

At Risk: What Does It Mean?

By Joan Halverstadt

Every child is influenced before birth by their prenatal environment and after birth by the family environment in which they live. While heredity gives the child the raw material from which they will develop, the environment influences how traits will be expressed and the opportunities the child will encounter. Thus heredity and environment work together to influence how a child will develop. For example, a child will inherit a certain range of intellectual potential. But how their intelligence develops will be greatly influenced by their home and educational opportunities. In the case of intelligence, scientists estimate that environment accounts for about 50% of the range of your intelligence which includes your prenatal environment, your family environment, your educational experiences, and your community/world experiences. (*Trawick-Smith, Early Childhood Development: A Multi-cultural Perspective, 2014*).

Early in life, the child's family is the primary source of meeting the child's needs. The family unit is influenced by their culture, religion, socio-economic status, extended family, community resources, etc. Whether the family will or will not be able to meet all the child's physical, cognitive, social-emotional, language, and adaptive needs will depend on their own experiences and the resources available to them. How well they are able to meet these needs will determine whether their child can develop to their full potential. For example, if there is a scarcity of nutritional food, not only will this affect the child's physical growth and health, but also will affect their brain development, their trust in getting their needs met, etc.

As the child gets older, they will be influenced by the neighborhood in which they live, their school, and the larger world around them. Although the family may be stable and nurturing, the daily environment outside the home may have positive or negative consequences for the child's growth and development. For example, attending a low performing school will not provide the educational opportunities to achieve their intellectual potential. Or growing up in a dangerous neighborhood will affect not only their safety but also their social-emotional and physical development.

When a child experiences adverse circumstances that can detrimentally affect their potential, then a child is said to be "At Risk". Usually risk factors are measured by how they affect academic performance, physical health, and mental health. Statistics show that certain risk factors contribute more to poor developmental outcomes than others. Children who have multiple risks factors, are more likely to experience school failure and other negative outcomes such as maladaptive behaviors. Some of the primary risk factors are as follows:

- 1) **Poverty** is the number one risk factor for children. Twenty percent of young children in the US live in poverty (*Children's Defense Fund: Kids Count Databook*

- 2017). Poverty results in multiple risk factors such as food insecurity, lack of healthcare, unsafe living situations, family stress, etc. As early as 24 months of age, children in low income families have been found to show lags in cognitive and behavioral development compared to higher income peers.
- 2) Maternal Education Level: Employment is highly dependent on what education and skills training an adult has attained. When a parent, especially a mother, has only a high school education or less, it is difficult to find steady, meaningful employment that pays a living wage.
 - 3) Low Birth Weight/Prematurity is common among low income babies. Ten percent of babies are born with low birth weight. (*Center for Disease Control: Maternal & Infant Health. 2017*). Any child who has a difficult start in life is going to need additional support and intervention.
 - 4) Single Parent Households experience more stress since there is only one parent trying to provide for the family needs on one income. Single teen parents are especially vulnerable.
 - 5) Households Without English Speaking Adults: when a household does not have an adult who is proficient in English, the family will have a more difficult time navigating societal expectations. This will affect their employment, their ability to access community services, their ability to access medical care, etc. According to the US Census, twenty-two percent of children speak a language other than English in their home. (ex. domestic violence)
 - 6) Residential Mobility: when a family changes residences one of more times per year, it usually is due to economic or emotional factors (like domestic violence) which affect family stability. Changing neighborhoods disrupts any community services and ties to neighborhood supports. Frequent changes in schools/daycares can have devastating results for a young student not only in terms of academics but also in terms of social-emotional development.
 - 7) Large Families: a family with 4 or more children is considered a large family. With the cost of raising a child to age 18 at over a quarter of a million dollars, more children puts a strain on the family budget. (*Fiorilla, Dept. of Agriculture, 2018*)
 - 8) Unemployment or Under Employment cause financial hardships. Of adults living below the federal poverty line, 69% are employed (*Ross, 2016*). Many low income workers are under employed which means they either do not have fulltime employment or are working at a job beneath their skill level.
 - 9) Ethnicity and Gender: Boys tend to engage in more risky behaviors and be exposed to more risk factors. Children of color (black, Hispanic, and Native American) experience more adverse events in their lives than Caucasian or Asian children. (*Children's Defense Fund: Kidscount Databook, 2017*).
 - 10) Trauma: Traumatic events can include such experiences a parental incarceration; physical, sexual, or social-emotional abuse or neglect; or exposure to parental hardships such as divorce, parental death, or drug/alcohol use. Such events

literally change the way a child's brain is wired and can have negative and lasting effects on a child's well-being. Trauma is also linked to increases in childhood obesity, school failure, depression, early drug/alcohol use, and poor adult outcomes. While twenty-two percent of all children experience two or more adverse events (ACEs.) during childhood, 37% of Native American and 34% of Black children experience two or more adverse events during childhood (*Center for Disease Control 2018.*) Black and Native American children also rate the lowest on measures of meeting key developmental milestones.

There are multiple ways to look at who is "at risk". First we can consider the individual child at risk when they experience one or more of the above risk factors. But you can also consider the family the child is growing up in to be at risk when the family is experiencing risk factors. And finally, you can consider the neighborhood or community to be at risk due to factors such as high crime rates, poverty, or low graduation rates. Therefore, the answer to remediation does not just lie in addressing an individual child's needs. We also need to consider the family and the neighborhood needs. In order to do this, the educator needs to look at not just the risks but also the protective factors and strengths a family or community may have. By identifying strengths in the family and community, you have a solid base from which to build interventions.

Protective factors are characteristics associated with a lower likelihood of negative outcomes or characteristics that reduce a risk factor's impact. Protective factors can be factors such as socioeconomic stability, good attachment to a parent/caregiver, a stable/loving environment, responsive parenting, or access to good support services. Indicators of protective for children at risk who succeed in school include multiple family factors, health factors, early education experiences, personality strengths, and community/cultural factors.

Family protective factors can be such skills as good parenting, positive family functioning, health practices within the family, stable socio-economic and cultural factors, parental resilience (the ability to effectively manage and recover from difficult situations), parental knowledge of child development, family demographics, etc. Resilience in the child may include such characteristics as social and emotional competence, the ability to communicate needs, the ability to establish positive relationships, tenacity and good problem solving skills, prenatal care and good health care, attendance in a good early childhood education program, and child demographics such as age, race, gender, and immigrant status. On the community level, protective factors include neighborhood resources that support families and reduces their stress, cultural supports, safety of the community, school quality, etc.

In conclusion, educators need to evaluate the whole child when crafting intervention services. We need to look at the challenges the family, the child, and the neighborhood face and understand how they affect the child's development in all areas. We also need to examine the protective factors and positive influences that are already supporting the child and their family. By using a well-rounded approach to intervention, we can provide

interventions that build on the family's strengths and are culturally, developmentally, and socially effective.