

# strengthening families

## research in brief: risk and protective factors

Understanding “risk factors,” “protective factors,” and their interaction is central to developing interventions to prevent child abuse and neglect. Some research-based ideas about these constructs are listed below:

“Individual developmental pathways throughout the life cycle are influenced by interactions among risk factors that increase the probability of a poor outcome and protective factors that increase the probability of a positive outcome.”

“Risk factors may be found within the individual (e.g., a temperamental difficulty, a chromosomal abnormality) or the environment (e.g., poverty, family violence). Protective factors also may be constitutional (e.g., good health, physical attractiveness) or environmental (e.g., loving parents, a strong social network). The cumulative burden of multiple risk factors is associated with greater developmental vulnerability; the cumulative buffer of multiple protective factors is associated with greater developmental resilience” (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000, p. 30).

“Risk and protective factors are found at multiple levels of the social ecology. . . from biological and psychological characteristics of the individual to the family and the community” (O’Connell, Boat, & Warner, 2009, p. 85).

“Resilience can be conceptualized as resulting from the relative balance of risk and protective factors across multiple levels” (Fraser, Kirby, & Smokowski, 2004, p. 33).

To make a difference in a child’s life, “we must simultaneously adopt and implement two evidence-based strategies. First, risk must be reduced.... Second, protection must be strengthened.... Interventions that strengthen protection and concomitantly reduce the effects of risk form the basis of a risk and resilience orientation. Coupled with “local” knowledge, they are core ingredients of EBP (evidence-based practice)” (Fraser & Galinsky, 2004, p. 390).

### SOME PROTECTIVE & RISK FACTORS FOR MALTREATMENT

#### Broad Environmental Protective Factors

- Concrete support in times of need
- Many opportunities for education or employment

#### Family Protective Factors

- Effective parenting knowledge
- Social connections
- Positive parent-child relationship

#### Individual Protective Factors

- Parental resilience
- Feelings of competence in parenting role
- Children’s social and emotional competence

#### Broad Environmental Risk Factors

- Few opportunities for education or employment
- Poverty

#### Family Risk Factors

- Parental conflict
- Low warmth and harsh parenting
- Isolation

#### Individual Risk Factors

- Biomedical problems
- Poor infant attachment to mother
- Unrealistic expectations of child

### SELECTED REFERENCES

Fraser, M.W., & Galinsky, M.J. (2004). Risk and resilience in childhood: Toward an evidence-based model of practice. In M. W. Fraser. *Risk and resilience in childhood: An ecological perspective*, (pp. 385-402). Washington, DC: NASW Press.

# strengthening families

Fraser, M.W., Kirby, L.D., & Smokowski, P.R. (2004). Risk and resilience in childhood. In M. W. Fraser. *Risk and resilience in childhood: An ecological perspective*, (pp. 13-66). Washington, DC: NASW Press.

O'Connell, M.E., Boat, T., & Warner, K.E. (Eds.). (2009). *Preventing mental, emotional, and behavioral disorders among young people: Progress and possibilities*. DC: National Academy Press.

Shonkoff, J. P., & Phillips, D. A. (Eds.). (2000). *From neurons to neighborhoods: The science of early childhood development*. DC: National Academy Press.