Children at Risk

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Definition: *"Win-Win"*
...means changing the school culture:

- Establishing authority relationships that respect student needs *and* adult needs
- Minimizing reasons for acting out (prevention)
- Allowing students to "win" academically, by helping them achieve success and improve academic performance
- Eliminating barriers to success that inspire misbehavior or disengagement
- Encouraging commitment, cooperation, and self-management in positive ways
- Building accountability and personal responsibility; self-management
- Eliminating power struggles (meeting students' needs for power/autonomy; dignity; and structure/limits)
- Building social skills, interactive competence; emotional literacy
- Improving problem-solving and decision-making skills

- **Building relationships and connections**

Does NOT mean:

- Punishing, disempowering, exacting revenge
- Finding ways to get them out of class (or school)
- Giving warnings
- Using threats
- Labeling misbehavior
- Asking for excuses
- Criticizing
- Shaming
- Continuing the cycle of failure
- Doing "business as usual" and expecting different results

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These two lists were originally developed to focus on patterns observed in children (and in their families) as possible predictors of the child's vulnerability for substance abuse and addiction, including alcohol, tobacco, and other addictive substances and behaviors. While these children would certainly come under the heading of being "at risk," this list has expanded over the years to also include children who are at risk for school failure, dropping out, gang involvement, early (or unprotected) sexual activity, violence, and vandalism, as well as those children who are at risk for perfectionism, overachieving, compulsive behavior, social vulnerability, food and body issues, intentional self-injury, and suicide.

- Do not feel valued, connected, or secure in the family
- Do not feel valued, connected, or secure in school
- Do not feel visible or listened to in a meaningful way
- Have a strong sense of not fitting in; feel excluded; not have an important aspect of their identity acknowledged; experience actual discrimination (cultural, social, religious, racial, sexual orientation, disability; family income or socioeconomic status; appearance, clothing, style; ability, for example)
- Lack meaningful connection with a caring, significant adult (in the family, community, or school)
- Lack meaningful connection with positive role models
- Do not believe that their opinions are valued or heard
- Frequently demonstrate a low tolerance for frustration
- Have unrealistic expectations of themselves, others, or situations
- Have difficulty seeing connection between their choices and the outcomes of their choices
- Have difficulty predicting outcomes of possible choices; difficulty thinking things through
- Have difficulty seeing alternatives or "ways out" of problem situations
- Experience despair much of the time; believe that they cannot positively affect or change their lives
- Have a strong sense of victimization, powerlessness, helplessness; low sense of autonomy OR a strong sense of entitlement
- Have feelings of inadequacy, a sense of never being good enough; low sense of worth, capability; may tend to equate achievement with worth; may confuse making a mistake with being a failure
- Have difficulty expressing feelings constructively; tend to "stuff" feelings or blow up (little provocation)
- Compete for power with most adults (and, often, peers)
- Have difficulty taking no for an answer
- Have difficulty hearing negative feedback
- Have difficulty balancing consideration for others with consideration for selves
- Have few interests; may use TV, video games, or other electronics to numb out OR likely to be significantly overscheduled, involved in too many activities; use busyness to numb out or prove worth
- Rarely invite other kids to their homes; apparent social isolation
- Lack a strong positive core belief system
- Have difficulty solving problems or making decisions
- Tend to blame or avoid responsibility; OR tend to act and feel overly responsible for other people
- Have difficulty asking for help
- Have difficulty thinking independently; easily talked into things
- Have a tendency toward people pleasing, compliance, approval-seeking,dependency OR rebelliousness, bullying, abusiveness, hostile behavior
- Reluctant to try new things; have a fear of failure OR reckless, dare-devil behavior
- Are perfectionistic, self-critical OR seemingly indifferent
- Have difficulty finishing projects or assignments OR compulsive involvement and overachievement
- Rarely share feelings and thoughts with at least one family member (or other safe adult)
- Demonstrate poor school performance; dislike of school; poor attendance OR compulsive overachiever
- Frequently experience a mismatch between instruction and learning style (how they learn)
- Frequently experience a mismatch between content and interest; perception of content as useless or irrelevant

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- Frequently experience a mismatch between content and cognitive ability (work is either too hard or too easy); lack of prerequisite skills OR bored because they're not being adequately challenged
- Demonstrate delinquent behavior; school misbehavior; acting out (often to cover-up inability to perform, lack of knowledge)
- Have friends who use drugs or alcohol; friends who are in gangs; friends who have dropped out
- Have favorable attitudes toward drug use; early first use of drugs or alcohol; early sexual activity or other risk behavior

Note: Everyone probably experiences some of these risk factors from time to time and I doubt there are many kids who would not relate to several of the items on this list. The presence of many risk factors does not condemn students to negative or dangerous outcomes, nor does the apparent lack of these characteristics mean they will avoid problems. However, students who frequently characterize many of the factors described above are typically at greater risk than students who do not, especially those who receive support, encouragement, and necessary intervention.

Family patterns and adult behaviors of at-risk children may include:

- Negative or antagonistic relationship with the school, with the legal system, or community resources
- Lack of involvement in child's education; places low value on school and education
- Substance abuse and addiction; compulsive behavior; issues involving food, weight, or appearance
- Codependency (supporting someone's addiction, or irresponsible or abusive behavior)
- Compulsive behavior, mental illness (especially with no support or intervention)
- Verbal, physical, sexual, or emotional abuse
- Inconsistency or neglect; does not hold child accountable to family for behaviors or whereabouts; OR overinvolvement and control of child; lack of privacy or boundaries with other family members
- Dependence on child's appearance, achievement, or performance (academic, athletic, other) to give a sense of worth to the family; or to distract from patterns of addiction or abuse practiced by adult family member; pressure on child
- Reactivity, rigidity, perfectionism, dishonesty, double standards, shaming, blaming, mistrust, all-or-nothing thinking, disempowering, martyrdom, intolerance, future or past orientation, negativity, criticism, boundary violations, self-righteousness, denial, or enabling.
- Tendency to notice flaws, errors, and omissions; infrequent expressions of recognition, validation, acknowledgement; praise expressed to manipulate and control (or expressed only publicly, "for show.")
- Lack of encouragement, lack of faith in child's ability (or lack of faith in school or child's ability to succeed there)
- Drug use; use of illegal drugs around children; heavy recreational drinking in the home
- Involvement of children in adult drug use (for example, asking the child to get a beer or light a cigarette for the adult)
- Family patterns of dismissing feelings, distracting or rescuing person from feelings, or using feelings as a basis for shaming, blaming, attacking, or making someone wrong.
- Family pattern of superficial identity and comparison; pigeonholing children, even with apparently positive labels: "the smart one," "the popular one," or "the cute one."
- Infrequent or inconsistent expressions of love and acceptance; conditional love based on specifics such as appearance, achievement, social competence, performance, or how well the child takes care of the adult's needs, (rather than on unconditional worth of the child)

Adapted from numerous sources, including *Creating Emotionally Safe Schools,* by Dr. Jane Bluestein (Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications, Inc, 2001); How to Drug-Proof Kids (by Jodi Freeman, Albuquerque, NM: The Think Shop, Inc., 1989); and "Risk Check for your Child," (handout from Garfield Middle School, Albuquerque, NM). Additional items on these lists have come from comments or correspondences from workshop participants, as well as personal observation and experience. This page has been excerpted from http://janebluestein.com/2012/children-at-risk/

Survival and Adaptation Strategies of Children at Risk:
Family Roles

Roles adopted to create safety in a troubled (or even non-supportive) family can be carried into adult relationships, impacting effectiveness socially and professionally.

Mode of survival (Family role assumed)	Visible Traits (Observable Behaviors)	How the child feels	Role in family system	Type of adult child may grow up to be (without help)	Type of adult child may grow up to be (with help)
FAMILY HERO (Super Kid)	"Little mother" or "little man." Always does what's right; over achiever; over responsible; needs everyone's approval; not much fun.	Hurt, inadequate, confused, guilty, fearful; low self-esteem; sense of never being or doing enough. May doubt worth and adequacy even with much approval.	Provides self-worth to family; someone to be proud of; compensates for parents' dysfunctionality or unhappiness; makes the family "look good."	Workaholic; can never be wrong; marries a dependent person; needs to control; compulsive; can't say no; can't fail; depression, suicide, use of stimulants.	Competent; organized; responsible; good manager; successful and healthy.
SCAPE-GOAT (Trouble-maker)	Hostile and defiant; withdrawn and sullen; gets negative attention; troublemaker.	Hurt and abandoned; angry; rejected; feels totally inadequate; no or low self-worth; impulsive; defeated.	Takes the heat off the dysfunctional parent: "See what *he's* done! Leave me alone!"	Alcoholic or addict; unplanned pregnancy; dropout; legal trouble and/or prison.	Recovery; courageous; good under pressure; can see reality; helpful to others; can take risks.
LOST CHILD (Invisible Child)	Loner; day dreamer; solitary; withdrawn; drifts and floats through life; may not be missed for days; quiet; shy; ignored.	Unimportant, not allowed to have feelings; loneliness; hurt and abandoned; defeated; given up; fearful; low worth.	Relief for the parents (and teachers); the one child no one worries about.	Indecisive; no zest; little fun; stays the same; alone or promiscuous; dies early; undeveloped talents; dropout; can't say no.	Independent; talented; creative; imaginative; assertive; resourceful.
MASCOT (Class Clown)	Supercute; immature; anything for a laugh or attention; fragile; hyperactive; short attention span; learning disabilities; anxious; may appear indifferent.	Low self-esteem; terror; loneliness; inadequate; unimportant.	Comic relief; provides fun, humor.	Compulsive clown; can't handle stress; marries a "hero;" often on the verge of hysterics; depends on appearance or external validation of worth.	Charming; good with company; quick wit; good sense of humor; independent; helpful; good people skills.

Adapted from Choicemaking *by Sharon Wegscheider Cruse, (Health Communications, Inc., 1985)*

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