Risk and Protective Factors

What are risk and protective factors?
Longitudinal research identifies a range of risk and protective factors that are known to influence the course of child and adolescent development. Risk factors are those factors, such as abuse or neglect, that have been shown to increase the probability of future adverse outcomes for children and young people. Protective factors are those factors, such as parental attachment, that are known to moderate or reduce the influence of risk factors, hence reducing the likelihood of adverse outcomes.

Risk and protective factors occur at all the environmental levels that influence child development: at the level of the individual child, his or her family, his or her networks and the wider community and society. Examples of the risk factors that operate at different environmental levels include: early behavioral difficulties (individual), family conflict (family) and socioeconomic disadvantage (community). Examples of protective factors include: an easy temperament (individual), family harmony (family) and access to positive opportunities, such as education (community). The majority of risk and protective factors are modifiable, that is, able to be altered.

Risk and protective factors also change over the course of childhood and adolescence, “The salience of risk or protective factors may vary with age, and this may vary by gender, race or the cultural context in which a child develops” (Centre for Community Child Health, 2000, p.12).

Why is an understanding of risk and protective factors important?
Research tells us that children who are exposed to multiple risk factors are more likely to experience poorer health, wellbeing and developmental outcomes whereas children who are exposed to protective factors are more likely to become resilient to adversity. Not all children who experience risk factors will go on to experience adverse outcomes. However, the chances of their doing so are increased with greater exposure to risk factors and reduced with greater exposure to protective factors.

As most risk and protective factors are modifiable, we can use our understanding of the factors that are predictive of specific outcomes in planning interventions, such as services and programs. We are most likely to achieve improvements in child health and wellbeing outcomes by using interventions that will reduce risk factors and enhance protective factors for the relevant outcomes at each environmental level of influence.

What is the WW4Kids risk and protective factors framework?
The WW4Kids risk and protective framework (Table 1) has been developed by ARACY for the WW4Kids website.
The framework sets out key risk and protective factors for children and young people under the four environmental headings of i) (individual) child factors; ii) parents and their parenting style; iii) family factors and life events; and iv) community factors.

**How was the WW4Kids risk and protective factors framework developed?**

The WW4Kids risk and protective factors framework was developed by ARACY following a review of existing literature and frameworks on risk and protective factors.

Much of the reviewed literature on risk and protective factors has a specific subject area focus, for example the risk and protective factors for child maltreatment, youth offending, mental health problems, or alcohol and drug use. The relevant literature also commonly relates to a specific age-grouping, for example early childhood risk and protective factors frameworks, rather than to a broader age range. Identified risk and protective factors frameworks tend also to be specific to particular subject areas and / or age-groups.

In contrast to this, the WW4Kids risk and protective factors framework aims to provide a comprehensive collation of risk and protective factors that are relevant to both the broader outcomes\(^1\) and age focus\(^2\) of *The Nest*.

The framework brings together and is collated from the content of several sources. It draws principally on a risk and protective factors framework developed by the Centre for Community Child Health (Centre for Community Child Health 2000, p. 10-11).

Other key sources include:


- risk and protective factors for children and young people up to 18 years included in the *Communities that Care Guide to Australian Prevention Strategies* (Communities that Care 2012).

- risk and protective factors relating to specific subject areas, including depression and anxiety, substance misuse and child maltreatment (see for example O’Connell, et. al 2009; Loxley et. al 2004; Sethi et. al. 2013).

**How can the WW4 Kids risk and protective framework be used?**

WW4Kids provides the facility for users to engage in a range of search strategies to identify preventive evidence-based interventions (programs, practices or tools).

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1. The measurable outcomes of *The Nest* are six inter-related domains of child and youth wellbeing: children and young people are loved and safe; have material basics; are healthy; are learning; are participating; and have a positive sense of culture and identity.
2. The *Nest* focuses on improving outcomes for children and youth aged 0-24 years.
WW4Kids site users are able to search for interventions that seek to address specific risk and protective factors included on the WW4Kids risk and protective factors framework.

**References**


Communities that Care (2012). *A Guide to Australian Prevention Strategies*, The Royal Children’s Hospital, Parkville, Vic, 3052: Communities that Care Ltd.

