

Risk and resilience

Reducing risk and promoting protective factors

Resilience is capacity of an individual to adapt successfully, despite sometimes having to face severe stressors or adversity.

Risk factors

Some children are more at risk than others of not achieving positive life outcomes. The elements that increase the likelihood of difficulties that will challenge their social and emotional wellbeing are termed risk factors.

There are three broad sources of potential risk.

- **Individual factors:** genetic issues, temperament and natural abilities.
- **Family factors:** a child's family circumstances, living environment, family relationships, mental health, conflict, abuse, drug use, criminality, employment, income and security.
- **Specific life events:** trauma, illness, losses through death and separation, and important transitions.

The presence of risk factors does not guarantee future difficulties. However, the likelihood increases in relation to the number of risk factors present. Having said this, each child and family also have resources and strengths that fortify them during difficult times.

Protective factors

Life is full of challenges, yet some people seem better equipped to cope with adverse experiences. The potentially negative impact of risk factors can be moderated by the presence of assets and strengths known as protective factors in a child's life.

The more protective factors there are, the more likely the child is to develop and display resilience, the quality that provides some immunity to life's challenges.

Strengths-based approach

Building resilience is assisted by the development of protective factors. Opportunities for this exist in the three most influential systems in a child's world: the family, the wider community and the school.

The family

Caring and supportive experiences in early childhood establish the basis for trusting relationships throughout life. Families, usually the first social structure encountered, are uniquely placed to lay strong foundations for resilience through:

- quality of care (nurturing)
- secure attachment
- supportive relationships
- stability and predictability
- responsiveness
- consistency
- adequate basic needs
- protection from harm and fear
- opportunities for autonomy
- imparting a sense of belonging.

Children who are connected and feel they belong to their family and community are more likely to develop a strong identity, a positive sense of self and strong relationships with others.

The community

Local communities can provide an extension of the connectedness found in the family setting. As well as offering infrastructure and shared amenities such as parks, playgrounds, community centres, pre-schools, churches and sporting clubs, the wider community can also provide help and support through health and wellbeing services, cultural connection, opportunities for involvement in local events and projects, and activities that foster skill development and interpersonal contact.

Communities provide a secondary social structure that interacts with the experiences within the family and impacts on the development of resilience.

The school

The daily contact that schools have with children presents numerous opportunities to support and strengthen protective factors, and influence the development of resilience. Key factors in building resilience and promoting positive outcomes for students are:

- caring relationships
- high expectations and academic standards
- frequent opportunities for participation and contribution
- social supports (friends, teachers, school counsellor)
- consistent structure, rules and routines
- development of problem solving, conflict resolution and prosocial skills
- acknowledgement of achievements
- constructive, timely feedback
- opportunities for autonomy, leadership and responsibility
- active participation in the learning process.

School staff

Genuine interest and interactions with staff help students to develop a sense of connection and belonging at school. Staff can foster protective factors by having an awareness of the individual students' risk factors, and by being:

- welcoming
- non-judgemental
- empathic listeners
- respectful of privacy
- dependable, nurturing and reassuring.

Staff can also offer support to families by building trusting relationships with parents and, where appropriate, helping and access to relevant information and services beyond the school.

More information

Visit the [Be You website](#) provides educators with knowledge, resources and strategies for helping children and young people achieve their best possible mental health.