

Risk and protective factors



Fact Sheet

What are risk and protective factors?

Risk factors are internal characteristics or external situations that increase the likelihood of a mental health problem or illness. These can be offset by protective factors, which tend to decrease the chances of mental health difficulties.

Risk factors do not *cause* illness. The presence of a risk factor does not necessarily mean that a person will have difficulties. However risk factors tend to have a cumulative effect. Several risk factors interacting with each other will significantly increase the possibility of negative mental health outcomes.

If a child's development seems very different from their peers, or their behaviour has changed, observe them more closely to see if they might benefit from extra support. An isolated incident does not necessarily indicate a problem, but look for clusters of risk factors or extremes of behaviour, particularly if these persist over time.

Risk factors for mental ill-health

Child: Being overly fearful or anxious; withdrawal and avoidance of new situations; being irritable or aggressive; being argumentative and non-compliant; reckless behaviour and poor understanding of consequences; learning difficulties; poor language skills; poor attachment to parents or caregivers.

Family: Harsh and overly controlling parenting styles; inconsistent supervision; lack of warmth and affection; lack of involvement in child's activities; parental health problems including physical or mental illness; parental substance abuse; family violence or conflict; divorce or separation; criminal behaviour in the family; family stresses such as single parenting, lack of support, unemployment or financial difficulties.

Social: A child who bullies others or is the target of bullying; social exclusion and peer rejection; being withdrawn; difficulty engaging in play and group activities; socioeconomic disadvantage in the family or community; social or cultural discrimination.

School or centre: Inadequate behaviour management or supervision; unsafe environments; learning difficulties or academic failure; poor attachment to school or centre; inconsistent attendance; difficult school transitions.

Protective factors

Child: Secure relationships and attachments (e.g. with family, other adults and peers); positive expectations of self; hopefulness for the future; a sense of independence and autonomy; good communication skills; intelligence; problem-solving skills; well-developed social skills; self-regulation of behaviour and emotions.

Environment: A warm and supportive environment at home; a supportive environment in childcare or school; a sense of security through consistency with firm limits and boundaries; opportunities for participation in a range of activities.

Sources and Links

Kay-Lambkin, F., Kemp, E., Stafford, K. & Hazell, T. (2007). Mental health promotion and early intervention in early childhood and primary school settings: A review. *Journal of Student Wellbeing*, 1, 31-56. Retrieved July 3, 2014 from: www.ojs.unisa.edu.au/index.php/JSW

