



CHILDREN, YOUTH & FAMILY CONSORTIUM

Risk and Protective Factors Associated With Children's Mental Health

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Consortium Connections, Winter 2002

The growth and development of children occurs within an ecological context. This consists of multiple social and cultural systems that interact with and mutually influence each other. These include the micro systems in which a child directly interacts (such as family, school, and peer group), as well as macro systems that are more distant from, but still an influence on, the child (such as government, mass media, and global economies).

Any of these systems can pose developmental risks for a child or, conversely, can present developmental opportunities that enhance mental health. Each System, including the developing child, is an active force shaping other systems in its context. Human organisms innately try to adapt to their environment, fitting into their ecological niche or trying to modify it to get their needs met. Some symptoms of mental disorders may represent behaviors that are attempts to adapt to pathological environments



RISK FACTORS

A risk factor increases the probability of, but does not necessarily cause, a harmful effect. The effect varies depending on individual differences, gender, age, persistence of exposure, and whether protective factors are present to mitigate the risk. A single risk factor usually poses minimal negative impact; however, exposure to multiple risks increases the probability of mental health problems—research shows an increase of as much as 20 times when exposed to four or more risks. Risks may be biological, psychological or social in nature and operate within individuals, families, communities or the larger society. For example, smoking during pregnancy may be associated with, but doesn't necessarily cause, brain abnormalities and low birth weights in babies.

PROTECTIVE FACTORS

Protective factors decrease the probability of a harmful effect. Multiple protective factors provide more protection and strengthen the likelihood of positive outcomes. Protective factors for good mental health

nourish mentally healthy development, including high self-esteem, feelings of competency, and social connectedness. Protective factors include attachment to a healthy parent, loving relationships and positive, proactive linkages between families and communities. Connections with caregivers and schools, including two-way communication and parent involvement, also contribute to self-esteem, self-efficacy, and social and academic competencies in children.

The most critical environment influencing the mental health of children is the family. The quality of the parent-child relationship, the parent's mental health, the parent's personal relationships, and the economic status of the family all affect child development and mental health. Nurturing children's emotional and social development requires parental time and attention, which many families find in increasingly short supply. Positive parent-child interactions have been shown to mediate the relationship between living in poor violent neighborhoods and child mental health problems.

THE IMPACT OF PUBLIC POLICIES

Social policies have a profound impact on child mental health. The large numbers of children living in poverty indirectly affects the growing incidence of mental disorder among children and youth. America has the largest gap between the rich and poor of any developed country; this gap is associated with increased work hours by parents, which separates children from needed nurturing. Public policies that ensure adequate income



for family needs, provide community resources that sustain family life, and empower parents to successfully accomplish their core nurturing function are essential for healthy child development and mental health. In addition, private policies such as work environments that understand and support balance in the lives of employees indirectly contribute to children's mental health.

*Adapted from a longer article appearing in *Healthy Generations*, January 2002