

How would a community implement a prevention strategy?

A community prevention strategy based on risk reduction, according to the “Communities that Care” approach developed by researchers at the University of Washington, requires the following:

- a shared definition of the problem
- a unified vision of change
- a developmentally complete series of prevention programs
- a high level of coordination and cooperation among services providing professionals and concerned community members
- skillful mobilization of human and financial resources