

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. Although heredity gives the child the raw material from which they will develop, the environment influences how traits will be expressed and the opportunities that a 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—which includes your prenatal environment, your family environment, your education experiences, and your community/world experiences—accounts for about 50% of the range of your intelligence (Trawick-Smith, 2014). Urie Bronfenbrenner explained this interaction of environment and heredity well in his ecological systems theory (watch the Ecological Systems Theory: Urie Bronfenbrenner video posted by Jankie).

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, economic status, extended family, community resources, and other factors. Whether they 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 can 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 a child's physical growth and health, but it also will affect their brain development. As the child gets older, they will be influenced by their neighborhood, their school, and the larger world around them. Although their 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 for them to achieve their intellectual potential. For another example, growing up in a dangerous neighborhood will affect not only their safety but also their social-emotional 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, health, and mental health. Statistics show that certain risk factors contribute more to poor developmental outcomes than others. Children who have multiple risk factors are the most likely to experience school failure and other negative outcomes, such as maladaptive behavior. Some of the primary risk factors are as follows:

1) Poverty is the number 1 risk factor. Sixteen percent of young children in the United States live in poverty (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2025).

Poverty results in multiple risk factors, such as food insecurity, lack of health care, unsafe living situations, and stress. As early as 24 months of age, children in low-income families have been found to lag their higher-income peers in cognitive and behavioral development.

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 for them to find steady, meaningful employment.

3) **Low Birth Weight/Prematurity** is common among low-income babies. About 8.1% of babies are both with low birth weight (CDC, 2016). 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 potential, their ability to access community services, their ability to access medical care, and more.

6) **Residential Mobility:** When a family changes residences one or more times per year, it usually is due to economic factors. Frequent changes in schools can have devastating results for a primary-aged student.

7) **Large Families:** A family with four or more children is considered a large family. With the cost of raising one child to age 18 now at close a quarter of a million dollars (Picchi, 2023), needless to say, having more children puts a strain on the family budget.

8) **Unemployment and underemployment** cause financial hardships. Of adults living below the federal poverty line, 69% are employed (Ross, 2016). Yet many are underemployed, which means either they don't have full-time work or are working at a job beneath their skills.

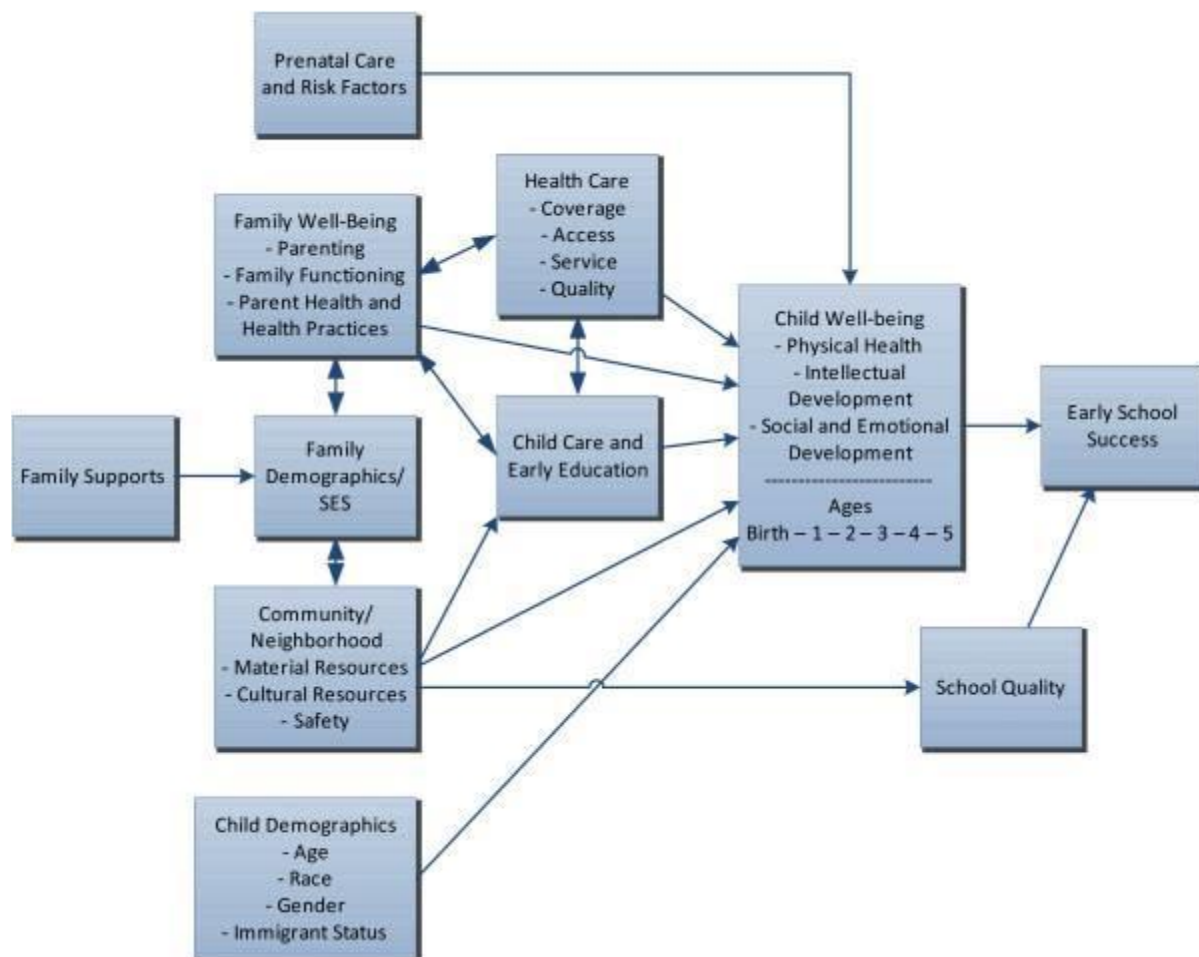
Another risk factor that educators need to be aware of is ethnicity and gender. Boys tend to engage in more risky behaviors and be exposed to more risk factors. Children of color (Black, Native American, or Hispanic) experience more adverse events in their lives than Caucasian or Asian children. Adverse traumatic events can include such experiences as parental incarceration; physical, sexual, or social-emotional child abuse; and exposure to parental hardships such as divorce or single parenting or poverty. Such events can have negative and lasting effects on a child's well-being and are linked to increased risk of school failure, depression, obesity, and alcoholism. Whereas 22% of all children experience two or more adverse events during childhood, one in three Native American children and one in four of African American experience two or more adverse events during childhood (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2021). African American and American Indian children also rate the lowest on measures of meeting key 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-mentioned risk factors. But you can also

consider the family the child is growing up in to be at risk, as they experience the same risk factors. And finally, you could consider the neighbor or community to be at risk because of factors such as a high crime rate or a low graduation rate. Therefore, the answer to remediation does not lie just in addressing an individual child's needs but also in addressing family and community needs. To do this, educators need to look at the risks and at the protective factors and strengths a family or community may have. Identifying strengths in the family or community gives you a solid base upon 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 such factors as socioeconomic stability, good attachment to a parent/caregiver, a stable/loving environment, responsive parenting, or access to support services. Indicators of protective factors for children at risk who succeed in school include multiple family factors, health factors, early education experiences, and community/cultural factors.

The graphic below is from the National Education Goals Panel (Moore et al., 2016) and summarizes the Panel's research on protective factors that ensure early school success. The framework is developmentally appropriate, focuses on the whole child, and incorporates an ecological perspective that recognizes the ways in which family and community can influence early development.



As you can see in this chart, protective factors for early school success occur on multiple levels. They start with Family Supports for measuring prenatal and health care; family functioning, parent well-being, family demographics, community/neighborhood/cultural factors, and child demographics. Child Care/Early Education and access to quality health care factor into the health and development of the child. And finally, the child's development, the quantity of risk factors, and the quality of the school filter into early school success or failure.

Recent research on adverse childhood experiences (ACES) has not only indicated the factors that cause risk but has also focused on the protective and intervention factors. Recognizing the ACEs that a child has experienced is the first step in crafting interventions. Throughout this course be aware that early intervention is key. The earlier a child receives intervention services, the less severe the impact of a risk factor will be.

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