



Finding their Way: Perceptions of risk, resilience, and positive youth development among adolescents and young adults from public housing neighborhoods



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ABSTRACT

Knowledge of the risk and protective factors associated with problem behavior and the application of principles consistent with positive youth development have led to significant advances in understanding why some young people develop behavioral and social problems while others display resilience in the face of adversity. Qualitative research methods were used to identify principles of risk, protection, resilience, and positive youth development in a sample of 17 adolescents and young adults (ages 14–20) who participated in afterschool programs located in 4 urban public housing neighborhoods. Template analysis in conjunction with constant comparative analysis revealed 7 themes identified as challenges, resources that support development, coping, caring and compassion, aspirations and well-being, competence and confidence, and wisdom and advice. The discussion considers how these themes are congruent with key constructs of risk, protection, resilience, and positive youth development. Implications for promoting positive behavior in adolescents and young adults are noted.

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I overcame it [a difficult childhood and adolescence] and you can do it too. It just takes a lot of effort and work and you have to want it. And it really depends on what scenario it is, like what they need help with...I know the best advice I could give them is like life isn't easy but you can overcome anything you set your mind to, and it's not going to be easy. It could be hard, it's harder for others...and other people have other outlets they can go through but everything is possible, everything you set your mind to is possible. (Young Adult Study Participant)

1. Introduction

Knowledge of the risk and protective factors associated with social and behavioral problems experienced by children, adolescents, and young adults has increased exponentially in the past several decades. Awareness of the factors that place young people at risk, or protect them from developing behaviors like juvenile delinquency, aggression, substance use, and school dropout, is now used widely to guide preventive interventions in school, family, and community settings (Jenson & Fraser, 2016). In many cases, principles of positive youth development (PYD) that define the core elements of healthy development have also

been applied to programs that seek to prevent problem behavior in young people (Jenson, Alter, Nicotera, Anthony, & Forrest-Bank, 2013). Knowledge accrued from investigations of risk and protective factors and PYD constructs has been systematically applied to a range of interventions aimed at preventing common child problem behaviors. Reviews of such interventions indicate that many risk- and PYD-based programs for young people are effective (Jenson & Bender, 2014).

Advances in understanding the risk and protective mechanisms associated with the onset of problem behavior and evidence supporting the efficacy of risk- and PYD-based programs for children and youth are encouraging. Yet evidence suggests that gains made during childhood are not always maintained during the later years of adolescence and the early years of adulthood. For example, recent data reveals disturbing increases in adverse physical, emotional, and behavioral health outcomes among adults between 18 and 25 years old (Committee on Improving the Health, Safety, and Well-Being of Young Adults, 2015). These trends are partially attributed to the economic downturn of 2007 which has created increasingly difficult challenges for young people to establish careers and find stable employment as they transition from adolescence to adulthood (Committee on Improving the Health, Safety, and Well-Being of Young Adults, 2015). Young adults from disadvantaged childhoods and marginalized racial and ethnic populations face especially difficult times (Committee on Improving the Health, Safety, and Well-Being of Young Adults, 2015; Fussell & Furstenberg, 2005). This evidence suggests that studies are

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needed to better understand how risk and protective mechanisms affect older adolescents and young adults.

Efforts to understand mechanisms of risk, protection, and PYD in young people's lives have been largely directed at children in elementary and middle school. Few studies, particularly studies that employ qualitative designs, have examined the way in which risk and protective factors and PYD constructs operate in the daily lives of older adolescents and young adults. There is a need for accurate and current understandings of how adolescents and young adults experience risk and protection, resilience, and positive development to better inform prevention and intervention efforts targeted at improving well-being for young adults. In this study, we examined key constructs of risk, protection, resilience, and PYD in a sample of older adolescents and young adults living in 4 urban public housing neighborhoods.

1.1. Risk, protection, and resilience

Principles of risk, protection, and resilience have become cornerstones in understanding and preventing behaviors like substance use, delinquency, aggression, and school drop-out in recent years (Catalano, 2007; Woolf, 2008). Risk factors are individual, school, peer, family, and community influences that increase the likelihood that a young person will experience a social or health problem (Jenson & Fraser, 2016). The initial work of identifying risk factors for problem behavior dates to the 1970s when researchers began placing greater importance on identifying the specific factors that were consistently associated with the occurrence of mental health and behavior problems (Rutter, 1979). This approach, adapted from public health efforts to identify risk factors associated with problems such as smoking and heart disease, led to the use of "risk-based" strategies to prevent child and adolescent problems in the 1990s (e.g., Hawkins, Catalano, & Miller, 1992). We use the term "at-risk youth" cautiously, yet intentionally, in this paper to refer explicitly to youth who have been exposed to numerous empirically-identified risk factors.

Over time, researchers noticed that some at-risk youth never participated in problem behaviors as they matured and became young adults. Indeed studies showed that many of these youth were "protected" from

risk as young adults (Werner & Smith, 1992). That is, these young adults seemed to have personal resources that helped them prevail over adversities. These resources came to be called protective factors. There is on-going debate about the exact definition of protection as well as how to put knowledge about protective factors into practice (Jenson & Fraser, 2016). Regardless, most investigators and practitioners agree that protective factors are conditions or attributes in individuals, families, communities, or the larger society that, when present, lower the probability of an undesirable outcome in young people. Fig. 1 shows risk and protective factors for problem behavior in young people by domains of influence that reflect the social ecology in which children interact (Jenson & Fraser, 2016).

Closely linked to principles of risk and protection is the concept of resilience, which is the ability to overcome adverse conditions and to function normatively despite exposure to risk. In other words, resilience represents successful adaptation in the presence of risk or adversity (Luthar, 2003; Olsson, Bond, Burns, Vella-Brodrick, & Sawyer, 2003). In circumstances when the risk level is high, protective factors exert their influence on developmental outcomes; however, in circumstances in which the risk level is low, protective factors are more likely to have a neutral or relatively benign effect. Many youth display resilience by avoiding negative pathways despite exposure to traumatic events and negative influences. In addition, there are numerous examples of resilient young people whose negative life experiences led them to take steps toward negative trajectories involving delinquency and/or substance abuse, but were able to overcome the odds and find their way back to more healthy and prosocial pathways (Vigil, 1990; Werner & Smith, 1992).

1.2. The positive youth development model

As noted above, the application of risk and resilience frameworks to the developmental periods of childhood and early adolescence has led to significant advances in understanding, preventing, and treating social and behavioral problems experienced by young people. Yet many practitioners and investigators note that an over-emphasis on individual deficits in these models often limits their capacity to acknowledge the strengths and assets in a young person's life. Youth advocates,

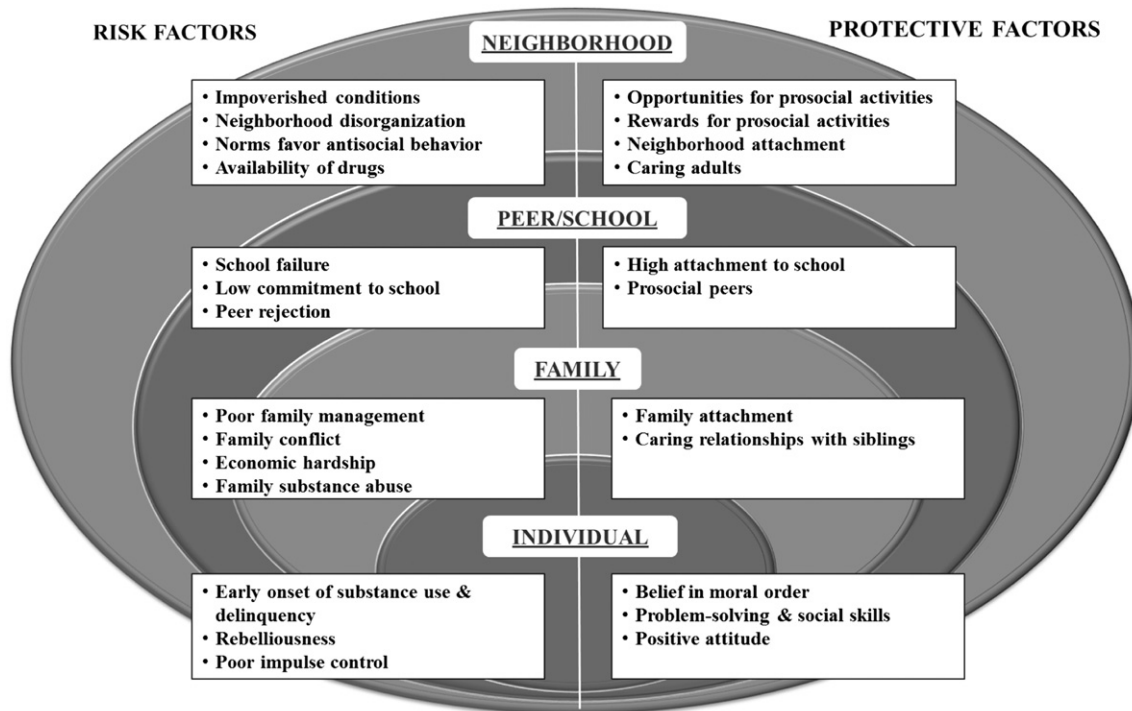


Fig. 1. Risk and protective factors in the context of child and adolescent social ecology. (Jenson et al., 2013; Jenson & Fraser, 2016).

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