

MODULE 1.3

PROTECTIVE AND RISK FACTORS

Common protective factors for mental health difficulties

Protective factors are characteristics that reduce the likelihood of poor mental health either on their own or when risk factors are present. They may be thought of as strengths or assets that help young people to maintain mental wellbeing and be resilient. Protective factors include characteristics relating to individual, family circumstances, peers, school and the broader community. Below are some common protective factors (individual schools may be able to think of others specific to their community). Through their ongoing contact with young people (and their families), schools may be in a position to strengthen some protective factors.

Individual	Family	Peers	School	Community
Easy temperament (e.g. sociable)	Positive parent or carer relationship	Positive peer role models and influences (e.g. peer group with pro-social values and activities)	Supportive relationships	Participation in community networks
Socially and emotionally competent (e.g. able to regulate emotions)	Family provides structure, limits, monitoring and predictability	Inclusive group norms: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mental health status • Same sex attraction • Disability • Open group membership 	Opportunities for academic or other school achievement	Access to support services (e.g. mental health care and family support)
Good coping and problem solving skills	Clear expectations for behaviours and values		Opportunities to participate in a range of activities	Economic security
Optimistic (e.g. a belief life has meaning and hope)	Supportive relationships between family members		Physical and psychologically safe environment	Safe and inclusive community
Physically healthy	Support available at critical times		Clear policies on behaviour and bullying	
Positive sense of identity and cultural heritage			Support available at critical times	
Positive attitude to help seeking			Connections to competent and caring adults	
Connected to family, school and community			School acknowledges and respects diversity (inclusive environment)	
			Positive approaches to behaviour education	

Common risk factors for mental health difficulties

Risk factors are characteristics that increase the likelihood of poor mental health. Risk factors include characteristics relating to the individual, family circumstances, peers, school and broader community. The presence of one or more risks factors does not mean a student will develop a mental health difficulty, however as the number of risk factors increases generally so does the likelihood. Some risk factors are particularly toxic (e.g. sexual or physical abuse). Below are some common risk factors (individual schools may be able to identify others specific to their community). Through their ongoing contact with young people (and their families), schools may be in a position to reduce the impact of risk factors either by addressing a specific risk factor or by strengthening protective factors.

Individual	Family	Peers	School	Community
Difficult temperament (e.g. overly shy or aggressive)	Family conflict including domestic violence	Poor peer role models	Poor student-teacher relationships	Social or cultural discrimination and racism
Low self-worth	Inconsistent or unclear discipline	Exclusive or rejecting peers	Difficult or inadequate student transition management	Socio-economic disadvantage including limited access to support services
Low IQ and learning difficulties	Lack of warmth and affection by parents	Peer norms favouring excessive use of drugs, alcohol and violence or antisocial behaviour	Bullying or discrimination	Neighbourhood violence or crime
Impulsivity	Parent/s with mental illness or substance abuse problems		School community is not inclusive	
Poor social skills			School violence	
Significant negative life events relating to loss, trauma and abuse			Low teacher expectations of students	
Alcohol and drug use			Lack of parent and community involvement	
Chronic illness, physical or mental disability			Poor absenteeism structures and processes	

Primary sources

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2003). *Australia's young people: Their health and wellbeing*. Canberra.

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National Research Council and Institute of Medicine. (2009). *Risk and Protective Factors for Mental, Emotional, and Behavioral Disorders Across the Life Cycle*.

Resnick, M. et al. (1997). Protecting adolescents from harm: Findings from the National Longitudinal Study on Adolescent Health. *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 278 (10), 823 – 832.

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