

Risk factors and protective factors

Knowing the risk factors and protective factors is key when designing a program because it allows you to identify specific areas that, if addressed, could lead to better outcomes. By distinguishing between these factors, you can craft strategies that lower risks and boost protective influences, leading to better results for young people.

Risk factors

Risk factors are conditions or characteristics that may increase the likelihood of negative outcomes or behaviours among young people. These factors can encompass various aspects of a young person's life, including individual, family, peer, school, and community influences. Recognising these risk factors allows program designers to target specific areas of vulnerability and tailor interventions accordingly.

While risk factors may increase the likelihood of negative outcomes, they are not predictors of offending (i.e., not all young people who have experienced these risk factors will offend).

Examples of risk factors for Australian young people include:

Socioeconomic disadvantage	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Growing up in low-income households or disadvantaged communities, which can limit access to resources and opportunities.
Family dysfunction	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Experiencing family conflict, parental substance abuse, domestic violence, or inadequate parental supervision and support.
School disengagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Facing academic difficulties, truancy, or disciplinary problems at school, which can contribute to disengagement and dropout.
Community violence	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Living in neighbourhoods characterised by high crime rates, gang activity, or social disorder, exposing young people to violence and trauma.
Mental health issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Experiencing depression, anxiety, trauma, or other mental health challenges, which can impact overall well-being and functioning.
Discrimination and racism	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Facing discrimination, racism, or prejudice based on factors such as race, ethnicity, culture, religion, or sexual orientation, leading to feelings of marginalisation and alienation.

Limited access to education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facing barriers to accessing quality education, including inadequate school facilities, limited educational resources, or educational policies that perpetuate inequalities.
Peer pressure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being influenced by peers engaged in risky behaviours, such as substance abuse, delinquency, or antisocial activities.
Substance abuse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experimentation or regular use of drugs or alcohol, which can lead to addiction, health problems, and involvement in criminal activities.
Lack of positive role models	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited exposure to positive role models, mentors, or supportive adults who can provide guidance, encouragement, and positive reinforcement.

It is important to note that risk factors are not limited to the above, and there may be intersecting elements as well.

Some risk factors are *static* and cannot be changed or may require broader societal changes or systemic interventions to address them effectively.

Dynamic risk factors are more subject to change through targeted interventions, support systems, and positive influences.

Understanding intersectionality of risk factors

Understanding the intersectionality of risk factors is crucial in designing effective programs that address the complex needs of individuals and communities. The goal is to ensure fair and equitable outcomes for all participants right from the start.

Intersectionality acknowledges that people can face multiple forms of disadvantage or marginalisation at once, making them more vulnerable and shaping their experiences in unique ways. For example, a young person from a low-income background who also lives with a disability will face compounded challenges, from limited access to services to potential discrimination.

This perspective encourages program designers to consider a variety of factors such as race, ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status, among others. While this list is not exhaustive, it provides a starting point for understanding the complexity of intersecting identities and experiences.

Recognising intersectionality also emphasises the importance of hiring diverse staff and offering proper training and resources to ensure programs are culturally responsive and inclusive. By tackling the root causes of inequality, programs can foster fair outcomes and drive positive change in communities.

Protective factors

Protective factors, on the other hand, are conditions or attributes that buffer young people from the negative effects of risk factors and promote resilience and positive development. These factors serve as sources of strength and support, enhancing young people's ability to cope with adversity and thrive in challenging environments.

Examples of protective factors for Australian young people may include:

Supportive relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having strong, positive relationships with family members, peers, teachers, mentors, or other supportive adults who provide encouragement, guidance, and emotional support.
Personal resilience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing coping skills, problem-solving abilities, self-regulation, and a sense of self-efficacy that enable young people to navigate challenges and setbacks effectively.
Positive school engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feeling connected to school, having supportive teachers and mentors, participating in extracurricular activities, and experiencing academic success.
Access to opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having access to educational, recreational, employment, and community resources that promote positive youth development, skill-building, and future opportunities.
Cultural identity and pride	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Embracing and affirming one's cultural heritage, traditions, values, and identity, which foster a sense of belonging, pride, and resilience.
Healthy peer relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Surrounding oneself with peers who engage in positive behaviours, provide social support, and reinforce healthy choices and values.
Community support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Living in communities with strong social networks, community organisations, and resources that promote youth engagement, civic participation, and community cohesion.
Access to mental health services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having access to culturally sensitive, affordable, and effective mental health services and support networks to address mental health challenges and promote emotional well-being.
Resilience-building activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participating in activities that promote resilience, such as sports, arts, recreation, volunteerism, and leadership development programs.
Social skills development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opportunities to learn and practice social skills such as communication, empathy, cooperation, and conflict resolution.
Positive parenting practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being raised in families that practice positive parenting strategies, such as warmth, communication, monitoring, and discipline, which contribute to healthy child development and well-being.
Emotional regulation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning strategies to manage and regulate emotions effectively, fostering emotional well-being and resilience.
Lifelong learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encouragement and support for ongoing learning and personal growth, promoting adaptability and success in various life domains.

Protective factors are dynamic and can be strengthened through targeted interventions, fostering resilience, and promoting positive outcomes among young people.

Why is this relevant for you?

Importance of context

Understanding the importance of context is key when examining the factors that influence youth development. For example:

- **Cultural identity:** Cultural identity can offer a strong sense of belonging and support, acting as a protective factor. However, it can also lead to risk if it results in discrimination or marginalisation within a community. It is essential to look beyond ethnicity and consider the broader social context to understand a young person's risk level.
- **Family structure:** A stable and supportive family environment can protect and nurture young people. On the flip side, dysfunction, conflict, or instability within the family can introduce risks and potentially harm a young person's development.

These examples show how what protects someone in one situation can become a risk in another, based on a person's own experiences, society's views, and their surroundings. That is why it is crucial to think about how different factors interact in any given context when designing programs or interventions.

Importance in program design

Understanding the difference between risk factors and protective factors is essential for program designers to effectively address the specific needs and strengths of young people.

Targeting risk factors helps to mitigate negative outcomes

Enhancing protective factors promotes resilience and well-being

Programs that focus on building protective factors empower young people by enhancing their strengths, assets, and resources, fostering resilience, and promoting long-term well-being.

By addressing both risk and protective factors, programs can maximise their impact and empower young people to reach their full potential.