

Handout: Prioritizing Risk and Protective Factors

Prioritizing risk and protective factors is a crucial part of the Strategic Prevention Framework (SPF) planning process. Different criteria can be used to prioritize risk and protective factors. Communities often use two of these — importance and changeability — to decide which risk or protective factors to address. You will want to select risk or protective factors that are high in both importance and changeability.

IMPORTANCE

Importance refers to how much a risk or protective factor impacts the problem in a community.

When examining assessment data, ask yourself how important a particular risk or protective factor is in reducing a specific problem in a community. If the answer is “very important,” then this risk or protective factor would have high importance. If your answer is “not very important,” then the factor would have low importance.

For example, consider the problem of underage drinking. Assessment data from the community show that many more youth obtain alcohol from stores (referred to as retail access) than from their homes or peers (referred to as social access). In this case, retail access would be considered to have high importance, whereas social access would be considered to have low importance.

When weighing the importance of risk and protective factors, be sure to consider the following information as well:

- **Will the risk or protective factor impact other behavioral health issues?** For example, having a parent with a substance use disorder increases the risk that the child of this parent will engage in underage drinking. It also increases the risk that she or he will experience other behavioral health issues. This risk factor is therefore important because focusing on it can reduce both youth substance use and youth mental health problems.
- **Does the risk or protective factor directly impact the specific developmental stage of the population group that is experiencing the problem?** For example, if the problem is underage drinking, the protective factor of becoming financially independent would have high importance for addressing this problem among young adults, as they are in a developmental stage when financial independence is relevant. It would have low importance for addressing underage drinking among 11- to 14-year-olds, as they are not ready to become financially independent at this stage.

CHANGEABILITY

Changeability can refer to three issues:

- **Capacity.** Whether the community has the capacity — readiness and resources — to change a particular risk or protective factor
- **Fit.** Whether a suitable evidence-based intervention exists to address a particular problem
- **Time.** Whether change can be brought about in a reasonable time frame, recognizing that changing some risk or protective factors may take too long to be a practical solution

For example, a risk or protective factor has a high changeability when:

- The community has ample resources and sufficient readiness to address a particular risk or protective factor
- A suitable evidence-based intervention exists
- Change can occur within a reasonable time frame

The risk or protective factor has a low changeability when:

- The community does not have adequate resources
- Community members are not ready to address the risk or protective factor
- Changing the factor will take too long to be practical