



risk and protective factors

Written by Keryn O'Neill MA, PGCertEdPsych, Knowledge Manager



There are many influences on children's development. We know that some things about children's lives put them at 'higher risk' of poor outcomes. Other things in their lives increase the chance of positive outcomes. Research from many different disciplines adds to our understanding of these factors (e.g. neuroscience, psychology, infant mental health).

Risk factors

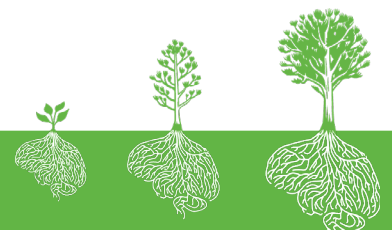
Conditions or events which increase the likelihood of poor outcomes for tamariki:

- do not cause the outcome directly, but increase its probability
- further increase the risk of poor outcomes if the child is exposed to more than one risk factor
- can contribute to a variety of poor outcomes (e.g. criminal offending, poor physical health)
- significantly increase in strength depending on the number of risk factors a child is exposed to (e.g. a child exposed to alcohol before birth is at greater risk if they also experience neglect after birth)
- some examples of risk factors are: poverty, exposure to alcohol and other drugs before birth, abuse and neglect.

Protective factors

Conditions or events which increase the likelihood of positive outcomes for tamariki:

- do not guarantee positive outcomes, but make them more likely
- the more protective factors tamariki have, the more likely they are to have positive outcomes
- examples of protective factors include a secure attachment relationship, breastfeeding, and positive parental relationship.

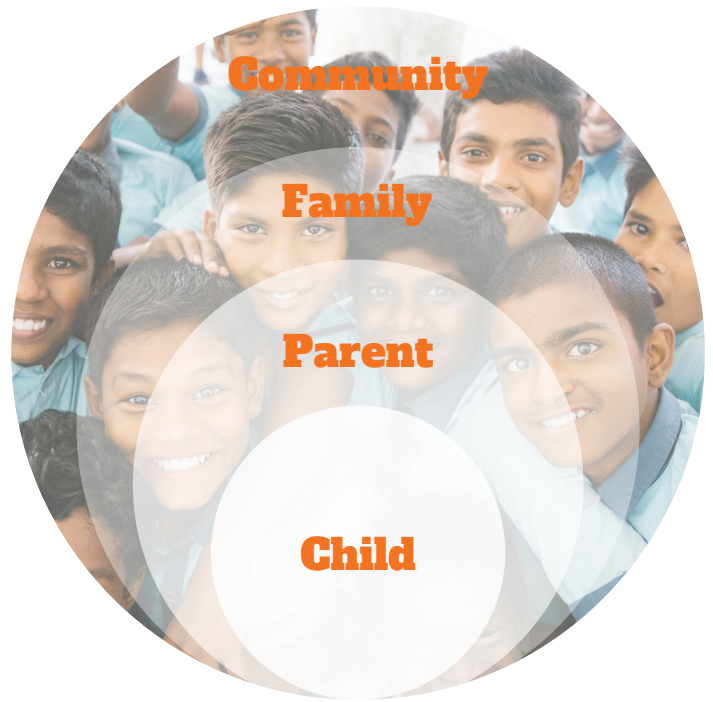


Layers of risk and protective factors

Risk & protective factors exist within the tamariki themselves as well as in their family and wider environment. Examples include:

- Child (e.g. genes, gender, temperament)
- Parent (e.g. substance or mental health issues)
- Family (e.g. living in poverty, available supports)
- Wider community (e.g. access to resources, safe neighbourhood)

Interactions occur between these layers within a child's environment. For example, a child's temperament influences how their parents respond to them. At another level, support provided by the community influences parents, in turn affecting interactions with their tamariki.



Research: A population perspective

- Research looks at risk from a 'population' (or, group) not an 'individual' perspective
- Information or data is collected from groups so the results reflect the trend or pattern shown by that group
- Individuals differ a lot in the way they are affected by risk & protective factors, and can differ from the group trend.

Points to note

Some risk or protective factors can change or be changed (e.g. income levels) whereas others may be long lasting or even permanent. It's important to remember however that:

- exposure to one risk factor does not automatically lead to negative outcomes
- a child's genetic makeup may add risk and/or protective qualities
- the balance between risk & protective factors is important.

To sum up

- Children's development is influenced by a range of risk and protective factors.
- Risk & protective factors can be biological, psychological, and social.
- The more protective factors tamariki have, and the fewer risks they face, the more likely they are to enjoy positive outcomes throughout life.
- For tamariki facing risk, every protective factor that is added, and every risk that is reduced, increases their chance of positive outcomes.



Want to know more?

See the full articles:

"Risk & protective factors in child development" <https://brainwave.org.nz/article/risk-and-protective-factors-in-child-development/>

"Our own set of scales: Risk and protective factors" <http://www.brainwave.org.nz/risk-and-protective-factors/>