

# NOTES YOUTH DEVELOPMENT



## Risk & Protective Factors in the Lives of Youth: The Evidence Base

Youth outcomes are directly affected by a range of risk and protective factors. If properly identified, these factors can be used as a signal for policy interventions to increase the likelihood of a positive transition to adulthood. Research has demonstrated that several of these factors have a greater impact on reducing risky behaviors and in promoting positive youth development than others. This Note outlines a framework for identifying risk and protective factors, and focuses on those which have demonstrated a particularly strong effect on youth in a range of longitudinal studies: i) in school attendance; ii) the degree of school “connectedness”; and iii) the sustained presence of caring adults in the lives of young people.



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*Today's youth (15–24) constitute the largest cohort ever to enter the transition to adulthood. Nearly 90% live in developing countries and the challenges they face—low quality education, lack of marketable skills, high rates of unemployment, crime, early pregnancy, social exclusion, and the highest rates of new HIV/AIDS infections—are costly to themselves and to society at large. Client demand for policy advice on how to tap the enormous potential of youth is large and growing. This series aims to share research findings and lessons from the field to address these important cross-sectoral topics.*

## Risk and Protective Factors

At each stage of the life-cycle, there exists an interrelated set of factors which impact behaviors, choices, and outcomes of individuals. As regards youth, **risk factors** are those which increase the likelihood that a young person will experience negative outcomes, whereas **protective factors** counterbalance the risk factors, increasing the likelihood that he or she will make a positive transition to adulthood. Identifying which factors have the greatest impact on youth behavior and outcomes – and their subsequent adult outcomes – can provide policymakers with a useful framework to guide both policy and programmatic choices.

These factors can be categorized into three levels: i) the macro-environment; ii) the micro-environment; and iii) the individual. **Macro level factors** are the systems and institutions that affect an individual, but with which the individual does not have direct contact (such as the state of the economy, poverty and inequality, legal frameworks, cultural background, the mass media, and social norms on gender). **Micro level factors** refer to institutions and individuals with which the young person interacts on a personal basis (such as schools, communities, teachers, family, and peers). **Individual level factors** are related to the cognitive, physiological and behavioral nature of the individual (such as physical health and growth, self-esteem, and aggressive behavior). This issue of Youth Development Notes focuses primarily on research related to micro-level factors, as they represent the most feasible entry points for direct youth interventions<sup>1</sup>. However, it is important to underscore the high degree of inter-connectedness among the risk and protective factors across all levels.

Longitudinal studies in the US and the Caribbean indicate that two micro-level protective factors have a much greater impact on youth development than others: i) school presence and “connectedness”; and ii) the sustained presence of a caring adult in the life of a young person (Box 1). The absence of these factors in the lives of youth show strong correlations to increased risky behavior, whereas the presence of these factors show greater likelihood of decreasing these behaviors and promoting positive youth development. The policy implications of these findings provide further evidence to the importance of investing in secondary education – with particular emphasis on targeting areas with greater concentrations of youth at risk – as well as in programs that can increase school attendance and connectedness among youth. It also indicates that greater attention to programs that foster strong families, parenting and mentors in the lives of young people could have an important impact on facilitating the transition of youth to adulthood.

## Micro-Level Factors

Micro-level factors are those which a young person is exposed to daily. The four major life domains present at the micro-environment level for youth are the community, schools, the family and peers. Each can play a protective or risk role in the lives of young people, affecting their likelihood of undertaking risky behaviors or of achieving positive outcomes. **Risk-taking behaviors** are those actions that hinder the personal development and successful integration of an individual youth into society. They include, among others: not attending school, working in settings that are damaging to development (including working in illicit activities against one’s will – e.g., prostitution, drug trafficking, mules), having unprotected or unsafe sex, participating in criminal or violent activities, drug dealing or substance abuse.

### Box 1: Measuring “Connectedness” to Schools and Caring Adults

**Schools:** In addition to school attendance, school connectedness is measured by the degree to which students perceive that school is fair, safe (physically, emotionally and academically), that teachers are supportive and that they set high academic standards.

**Parent/caring adult:** The perception by a young person that there is at least one parent or caring adult in their life who is regularly available both physically and emotionally, who expresses love and affection, who monitors behaviors and provides feedback in a supportive (non-abusive) manner.

**Source:** Blum, R. W. 2005. *Protective Factors in the Lives of Youth: The Evidence Base*. World Bank HDNCY Youth Development Lecture Series. Available at: [www.worldbank.org/childrenandyouth](http://www.worldbank.org/childrenandyouth)

An example of how micro level factors can affect youth development is that if a young person lives in an urban slum, he or she may have a greater likelihood of undertaking risky behaviors because of the community environment, but if that person is in school and has a positive adult influence in his or her life, that likelihood is greatly reduced. It is important to note that youth may rely more or less heavily on certain types of micro-level factors at different stages of their development. For example, peers become increasingly influential in the early teens but that fact does not mean that parents become unimportant. In addition, although single risk and protective factors have limited predictive powers, multiple risks have a cumulative effect.

At the **community level**, the physical environment in which youth live and the institutions they confront daily are very powerful influences on their lives. The most relevant community institutions are schools, religious organizations, community organizations, police and the physical neighborhood. **Schools** and teachers play a particularly powerful role given the number of hours per week a young



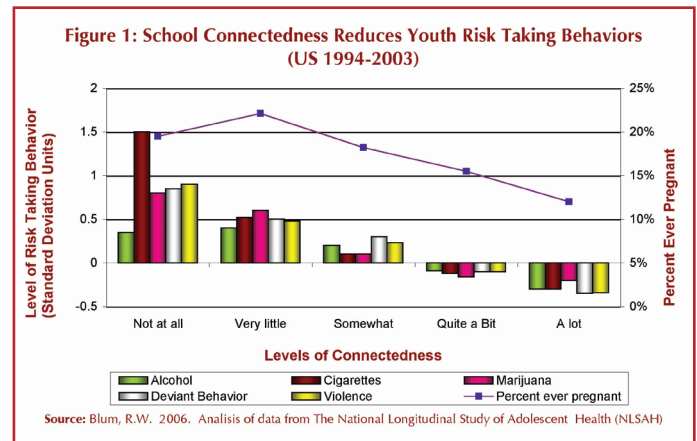
person spends in that environment. Specifically, in addition to regular school attendance, teacher support, coupled with high expectations is a critical part of “school connectedness”. By contrast, if they have dropped out of school, or if school is abusive, the absence of that protective factor can increase chances of risky behavior dramatically.

At the **family** level, factors such as the presence – or absence – of a caring adult, physical or sexual abuse in the home, risk-taking behavior by parents, and household poverty all play important roles in the development of youth. When parents are physically or psychologically absent, other caring adults (e.g. teachers, ministers, a coach) may moderate the otherwise devastating consequences. Youth choose to spend the majority of their free time with **peers**, and these relationships can provide important protective or risk factors in their lives depending on whether the peer group is pro- or anti-social. For example, it has been well documented that poor urban youth who live in environments where parents are not present identify gangs as a support structure in terms of personal safety, identity and companionship<sup>2</sup>.

## Providing the Evidence Base

This Note highlights two studies undertaken in the US and the Caribbean to assess the relative importance of a range of micro-level factors in reducing youth risky behavior. In both cases, it is clear that **school “connectedness” is one of the most important protective factors in the lives of young people**. It goes without saying that one cannot experience this factor without being in school, hence the central importance of increasing school attendance. When this is combined with other important protective factors such as the presence of a parent or caring adult – or family “connectedness” – in the lives of young people, the probability of reducing risky behaviors is even greater. Conversely, the presence of several risk factors, such as a history of skipping school, experiencing physical or sexual abuse in the home, and parental risky behavior can have a pile-up effect of increasing the likelihood of negative outcomes.

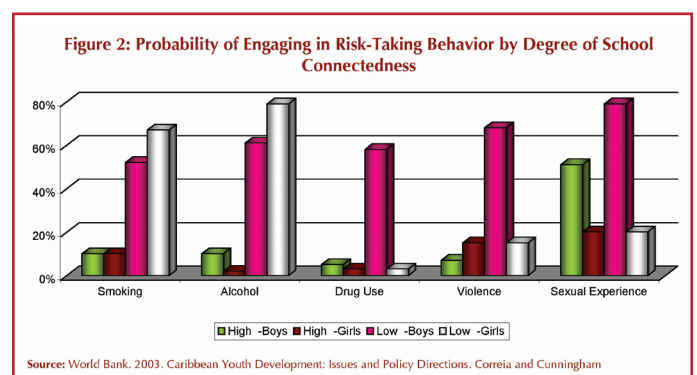
The first study – the US National Longitudinal Study on Adolescent Health – draws from a survey initially using a stratified random sample of about 130 schools and more than 20,000 students over the period of 1994 to 2003<sup>3</sup>. It attempts to measure the association between a range of micro-factors and reducing adolescent risky behaviors, including substance abuse, violent behaviors, early pregnancy, and sexual intercourse. The study’s central finding is that **school attendance/connectedness and - to a lesser degree – parent/family connectedness show the strongest associations with reducing every risk behavior studied, including substance**



use (alcohol, cigarettes, marijuana), violent or deviant behavior, emotional distress and pregnancy (Figure 1). The second study attempted to test these same factors in an international setting on a similar range of youth risk-taking behaviors<sup>4</sup>. As part of the World Bank’s Caribbean Youth Development report<sup>5</sup>, this research consisted of a stratified random sample of schools and young people from nine Caribbean countries.

The objective was to identify risk and protective factors among Caribbean youth and determine whether these factors remained significant across a range of risk-taking behaviors as a means of providing relevant policy signals to Caribbean policymakers confronted with an increasingly difficult set of challenges facing youth. These findings confirmed the conclusions of the US Longitudinal study that school attendance and connectedness are the single most important protective factors identified in reducing risky behaviors. Among youth who feel connected to school, the study finds that the probability of sexual activity *falls* by 30% for boys and 60% for girls, of engaging in violent activity by 60% for boys and 55% for girls, and of drug use by 50% for boys and 30% for girls (figure 2).

The impact of school connectedness is considerably stronger than the presence of the other factors, including peer/family connectedness and religious attendance. For example,



young women who have few protective factors in their lives have a predicted probability of 79% that they will use alcohol. However, once connected to their schools, this figure drops to 2.1%. Young men that have few connections to family, school, or churches have a predicted probability of 51% that they will smoke. If connected to their schools, this number drops to 9%, a considerably lower score than if they were connected to both churches and their family/peer group (36%).

## Translating Research into Action

The public policy implications of applying such a framework to youth in developing countries are important. Risk taking behaviors are highly correlated, meaning that individuals who engage in one type of risk-taking behavior are likely to engage in several. Although the studies above did not explicitly test for a bundling of such behaviors, the repeated influence of the same factors and the high participation in risk-taking of youth without any protective factors (or with multiple risk factors) suggests that bundling occurs.

Public policy that focuses on reducing a single risk factor (or enhancing a single positive factor), therefore, will have important implications for several types of behavior, and subsequent youth development outcomes. Where multiple protective factors can be addressed – increasing school attendance, school connectedness, and caring adult/mentor

### Box 2: Enhancing School Connectedness

- Introduce policies that **increase school attendance** (such as school meals, greater supervision, Conditional Cash Transfers and other incentives).
- Offer **skills-building for teachers** in how to positively engage students and eliminate abusive behaviors (through both pre- and in-service professional development).
- Provide **greater safety** (both emotionally and physically) in schools (such as ensuring a well-lit building and strictly penalize abusive behavior).
- **Involve parents** in school life (such as regular parent-teacher meetings, parent committees, and oversight).

relationships – the impact will increase even further.

In sum, this research underscores the close connection between positive health outcomes, reducing risky behaviors, school attendance and school engagement. Translating this into action entails explicit policies that can improve a student's sense of belonging to a school (Box 2). It also points to the importance of programs that promote positive parenting, as outlined in a previous issue of Youth Development Notes (See Vol. 1, No. 3). In the case of absent parents, programs that provide a caring adult in the life of a child have proven to be an effective second-best solution<sup>6</sup>. Together, these measures will foster the resilience young people need for a successful transition to adulthood.

### Recommended reading

1. Blum, R. W. 2005. *Protective Factors in the Lives of Youth: The Evidence Base*. World Bank HDNCY Youth Development Lecture Series 11/01/05. Available at: [www.worldbank.org/childrenandyouth](http://www.worldbank.org/childrenandyouth)
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  3. Udry, J. R. 2003. *The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health* (Add Health), Waves I & II, 1994–1996; Wave III, 2001–2002 [machine-readable data file and documentation]. Chapel Hill, NC: Carolina Population Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
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