

# Drug Misuse – Risk and Protective Factors

## Introduction

Research over the last two decades has given us a very strong idea of the risk and preventative factors that affect behaviour by young people; including drug misuse. The risk factors described here indicate possible pathways to early and more problematic patterns of drug use.

This isn't to say that all young people facing these risks will become drug takers, or that any use will necessarily be at a problematic level. Nor can the existence of one or more strong protective factors guarantee to guard against, or reduce, drug misuse. However, if risk factors are lowered and protective factors heightened the evidence suggests fewer young people will have drug problems. It is where these factors are severely out of balance that a young person's ongoing well-being may be at great risk.

It is worth noting that:

- risk factors work more powerfully in combination;
- risks cannot by themselves accurately predict which young people will, or might, take drugs; rather, they may indicate the possibility of an early start to any drug use, may herald a worrying pattern of use, and may accompany motives for use that are more related to seeking comfort from distress, than looking for the fun, enjoyment and kicks often sought by a recreational user.

## Identified risk factors

- Chaotic home environment
- Parents who misuse drugs or suffer from mental illness
- Behaviour disorders
- Lack of parental nurturing

- Inappropriate and/or aggressive classroom behaviour
- School failure
- Poor coping skills
- Low commitment to school
- Friendships with deviant peers
- Low socio-economic status
- Early age of first drug use
- Being labelled as a drug misuser

### **Protective factors**

- Strong family bonds
- Experiences of strong parental monitoring with clear family rules
- Family involvement in the lives of the children
- Successful school experiences
- Strong bonds with local community activities
- A caring relationship with at least one adult

The Right Responses<sup>1</sup> points out:

“Risk and protective factors do not all carry equal weight, and because drug use and misuse are often determined by many inter-related factors, it is apparent that no single organisation or institution can tackle drug misuse by itself. Whereas the risk factors present may, by themselves, be poor at accurately predicting future drug use, reducing those that are present may also reduce the level of risk.”

The same document points out schools can help young people develop specific protective factors by:

- helping them develop supportive and safe relationships
- insisting on regular school attendance
- providing pupils with strategies to cope well with academic and social demands at school
- allowing strong and supportive social networks
- encouraging good social skills
- developing self-knowledge and esteem
- building good knowledge of legal and illegal drugs, their effects and

their risks

- building good knowledge of general health and how to ensure their good mental health
- providing access to help and information
- delaying involvement with legal drugs

We know that vulnerable children and young people are less likely to engage with mainstream schooling, however, the same interventions wherever they are carried out will increase the protective factors surrounding those young people.

<sup>1</sup> Drug and Alcohol Education and Prevention Team *The Right Responses: managing and making policy for drug related incidents in schools*, DrugScope (1999)

## The Drug Education Forum

The Drug Education Forum was launched in 1995; based at The Mentor Foundation (UK) it brings together a range of national organisations from health, education, police and voluntary sectors that deliver or support the delivery of drug education.

The Forum promotes the provision of effective drug education for all children and young people. The Drug Education Forum believes that the purpose of drug education is to increase children's and young people's knowledge and understanding of drugs and their usage, and help them develop skills and attitudes, so that they can make informed choices.

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