



youth service bureau

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## Preventing Drug Use - Risk and Protective Factors

National Institute on Drug Abuse  
**Preventing Drug Use among Children and Adolescents:  
A Research-Based Guide for Parents, Educators, and Community Leaders**

*Source: National Institute on Drug Abuse; National Institutes of Health; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.*

*Full text available: <https://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/preventing-drug-abuse-among-children-adolescents/chapter-1-risk-factors-protective-factors>*

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### What are risk factors and protective factors?

Research over the past two decades has tried to determine how drug abuse begins and how it progresses. Many factors can add to a person’s risk for drug abuse. **Risk factors can increase a person’s chances for drug abuse, while protective factors can reduce the risk.** Please note, however, that most individuals at risk for drug abuse do not start using drugs or become addicted. Also, a risk factor for one person may not be for another.

**Risk and protective factors can affect children at different stages of their lives.** At each stage, risks occur that can be changed through prevention intervention. Early childhood risks, such as aggressive behavior, can be changed or prevented with family, school, and community interventions that focus on helping children develop appropriate, positive behaviors. If not addressed, negative behaviors can lead to more risks, such as academic failure and social difficulties, which put children at further risk for later drug abuse.

*Research-based prevention programs focus on intervening early in a child’s development to strengthen protective factors before problem behaviors develop.*

The table below describes how risk and protective factors affect people in five domains, or settings, where interventions can take place.

<b>Risk Factors</b>	<b>Domain</b>	<b>Protective Factors</b>
Early Aggressive Behavior	Individual	Self-Control
Lack of Parental Supervision	Family	Parental Monitoring
Peer Substance Abuse	Peer	Academic Competence
Drug Availability	School	Anti-Drug Use Policies
Poverty	Community	Strong Neighborhood Attachment

**Risk factors can influence drug abuse in several ways. The more risks a child is exposed to, the more likely the child will abuse drugs.** Some risk factors may be more powerful than others at certain stages in development, such as peer pressure during the teenage years; just as some

protective factors, such as a strong parent-child bond, can have a greater impact on reducing risks during the early years. **An important goal of prevention is to change the balance between risk and protective factors so that protective factors outweigh risk factors.**

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### What are the early signs of risk that may predict later drug abuse?

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Some signs of risk can be seen as early as infancy or early childhood, such as aggressive behavior, lack of self-control, or difficult temperament. As the child gets older, interactions with family, at school, and within the community can affect that child's risk for later drug abuse.

**Children's earliest interactions occur in the family; sometimes family situations heighten a child's risk for later drug abuse, for example, when there is:**

- a lack of attachment and nurturing by parents or caregivers;
- ineffective parenting; and
- **a caregiver who abuses drugs.**

**But families can provide protection from later drug abuse when there is:**

- a strong bond between children and parents;
- parental involvement in the child's life; and
- clear limits and consistent enforcement of discipline.

Interactions outside the family can involve risks for both children and adolescents, such as:

- poor classroom behavior or social skills;
- academic failure; and
- association with drug-abusing peers.

*Association with drug-abusing peers is often the most immediate risk for exposing adolescents to drug abuse and delinquent behavior.*

Other factors—such as drug availability, trafficking patterns, and beliefs that drug abuse is generally tolerated—are risks that can influence young people to start abusing drugs.

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### What are the highest risk periods for drug abuse among youth?

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**Research has shown that the key risk periods for drug abuse are during major transitions in children's lives.** The first big transition for children is when they leave the security of the family and enter school. Later, when they advance from elementary school to middle school, they often experience new academic and social situations, such as learning to get along with a wider group of peers. It is at this stage—early adolescence—that children are likely to encounter drugs for the first time.

When they enter high school, adolescents face additional social, emotional, and educational challenges. At the same time, they may be exposed to greater availability of drugs, drug abusers, and social activities involving drugs. These challenges can increase the risk that they will abuse alcohol, tobacco, and other substances.

When young adults leave home for college or work and are on their own for the first time, their risk for drug and alcohol abuse is very high. Consequently, young adult interventions are needed as well.

*Because risks appear at every life transition, prevention planners need to choose programs that strengthen protective factors at each stage of development.*

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### When and how does drug abuse start and progress?

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Studies such as the National Survey on Drug Use and Health, formally called the National Household Survey on Drug Abuse, reported by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, indicate that some children are already abusing drugs at age 12 or 13, which likely means that some begin even earlier. Early abuse often includes such substances as tobacco, alcohol, inhalants, marijuana, and prescription drugs such as sleeping pills and anti-anxiety medicines. If drug abuse persists into later adolescence, abusers typically become more heavily involved with marijuana and then advance to other drugs, while continuing their abuse of tobacco and alcohol. Studies have also shown that abuse of drugs in late childhood and early adolescence is associated with greater drug involvement. **It is important to note that most youth, however, do not progress to abusing other drugs.**

*Preventive interventions can provide skills and support to high-risk youth to enhance levels of protective factors and prevent escalation to drug abuse.*

Scientists have proposed various explanations of why some individuals become involved with drugs and then escalate to abuse. One explanation points to a biological cause, such as having a family history of drug or alcohol abuse. Another explanation is that abusing drugs can lead to affiliation with drug-abusing peers, which, in turn, exposes the individual to other drugs.

**Researchers have found that youth who rapidly increase their substance abuse have high levels of risk factors with low levels of protective factors.** Gender, race, and geographic location can also play a role in how and when children begin abusing drugs.

#### Community Action Box

**Parents** can use information on risk and protection to help them develop positive preventive actions (e.g., talking about family rules) before problems occur.

**Educators** can strengthen learning and bonding to school by addressing aggressive behaviors and poor concentration—risks associated with later onset of drug abuse and related problems.

**Community leaders** can assess community risk and protective factors associated with drug problems to best target prevention services.

**For a list of Developmental Assets and Protective Factors, visit:**

<http://www.search-institute.org/content/40-developmental-assets-adolescents-ages-12-18>

Search Institute® has identified the following building blocks of healthy development—known as **Developmental Assets**®—that help young people grow up healthy, caring, and responsible.

<b>External Assets</b>	<b>Support</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Family Support</b>—Family continues to be a consistent provider of love and support for the child’s unique physical and emotional needs.</li> <li><b>Positive Family Communication</b>—Parent(s) and child communicate openly, respectfully, and frequently, with child receiving praise for her or his efforts and accomplishments.</li> <li><b>Other Adult Relationships</b>—Child receives support from adults other than her or his parent(s), with the child sometimes experiencing relationships with a nonparent adult.</li> <li><b>Caring Neighborhood</b>—Parent(s) and child experience friendly neighbors who affirm and support the child’s growth and sense of belonging.</li> <li><b>Caring School Climate</b>—Child experiences warm, welcoming relationships with teachers, caregivers, and peers at school.</li> <li><b>Parent Involvement in Schooling</b>—Parent(s) talk about the importance of education and are actively involved in the child’s school success.</li> </ol>
	<b>Empowerment</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Community Values Children</b>—Children are welcomed and included throughout community life.</li> <li><b>Children as Resources</b>—Child contributes to family decisions and has opportunities to participate in positive community events.</li> <li><b>Service to Others</b>—Child has opportunities to serve in the community with adult support and approval.</li> <li><b>Safety</b>—Parents and community adults ensure the child’s safety while keeping in mind her or his increasing independence.</li> </ol>
	<b>Boundaries &amp; Expectations</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Family Boundaries</b>—The family maintains supervision of the child, has reasonable guidelines for behavior, and always knows where the child is.</li> <li><b>School Boundaries</b>—Schools have clear, consistent rules and consequences and use a positive approach to discipline.</li> <li><b>Neighborhood Boundaries</b>—Neighbors and friends’ parents help monitor the child’s behavior and provide feedback to the parent(s).</li> <li><b>Adult Role Models</b>—Parent(s) and other adults model positive, responsible behavior and encourage the child to follow these examples.</li> <li><b>Positive Peer Influence</b>—Parent(s) monitor the child’s friends and encourage spending time with those who set good examples.</li> <li><b>High Expectations</b>—Parent(s), teachers, and other influential adults encourage the child to do her or his best in all tasks and celebrate their successes.</li> </ol>
	<b>Constructive Use of Time</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Creative Activities</b>—Child participates weekly in music, dance, or other form of artistic expression outside of school.</li> <li><b>Child Programs</b>—Child participates weekly in at least one sport, club, or organization within the school or community.</li> <li><b>Religious Community</b>—Child participates in age-appropriate religious activities and caring relationships that nurture her or his spiritual development.</li> <li><b>Time at Home</b>—Child spends time at home playing and doing positive activities with the family.</li> </ol>

<b>Internal Assets</b>	<b>Commitment to Learning</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Achievement Motivation</b>—Child is encouraged to remain curious and demonstrates an interest in doing well at school.</li> <li><b>Learning Engagement</b>—Child is enthused about learning and enjoys going to school.</li> <li><b>Homework</b>—With appropriate parental support, child completes assigned homework.</li> <li><b>Bonding to School</b>—Child is encouraged to have and feels a sense of belonging at school.</li> <li><b>Reading for Pleasure</b>—Child listens to and/or reads books outside of school daily.</li> </ol>
	<b>Positive Values</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Caring</b>—Parent(s) help child grow in empathy, understanding, and helping others.</li> <li><b>Equality and Social Justice</b>—Parent(s) encourage child to be concerned about rules and being fair to everyone.</li> <li><b>Integrity</b>—Parent(s) help child develop her or his own sense of right and wrong behavior.</li> <li><b>Honesty</b>—Parent(s) encourage child’s development in recognizing and telling the truth.</li> <li><b>Responsibility</b>—Parent(s) encourage child to accept and take responsibility for her or his actions at school and at home.</li> <li><b>Self-Regulation</b>—Parents encourage child’s growth in regulating her or his own emotions and behaviors and in understanding the importance of healthy habits and choices.</li> </ol>
	<b>Social Competencies</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Planning and Decision Making</b>—Parent(s) help child think through and plan school and play activities.</li> <li><b>Interpersonal Competence</b>—Child seeks to build friendships and is learning about self-control.</li> <li><b>Cultural Competence</b>—Child continues to learn about her or his own cultural identity and is encouraged to interact positively with children of different racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds.</li> <li><b>Resistance Skills</b>—Child is learning to recognize risky or dangerous situations and is able to seek help from trusted adults.</li> <li><b>Peaceful Conflict Resolution</b>—Child continues learning to resolve conflicts without hitting, throwing a tantrum, or using hurtful language.</li> </ol>
	<b>Positive Identity</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Personal Power</b>—Child has a growing sense of having influence over some of the things that happen in her or his life.</li> <li><b>Self-Esteem</b>—Child likes herself or himself and feels valued by others.</li> <li><b>Sense of Purpose</b>—Child welcomes new experiences and imagines what he or she might do or be in the future.</li> <li><b>Positive View of Personal Future</b>—Child has a growing curiosity about the world and finding her or his place in it.</li> </ol>

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<b>External Assets</b>	<b>Support</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <b>Family support</b>—Family life provides high levels of love and support.</li> <li>2. <b>Positive family communication</b>—Parent(s) and child communicate positively. Child feels comfortable seeking advice and counsel from parent(s).</li> <li>3. <b>Other adult relationships</b>—Child receives support from adults other than her or his parent(s).</li> <li>4. <b>Caring neighborhood</b>—Child experiences caring neighbors.</li> <li>5. <b>Caring school climate</b>—Relationships with teachers and peers provide a caring, encouraging environment.</li> <li>6. <b>Parent involvement in schooling</b>—Parent(s) are actively involved in helping the child succeed in school.</li> </ol>
	<b>Empowerment</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>7. <b>Community values youth</b>—Child feels valued and appreciated by adults in the community.</li> <li>8. <b>Children as resources</b>—Child is included in decisions at home and in the community.</li> <li>9. <b>Service to others</b>—Child has opportunities to help others in the community.</li> <li>10. <b>Safety</b>—Child feels safe at home, at school, and in his or her neighborhood.</li> </ol>
	<b>Boundaries &amp; Expectations</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>11. <b>Family boundaries</b>—Family has clear and consistent rules and consequences and monitors the child’s whereabouts.</li> <li>12. <b>School Boundaries</b>—School provides clear rules and consequences.</li> <li>13. <b>Neighborhood boundaries</b>—Neighbors take responsibility for monitoring the child’s behavior.</li> <li>14. <b>Adult role models</b>—Parent(s) and other adults in the child’s family, as well as nonfamily adults, model positive, responsible behavior.</li> <li>15. <b>Positive peer influence</b>—Child’s closest friends model positive, responsible behavior.</li> <li>16. <b>High expectations</b>—Parent(s) and teachers expect the child to do her or his best at school and in other activities.</li> </ol>
	<b>Constructive Use of Time</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>17. <b>Creative activities</b>—Child participates in music, art, drama, or creative writing two or more times per week.</li> <li>18. <b>Child programs</b>—Child participates two or more times per week in cocurricular school activities or structured community programs for children..</li> <li>19. <b>Religious community</b>—Child attends religious programs or services one or more times per week.</li> <li>20. <b>Time at home</b>—Child spends some time most days both in high-quality interaction with parents and doing things at home other than watching TV or playing video games.</li> </ol>

<b>Internal Assets</b>	<b>Commitment to Learning</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>21. <b>Achievement Motivation</b>—Child is motivated and strives to do well in school.</li> <li>22. <b>Learning Engagement</b>—Child is responsive, attentive, and actively engaged in learning at school and enjoys participating in learning activities outside of school.</li> <li>23. <b>Homework</b>—Child usually hands in homework on time.</li> <li>24. <b>Bonding to school</b>—Child cares about teachers and other adults at school.</li> <li>25. <b>Reading for Pleasure</b>—Child enjoys and engages in reading for fun most days of the week.</li> </ol>
	<b>Positive Values</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>26. <b>Caring</b>—Parent(s) tell the child it is important to help other people.</li> <li>27. <b>Equality and social justice</b>—Parent(s) tell the child it is important to speak up for equal rights for all people.</li> <li>28. <b>Integrity</b>—Parent(s) tell the child it is important to stand up for one’s beliefs.</li> <li>29. <b>Honesty</b>—Parent(s) tell the child it is important to tell the truth.</li> <li>30. <b>Responsibility</b>—Parent(s) tell the child it is important to accept personal responsibility for behavior.</li> <li>31. <b>Healthy Lifestyle</b>—Parent(s) tell the child it is important to have good health habits and an understanding of healthy sexuality.</li> </ol>
	<b>Social Competencies</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>32. <b>Planning and decision making</b>—Child thinks about decisions and is usually happy with results of her or his decisions.</li> <li>33. <b>Interpersonal Competence</b>—Child cares about and is affected by other people’s feelings, enjoys making friends, and, when frustrated or angry, tries to calm her- or himself.</li> <li>34. <b>Cultural Competence</b>—Child knows and is comfortable with people of different racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds and with her or his own cultural identity.</li> <li>35. <b>Resistance skills</b>—Child can stay away from people who are likely to get her or him in trouble and is able to say no to doing wrong or dangerous things.</li> <li>36. <b>Peaceful conflict resolution</b>—Child seeks to resolve conflict nonviolently.</li> </ol>
	<b>Positive Identity</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>37. <b>Personal power</b>—Child feels he or she has some influence over things that happen in her or his life.</li> <li>38. <b>Self-esteem</b>—Child likes and is proud to be the person that he or she is.</li> <li>39. <b>Sense of purpose</b>—Child sometimes thinks about what life means and whether there is a purpose for her or his life.</li> <li>40. <b>Positive view of personal future</b>—Child is optimistic about her or his personal future.</li> </ol>



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<b>External Assets</b>	<b>Support</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <b>Family support</b>—Family life provides high levels of love and support.</li> <li>2. <b>Positive family communication</b>—Young person and her or his parent(s) communicate positively, and young person is willing to seek advice and counsel from parents.</li> <li>3. <b>Other adult relationships</b>—Young person receives support from three or more nonparent adults.</li> <li>4. <b>Caring neighborhood</b>—Young person experiences caring neighbors.</li> <li>5. <b>Caring school climate</b>—School provides a caring, encouraging environment.</li> <li>6. <b>Parent involvement in schooling</b>—Parent(s) are actively involved in helping young person succeed in school.</li> </ol>
	<b>Empowerment</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>7. <b>Community values youth</b>—Young person perceives that adults in the community value youth.</li> <li>8. <b>Youth as resources</b>—Young people are given useful roles in the community.</li> <li>9. <b>Service to others</b>—Young person serves in the community one hour or more per week.</li> <li>10. <b>Safety</b>—Young person feels safe at home, school, and in the neighborhood.</li> </ol>
	<b>Boundaries &amp; Expectations</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>11. <b>Family boundaries</b>—Family has clear rules and consequences and monitors the young person’s whereabouts.</li> <li>12. <b>School Boundaries</b>—School provides clear rules and consequences.</li> <li>13. <b>Neighborhood boundaries</b>—Neighbors take responsibility for monitoring young people’s behavior.</li> <li>14. <b>Adult role models</b>—Parent(s) and other adults model positive, responsible behavior.</li> <li>15. <b>Positive peer influence</b>—Young person’s best friends model responsible behavior.</li> <li>16. <b>High expectations</b>—Both parent(s) and teachers encourage the young person to do well.</li> </ol>
	<b>Constructive Use of Time</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>17. <b>Creative activities</b>—Young person spends three or more hours per week in lessons or practice in music, theater, or other arts.</li> <li>18. <b>Youth programs</b>—Young person spends three or more hours per week in sports, clubs, or organizations at school and/or in the community.</li> <li>19. <b>Religious community</b>—Young person spends one or more hours per week in activities in a religious institution.</li> <li>20. <b>Time at home</b>—Young person is out with friends “with nothing special to do” two or fewer nights per week.</li> </ol>

<b>Internal Assets</b>	<b>Commitment to Learning</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>21. <b>Achievement Motivation</b>—Young person is motivated to do well in school.</li> <li>22. <b>School Engagement</b>—Young person is actively engaged in learning.</li> <li>23. <b>Homework</b>—Young person reports doing at least one hour of homework every school day.</li> <li>24. <b>Bonding to school</b>—Young person cares about her or his school.</li> <li>25. <b>Reading for Pleasure</b>—Young person reads for pleasure three or more hours per week.</li> </ol>
	<b>Positive Values</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>26. <b>Caring</b>—Young person places high value on helping other people.</li> <li>27. <b>Equality and social justice</b>—Young person places high value on promoting equality and reducing hunger and poverty.</li> <li>28. <b>Integrity</b>—Young person acts on convictions and stands up for her or his beliefs.</li> <li>29. <b>Honesty</b>—Young person “tells the truth even when it is not easy.”</li> <li>30. <b>Responsibility</b>—Young person accepts and takes personal responsibility.</li> <li>31. <b>Restraint</b>—Young person believes it is important not to be sexually active or to use alcohol or other drugs.</li> </ol>
	<b>Social Competencies</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>32. <b>Planning and decision making</b>—Young person knows how to plan ahead and make choices.</li> <li>33. <b>Interpersonal Competence</b>—Young person has empathy, sensitivity, and friendship skills.</li> <li>34. <b>Cultural Competence</b>—Young person has knowledge of and comfort with people of different cultural/racial/ethnic backgrounds.</li> <li>35. <b>Resistance skills</b>—Young person can resist negative peer pressure and dangerous situations.</li> <li>36. <b>Peaceful conflict resolution</b>—Young person seeks to resolve conflict nonviolently.</li> </ol>
	<b>Positive Identity</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>37. <b>Personal power</b>—Young person feels he or she has control over “things that happen to me.”</li> <li>38. <b>Self-esteem</b>—Young person reports having a high self-esteem.</li> <li>39. <b>Sense of purpose</b>—Young person reports that “my life has a purpose.”</li> <li>40. <b>Positive view of personal future</b>—Young person is optimistic about her or his personal future.</li> </ol>