Protective Factors Against Delinquency

When considering the likelihood of youths engaging in delinquent behaviors, both protective and risk factors should be carefully examined. Protective factors are those characteristics of the child, family, and wider environment that reduce the likelihood of adversity leading to negative child outcomes and behaviors, such as delinquency and later adult offending (Vanderbilt-Adriance and Shaw 2008; DSG 2013). Risk factors are indicators of the probability of youths becoming involved in problem behaviors. (For more information, see the Model Programs Guide literature review on Risk Factors). However, Protective factors are conceptually distinct from risk factors, in that they are characteristics or conditions that may reduce the influence of risk factors causing delinquent and violent behavior (Rutter 1987; Garmezy 1991).

Protective factors can also be thought of as "buffers," where they are seen as characteristics or conditions that reduce the negative effect of adversity on child outcomes (Vanderbilt-Adriance and Shaw 2008, 2). Thus, where exposure to *risk* factors increases the likelihood of adverse outcomes, exposure to *protective* factors buffers risk and reduces the likelihood of delinquency and other problem behaviors (Jenson and Fraser 2011).

According to research on resilience, protective factors are conceptualized as a broader set of characteristics and environmental supports that promote the ability of youths to succeed or thrive, even in environments of risk (Garmezy 1991, 1983; Masten 2007, 1989; Rutter 1999, 1987; Werner 2000, 1993). Protective factors may contribute to resilience either by exerting positive effects in direct opposition to the negative effects of risk factors (additive model) or by buffering individuals against the negative effects of risk factors (interactive model) (Kirby and Fraser 1997).

Protective factors, like risk factors, are typically organized into the following domains (see discussion below for further details on the five domains):

- *Individual* (e.g., biological and psychological dispositions, attitudes, values, knowledge, skills)
- *Family* (e.g., function, management, bonding)
- *Peer* (e.g., norms, activities, attachment)
- *School* (e.g., bonding, climate, policy, performance)
- *Community* (e.g., bonding, norms, resources, awareness/mobilization)

Theoretical Background

The concept of protective factors has a varied theoretical background, including social learning theory and social control theory. Subsequent work has expanded the focus on protective factors, typically framed as buffers against risk factors (Vanderbilt-Adriance and Shaw 2008).

Social learning theory and social control theory pertain to the influence of protective factors on why youths do not participate in delinquent acts. Social learning theory (Bandura 1977) suggests that youths can learn through the prosocial modeling of peers, teachers, and/or family members to engage in positive rather than negative behaviors. According to social control theory, the bonds that youths develop in the form of attachment to others and to school, commitment to social relationships, involvement in prosocial activities, and from adherence to prosocial beliefs help to prevent them from delinquency (Hirschi 1969). All of the bonds put forth by Hirschi's theory can be perceived as protective factors. For instance, family-based protective factors, such as effective parenting, contribute to stronger adolescent bonds and increase the probability of adolescents having better social competence (Glasgow Erickson, Crosnoe, and Dornbusch 2000). If a child has a strong and positive attachment to his or her parents, is committed to education, is involved in productive and positive activities, and has conventional beliefs, he or she is less likely to engage in delinquency (Reingle, Jennings, and Maldonado-Molina 2011).

The buffers and resilience bodies of literature are brought together to some degree under the rubric of positive youth development (PYD). (For more information, see the Model Programs Guide literature review on Positive Youth Development). PYD approaches generally emphasize protective factors or assets as the key to preventing negative behavior, as opposed to focusing on exposure to risk factors as the primary mechanism for problem behaviors (DSG 2013). The basic premise is that the more assets youths can access in their environments (e.g., family, school, peers, and community), the less likely they are to engage in negative behavior, even when exposed to risk. The PYD approach emerging from the risk/protective factors literature (Catalano et al. 2004, 2012) emphasizes a set of specific positive characteristics as a focus of intervention: bonding, resilience, social competence, emotional competence, cognitive competence, behavioral competence, moral competence, self-determination, spirituality, self-efficacy, clear and positive identity, belief in the future, (recognition for) positive behavior, (opportunities for) prosocial involvement, and prosocial norms. These constructs, in turn, represent mediating factors associated with positive youth outcomes.

Protective Factor Domains and Indicators

As mentioned above, protective factors have been categorized into five domains: individual, family, peer, school, and community-related factors (Foshee et al. 2011; DSG 2013). Protective factor indicators are the means through which researchers and practitioners understand and measure the presence of protective factors. For example, involvement in prosocial activities (as in Hirschi's social control theory) can be measured by counting the number of class activities, school clubs, and organizations in which a student is involved. Prevention approaches focus on supporting youths before problem behavior occurs and seek to address the various circumstances of their lives (Catalano et al. 2004).

Each of the following sections includes descriptions of the protective factor domains and the related indicators, which may be used to measure the corresponding protective factors. The sections below also provide examples of evidence-based programs that aim to increase the presence and influence of protective factors and resilience among youths.

Individual-Level Protective Factors

Individual-level protective factors focus on the personal characteristics that affect risk and engagement in delinquency, violence, and other problem behaviors. Sociability, positive moods, low irritability, low impulsivity, and child IQ are examples of individual-level protective factors. Self-efficacy, which is confidence in one's ability to exert control over behavior (Bandura 1977), is an individual characteristic that promotes resilience, achievement, and coping skills in youths (Logan-Greene et al. 2011). Self-efficacy can serve as a protective factor by increasing the ability to manage healthy relationships and resist peer pressure (Reilly 2012). Child IQ is one of the most widely researched and validated protective factors. Children with high intelligence levels are able to effectively use information-processing and problem-solving skills, which can help them to contend with the challenges they may encounter (Vanderbilt-Adriance and Shaw 2008). A few examples of some individual-level protective factors and their indicators are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1: Individual-Level Protective Factors and Indicators*	
Factors	**Indicators**
High expectations and positive/resilient temperament	– Resilient personality – Prosocial orientation – Easy-going temperament – Sense of purpose and positive future – Socially outgoing – Low irritability and impulsivity
Social competencies and problem-solving skills	– Self-efficacy – Feelings of self-worth – Youth employment – Conflict resolution skills – Life skills – Resistance skills – Communication skills

	– High IQ
Healthy/conventional beliefs and commitment to community and school	– Planning to go to college – Interest in/commitment to school, hobbies, and work – Involved in meaningful activities (such as tutoring or volunteering) – Academic aspirations – Cultural identity
Religiosity/involvement in organized religious activities	– Frequency of praying and attending religious events – Perceived importance of religion – Religious identity
*From: DSG 2001; Arthur et al. 2002; Hawkins et al. 2009; ADBH 2011.	

Al's Pals: Kids Making Healthy Choices. This program is an early childhood curriculum designed to increase the protective factor of social and emotional competence in young children and to decrease the risk factor of early and persistent aggression or antisocial behavior. The resiliency-based curriculum is designed to provide real-life situations that introduce children to health-promoting concepts and build prosocial skills such as understanding feelings, accepting differences, caring about others, using self-control, and managing anger.

Overall, the evaluation results of the program were mixed. Lynch, Geller, and Schmidt (2004) found the intervention group improved significantly on measures of social–emotional competence, prosocial skills, and some measures of coping, but there was no improvement in problem behaviors at the posttest. At the same time, the control group showed no significant improvements in measures of social–emotional competence, prosocial skills, and coping, and actually showed higher ratings of problem behaviors at the posttest. For more information on the program, please click on the link below.

Al's Pals: Kids Making Healthy Choices

Family-Level Protective Factors

Family context and parent–child relationships are a major aspect of protective factors (Logan-Greene et al. 2011). The factors in the family domain are typically related to family structure, support, culture, and functioning, all of which ultimately affect the behavior of the individual family members. Examples of family protective factors include intensive parental supervision, low physical punishment, and involvement in family activities (Losel and Farrington 2012). Research examining the relationship between children and parents suggests that good relationships can improve child adjustment during

important developmental phases and serve as a buffer to problem behaviors such as aggression and delinquency (Losel and Farrington 2012; Reingle et al. 2011). Parenting strategies, such as responsiveness to children and consistent discipline, are also associated with children's positive social adjustment (Vanderbilt-Adriance and Shaw 2008). Similarly, parental involvement was found to be a significant protective factor for preventing violent behavior (Reingle et al. 2011). Some examples of family-level protective factors and their indicators are displayed in Table 2.

Table 2: Family-Related Protective Factors and Indicators*	
Factors	**Indicators**
Effective/positive parenting and having a stable family	– Parental care – Family love and support – Clear rules and appropriate consequences – Consistent discipline – Responsiveness – Monitoring and supervision – High expectations of youths (in school and personal achievements) – Clear family rules – Fair and consistent discipline practices
Good relationship with parents/bonding and attachment to family	– Presence of a parent (during key times: before and after school, dinner, bedtime, and doing activities together) – Emotional bonds to parents/family – Commitment/connectedness to parents and family – Marital quality – Family cohesion
Opportunities and rewards for prosocial bonding	– Opportunities for involvement in prosocial activities in family – Rewards and recognition for involvement in prosocial activities in family
*From: DSG 2001; Arthur et al. 2002; ADBH 2011.	

Families and Schools Together (FAST). FAST is a multifamily group intervention program designed to build protective factors for children, to empower parents to be the primary prevention agents for their own children, and to build supportive parent-to-parent groups. The overall goal of the FAST program is to intervene early to help at-risk youths succeed in the community, at home, and in school and thus avoid problems such as adolescent delinquency, violence, addiction, and dropping out of school. The FAST program achieves its goals by respecting and supporting parents and by using the existing strengths of families, schools, and communities in creative partnerships. The program is geared to at-risk children ages 4 to 12 and their families.

Kratchowill and colleagues (2004) found that students in the FAST program had fewer behavior problems within 9 months of the intervention, compared with students not enrolled in the intervention. McDonald and colleagues (2006) found that after 2 years in the program, students who were enrolled in FAST displayed significantly less externalizing behavior, more social skills, and better academic performance, compared with students who were not in the program. For more information on the program, please click on the link below.

[Families and Schools Together (FAST)](#)

Peer-Related Protective Factors

The protective factors in the peer category are related to peer-norms, attachment, socialization, and interaction processes. The impact of peers on delinquency depends on many factors such as age, personality, and gender (Losel and Farrington 2012). Having a close relationship with non-deviant and non-delinquent peers has a buffering, positive effect on the risk of engaging in delinquent and problem behaviors such as substance abuse (Osgood et al. 2013). Programs that aim to prevent or reduce adolescent problem behaviors often target peer influence (Gest et al. 2011). Examples of some peer-level protective factors and their indicators are displayed in Table 3.

Table 3: Peer-Related Protective Factors and Indicators*	
Factors	**Indicators**
Good relationships with peers	– Support from friends – Healthy relationships with peers – Conflict resolution skills – Peers who engage in prosocial behaviors – Non-delinquent peers
Involvement with positive peer group activities and norms	– Participation in prosocial activities – Positive peers – Parental approval of friends – Strong social support – Extracurricular activities at school – Healthy leisure activities – Endorsement of conventional beliefs
Positive peer role models	– Peers/friends with positive attitudes – Peers with good grades – Peers not involved in risky behaviors – Peers with close relationships to parents
*From: DSG 2001; Arthur et al. 2002; ADBH 2011.	

Peers Making Peace (PMP). PMP is a peer-mediation program designed to handle conflicts both in and out of school and to help maintain drug-free schools. The goal of the program is to improve school environments by reducing violence, assaults, and discipline referrals and by increasing academic performance. It is designed to work with students in prekindergarten through 12th grade. The program is based on a combination of strategies that include life- and social-skills training, conflict prevention

and resolution, parental involvement in conflict- resolution education, and peer-led modeling and coaching. Each participating school selects a group of 15 to 24 students who represent the community's racial, ethnic, and gender demographics; these teams of students are trained to act as peer mediators on their school campuses. They are trained in skills such as conflict resolution, nonverbal communication, questioning, and maintaining neutrality. Peer mediators are also trained to serve as drug-free role models. Students apply the skills they learn by serving as third-party mediators to help those involved in conflict reach mutually satisfactory agreements.

Landry (2003) found that, compared with the control group, the PMP group had significantly fewer assaults, expulsions, discipline referrals, absences, as well as significantly greater improvement in self-efficacy and academic performance. For more information on the program, please click on the link below.

[Peers Making Peace](#)

School-Related Protective Factors

The protective factors related to school focus on attendance, performance, and attachment. The school and classroom environments play an important role in the emergence and persistence of aggressive behaviors in students (Oliver, Wehby, and Reschly 2011). A positive school climate can be an important motivational element in the learning process for students (Quint 2006), and youths who receive support from teachers and peers in school are more likely to engage in positive activities and display positive behaviors (Logan-Greene et al. 2011). Examples of some school-level protective factors and their indicators are displayed in Table 4.

Table 4: School-Related Protective Factors and Indicators*	
Factors	**Indicators**
High expectations and above average academic achievement/reading ability and mathematics skills	– Academic achievement – High GPA – Scholarships available – College attendance – Scores on reading and mathematics tests – High expectations for student academics, behavior, and responsibility
High-quality schools/clear standards and rules for appropriate behavior	– Adherence to school policies and rules – Safe and drug-free school policy – Anti-violence and guns policy
Opportunities and rewards for prosocial student bonding/involvement	– Youth involvement in class activities and school policies

	– Youth involvement in extracurricular activities, school clubs, and organizations – Consistent acknowledgement or recognition for youths' good work
Strong school motivation/positive attitude toward school and student bonding	– Youths' feelings of school connectedness – Attachment to teachers and other caring/supportive adults – Safe and caring environment – Use of proactive classroom-management strategies – Low teacher turnover rate – Parental support for school – High teacher morale

*From: DSG 2001; Arthur et al. 2002; Hawkins et al. 2009; ADBH 2011.

Career Academies. Career Academies are schools within schools that link students with peers, teachers, and community partners in a disciplined environment. The goal of the program is to foster success and mental and emotional health. Career Academies take a multifaceted approach to reduce delinquent behavior and enhance protective factors among at-risk youth. They enable youths who may have trouble fitting into the larger school environment to belong to a smaller educational community and connect what they learn in school with their career aspirations and goals.

Kemple and Scott-Clayton (2004) found that young men in the Career Academy group were less likely to drop out of school and more likely to secure employment that brought in a higher earning rate (18 percent) than young men not enrolled in the program. High school completion and postsecondary enrollment and attainment were slightly higher for the youths who were in the academy. For more information on the program, please click on the link below.

[Career Academy](#)

Community-Level Protective Factors

Protective factors within the community are generally related to the physical environment, the availability of economic and recreational opportunities, existing social supports, and other characteristics or structures that affect successful functioning of the community and community members. Growing evidence has indicated that neighborhoods have a tremendous effect on adolescent development (Brooks-Gunn et al. 1993). Studies have found that neighborhoods, via institutional and social conditions, can affect development both positively and negatively (Jain et al. 2012). For instance,

various aspects of living in poverty affect delinquency (Hay et al. 2007). Due to the high number of risk factors in some minority communities, particularly in urban contexts, research suggests that adolescents in such neighborhoods would benefit from bolstered protective factors (Vanderbilt-Adriance and Shaw 2008). By building resilience, neighborhoods can influence adolescents more than other cohesive institutions. Examples of some community-level protective factors and their indicators are displayed in Table 5.

Table 5: Community-Related Protective Factors and Indicators*	
Factors	**Indicators**
Non-disadvantaged neighborhood and safe, supportive environment	– Community safety – Community crime rates – Neighborhood cohesion – Connection to the community – Positive social norms
High expectations for youth	– School graduation rates – Scholarships available from community – Public education campaigns – Incentive programs for graduating high school
Presence and involvement of caring/supportive adults	– Availability of caring supportive adults and neighbors in community – Neighborhood associations – Positive relationships with adults outside of the family – Support and caring received from adults other than family members (mentors, coaches, neighbors, etc.)
Prosocial opportunities/opportunities for participation/availability of neighborhood resources	– Meaningful ways for youths to participate in community activities – Structured recreational activities – Availability of prosocial activities

	– Community service opportunities and volunteerism

The Big Brother Big Sister (BBBS) Community-Based Mentoring Program (CBM). The BBBS CBM program supports the development of healthy youths by addressing needs for positive adult contact, reducing risk factors for negative behavior, and enhancing protective factors for positive behavior. BBBS helps youths between the ages of 6 and 18, who come from low-income neighborhoods and single-parent households, to withstand the effects of adversity. The program involves one-on-one mentoring in a community setting. Matching Little Brothers and Sisters with Big Brothers and Sisters is an important part of the intervention because pairing can lead to a caring and supportive relationship, which can be crucial for youths.

Tierney, Grossman, and Resch (2000) found that youths in the BBBS intervention program were significantly less likely to initiate drug and alcohol use and less likely to have struck someone in the previous 12 months, compared with youths not involved in the intervention. Youths not involved in the BBBS intervention were more likely to perform poorer academically, miss more classes, and feel less competent, whereas youths in the BBBS intervention had better results in each of these categories. Researchers also found that mentored youths, compared with other youths not involved in the mentoring intervention, had significantly better relationships with parents. Mentees also had greater trust of parents, which was specifically true for males. For more information on the program, please click on the link below.

 Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBBS) Community-Based Mentoring Program (CBM)

Conclusion

Protective factors are crucial in reducing the likelihood that youths will engage in delinquency and other problem behaviors such as violence and substance abuse. Risk and protective factors have a contradictory relationship. Risk factors only address negative characteristics, exposures, and influences on behavior, whereas protective factors can keep youths from engaging in negative behaviors even when they are faced with adverse circumstances (Jenson and Fraser 2011; DSG 2013).

Some attention has focused on creating programs that address fostering protective factors at an early age. Programs that target youths sometimes combine protective factors that fall within different domains, such as family and school, or school and peers.

However, research is still predominantly focused on the impact of risk factors on delinquency; comparable research on protective factors is lacking. Additional research is needed on the interaction of risk and protective factors, and how this information can be applied in the juvenile justice field to reduce delinquent behavior in youths.

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