

# Brief Research-to-Results

Child  
TRENDS

*...information for program providers, funders, policy makers, and researchers on the meanings of a common phrase, “at risk.”*

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## DEFINING THE TERM “AT RISK”

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### WHAT DOES “AT RISK” MEAN?

The term *at risk* is used frequently to describe children and youth and has a strong intuitive meaning. However, the term has no consistent definition and can be viewed as stigmatizing certain groups. Nevertheless, it is widely used. The positive side of this confusion is that program providers have some leeway in how they define “at risk” for their programs. Despite this flexibility, it still is important to have a standard or a reference point for clear communication between providers, funders, policy makers, and the media about what “at risk” means. This brief highlights some of the issues surrounding the concept. Who is at risk? What are they at risk of? What can the information on risk be used for? Is a quantitative measure of “at-risk” desired? And what about protective factors?

### WHO IS “AT RISK”?

Is it the child or adolescent? Is it the family? Or is it the community?

Some would argue that all children are at risk in some way or another, while others emphasize that some children face much higher risks than do other children. For example, children are seen as at risk if they are disabled, have low self-esteem, or have been abused.

Alternatively, some contend that one should not view children themselves as being at risk, but rather the environments in which children develop. For example, it could be said that the family is at risk. Families are the most critical setting for the development of children, and family risk factors, such as poverty, single parenthood, and low parental education levels, regularly have been found to undermine children’s development.

A third approach would focus on the community, neighborhood, or school context as an at-risk environment. For example, a low-income community with a high crime rate and a low high school graduation rate might be viewed as a place that puts children and adolescents at risk of poor outcomes.

### WHAT ARE CHILDREN AT RISK OF?

Surprisingly, rather than specifically indicating what children are at risk of, the phrase is often used vaguely to refer to poor life outcomes in general. When outcomes for children are mentioned, they tend to refer to very general, long-term deficits, such as school failure, death, economic dependency, or incarceration. However, particular out-of-school-time programs in the community are likely to have more specific goals for “at-risk” children, such as improving grades in school, delaying sexual initiation, or developing conflict resolution skills. Moreover, any given program is likely to have just one or two specific targets; in other words, few programs are seeking to improve arts performance, sports competence, academic skills and test scores, and to encourage volunteering. Thus, in the field, different program providers are likely to have quite different outcomes in mind when they think a

child is “at risk” of a poor outcome. Also, as discussed below, both general goals and specific target outcomes can be useful, but for different purposes.

### **HOW CAN MEASURES OF “AT RISK” BE USED?**

Programs increasingly are being asked to develop logic models, provide program plans, and implement evaluation strategies. Each task might call for assessing “at risk,” but different measures of “at risk” might be used for each purpose. For example, in developing a logic model, program staff might want to understand the characteristics of the community. Are children “at risk” because of poverty, crime, toxins or pollution, low levels of English proficiency, poorly performing schools, unemployment, or several of these kinds of factors? On the other hand, decisions about which children to enroll in a program or to target for a program may be based on current or historical information about the child or his/her family. For example, has the child frequently been absent from school or been suspended or expelled? Is the family in poverty? In evaluating a program, however, the focus moves to the specific outcomes for which children and adolescents are at risk in the future. These outcomes might include pregnancy, school dropout, arrest or drug use.

### **HOW SHOULD “AT RISK” BE ASSESSED?**

To assess risk, a survey could be administered, or administrative data or government statistics could be used.

If children are at the center of the “at risk” definition, then it will be necessary to obtain data about individual children from school records or other administrative data or from a survey of children or parents.

If family characteristics are used to define risk, data might be available from the school, or it might be available from other administrative record systems, such as those pertaining to food stamps or Medicaid. Also, it might be possible to administer a survey to parents to obtain information about the family that would inform the program about the levels of risk that a family experiences.

If community characteristics are used to define risk, local area data from the U.S. Census or the American Community Survey might be used to describe the community. Crime statistics are also available for every city, as are vital statistics data on teen births and mortality. Community-level surveys also provide information about risks faced at the community level.

### **WHAT ABOUT PROTECTIVE FACTORS?**

Do programs only want to know about the risks faced by children and families in their schools and communities? Assets, strengths, and protective factors also can be valuable to assess. Even though some children, families, and communities face multiple risks, most also will have assets and protective factors.<sup>1</sup> For example, a positive, caring relationship with a parent can inoculate against many risks.<sup>2</sup> Ongoing positive relationships with other adults represent another critical protective factor.<sup>3</sup>

### **WHAT MEASURES ARE USED TO ASSESS “AT RISK”?**

Children have been defined as “at risk” with a variety of different indicators, including having limited reading proficiency, having experienced abuse or trauma, having a disability or illness, or having exhibited behavior problems.<sup>4</sup>

Measures of family risk include poverty, a low level of parental education, a large number of children, not owning a home, single parenthood,<sup>5</sup> welfare dependence,<sup>6</sup> family dysfunction, abuse,<sup>7</sup> parental mental illness, parental substance use, and family discord or illness.<sup>8</sup>

Measures of community risk might include rates of poverty, crime, unemployment, or teen parenthood in the community.

## CONCLUSION

It is critical to note that “at risk” is a concept that reflects a chance or a probability. It does not imply certainty. Risk factors raise the chance of poor outcomes, while protective factors raise the chance of good outcomes. It is valuable for programs to understand the levels of risk and protective factors in their program clients, as well as of their potential clients. Such understanding can help in developing programs and also in obtaining funding for them.

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<sup>1</sup> Kretzmann, J., & McKnight, J. (1993). *Building communities from the inside out: A path toward finding and mobilizing a community's assets*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University.

<sup>2</sup> Hair, E. C., K. A., Moore, K. A., Garret, S. B., Ling, T., & Cleveland, K. (Forthcoming). The continued importance of quality parent-adolescent relationships during late adolescence. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*.; Hair, E. C., Moore, K. A., Garrett, S. B., Kinukawa, A., Lippman, L., & Michelson, E. (2005). The parent-adolescent relationship scale. In L. Lippman (Ed.), *Conceptualizing and measuring indicators of positive development: What do children need to flourish?* New York, NY: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Press.; Steinberg, L. (2001). We know some things: Parent-adolescent relationships in retrospect and prospect. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, *11*, 1-19.

<sup>3</sup> Rhodes, J., & Roffman, J. (2003). Nonparental adults as asset builders in the lives of youth. In R. M. Lerner & P. L., Benson (Eds.), *Developmental assets and asset-building communities: Implications for research, policy, and practice* (pp. 195-212). New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum.; Search Institute. (1999). *Five fundamental resources for children and youth: report to America's Promise-The Alliance for Youth*. Minneapolis: Author.

<sup>4</sup> Rak, C. F., & Patterson, L. E. (1996). Promoting resilience in at-risk children. *Journal of Counseling and Development*, *74*(4), 368-373.; Randolph, K. A., Fraser, M. W., & Orthner, D. K. (2004). Educational resilience among youth at risk. *Substance Use and Misuse*, *39*(5), 747-767.

<sup>5</sup> Moore, K. A., Vandivere, S., & Redd, Z. (2006). A sociodemographic risk index. *Social Indicators Research Series*, *27*, 45-81.

<sup>6</sup> United States Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census. (1997). *America's children at risk*. Census Brief 97-2. Retrieved 18 April, 2006, from <http://www.census.gov/prod/3/97pubs/cb-9702.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> Education Commission of the States. *At-risk youth*. ECS Issue Site. Retrieved 18 April, 2006, from <http://www.ecs.org/html/issue.asp?issueid=13>.

<sup>8</sup> Rak & Patterson, 1996.

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