

Understanding risk and protective factors in early childhood



Children grow up surrounded by people and living in environments that shape their development.

Right from conception, factors in a child's immediate environment such as their family and home and the early education and care they receive influence their emotional, social, physical and mental health.

Their neighbourhoods and the communities in which they live also play an important role. Additionally, the cultural and political landscape can have an indirect influence on a young child's development.

Characteristics of these environments, and a child's **give and take** interactions with their surroundings, can increase the risk of them experiencing poor developmental outcomes or, alternatively, help protect them from adversity.

During pregnancy

Poor nutrition can lead to low birth weight, and a mother's anxiety or depression can result in a child with behavioural, emotional, cognitive and mental health problems.

Maternal substance abuse, in particular exposure to tobacco smoke, is linked to lower IQ, poorer memory and attention and delayed motor development and behavioural and mental health problems.

Alcohol in pregnancy is associated with the risk of birth defects and Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS).

Family and home environment

The most important protective factor in the early years of life is a secure attachment between a child and their primary caregiver.

Being able to rely on someone to respond quickly and appropriately to their needs gives

children a sense of emotional and physical security.

However, neglect, abuse and harsh or inconsistent parenting increases their stress.

Research shows that establishing just one stable, supportive and caring relationship with an adult significantly enhances a child's resilience in times of adversity.

Where and how a child lives is important too.

Factors such as frequently having to move house can have a negative effect by disrupting routine and engagement with the local community.

Overcrowding can hamper a child's ability to explore, play and engage. Crowded homes are also linked to family conflict, less parental monitoring and poor parenting.

Good nutrition is crucial to setting children up for a healthy life.

Rapid brain development occurs in the early years making young children particularly sensitive to the quality of their diets.

Breast feeding in infancy is an important protective factor shown to aid verbal ability, IQ and psycho-motor skills, and is associated with fewer mental health problems in childhood.

Early childhood education and care

Access to good quality early childhood education is an important protective factor, linked to improved cognitive, socio-emotional and behavioural development and improved school performance.

High quality early education can help bridge the learning gaps known to exist between children who grow up poor and children who are more well off.

Neighbourhoods and communities

Neighbourhood economic disadvantage is a risk factor for poorer developmental outcomes.

This is not due to the economic hardship itself, but rather the poverty of everyday experiences which accompany it.

A lack of open spaces to play, and a perception that their neighbourhood is unsafe hinder children from engaging in physical exercise and socializing in their community.

Cultural and political landscape

Cultural, political and economic factors can influence a child's development. For example, legislation regarding the provision of childcare, welfare, public education and free health care all have an impact on a developing child.

Conclusion

Looking beyond individual characteristics, the environment in which a child grows up and the people he or she interacts with helps shape who they will become.

Cultivating positive experiences in early childhood at an individual, family and community level enables a child to develop skills and abilities which are crucial for supporting healthy development.

We all have a critical responsibility to ensure young children receive the best start in life through paying careful attention to their environments, interactions and experiences, and helping to reduce risks to their development, while building their capacity to help overcome adversity.

