Looking Towards the Positive: The Role of Protective Factors in Youth Prevention

At the forefront of SCIP are efforts to engage in prevention initiatives that promote positive youth development. Research tells us that the healthy development of youth does not occur in isolation. Specifically, when we consider a student's emotional and behavioral health, we must explore individual traits, the role of family and the influence of school, peers and the community. It is easy to get hung up on risk factors that may adversely affect youth development and wellbeing. While we can't ignore the role of risk factors, a growing number of studies suggest that greater health impact might be achieved by enhancing protective factors that help children and adolescents avoid multiple behaviors that place them at risk for adverse outcomes (CDC: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention). An important goal of prevention is to change the balance between risk and protective factors so that protective factors outweigh risk factors.

Protective factors are seen as characteristics or conditions that buffer or reduce the negative effect of adversity on child outcomes. Research supports the idea that the more protective factors a youth has, the greater likelihood they will avoid at risk behaviors such as substance use, delinquency and violence. Thus, research-based prevention programs focus on intervening early in a child's development to strengthen protective factors before problem behaviors develop).

Protective factors are typically organized into 5 categories:

- *Individual* (biological and psychological dispositions, attitudes, values, knowledge, skills)
- *Family* (family function, management, parenting practices, parental engagement, bonding, etc.)
- *Peer* (norms, activities, ability to make friends, healthy relationships, etc.)
- *School* (school climate and culture, policy, school connections, partnering between school/family, academic performance, etc.)
- *Community* (resources, awareness, connections, community mentoring programs, positive social norms, etc.)

Protective factors not only exist in multiple domains, but they have the potential to produce positive effects in multiple areas. For example, positive parenting practices has been found to mediate the effects of poverty, divorce, parental bereavement and parental mental illness. Likewise, young people who feel connected to their school (school connectedness) are less likely to have emotional distress, consider suicide, engage in substance use, violence and gang involvement and are more likely to have higher grades and better school attendance (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration: SAMHSA).

Promoting protective factors not only serve in the prevention of adverse behaviors and outcomes, but examining protective factors that reduce risk factors can also be useful in identifying interventions that are more likely to work when problem behaviors are seen. Both prevention and early intervention are powerful tools in enhancing the overall health and wellbeing of our youth.

Below are some tips from the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) on how to incorporate the use of protective factors specifically into drug and alcohol prevention initiatives:

- *Parents:* use protective factor information to help develop positive preventative actions before problems occur. Parental involvement and parental monitoring are two important protective factors. Talking about family rules, setting family policies and having clear expectations for behavior and values can help guide parents.
- *Schools/Educators:* strengthen relationships with both parents and students to increase school connectedness and parental engagement in school. Schools can also be an important connecting point for mentoring programs and the involvement in positive extracurricular activities (two important youth protective factors).
- *Community Level:* provide opportunities for youth prosocial involvement in the community (giving back to the community, volunteering, etc.), recognizing and rewarding youth for prosocial community involvement, enhancing neighborhood safety and investing in building strong, socially cohesive neighborhoods. Communities that show youth they are invested in their wellbeing can help contribute to protective factors.

References: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC); Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA); Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.