

# What are the Best Ways to Prevent or Reduce Substance Abuse Problems?

**First, we need to know a little about risk and protective factors.**

Risk and protective factors help to explain why a problem exists or is likely to occur. These factors suggest why certain individuals, groups or communities are more or less likely to have substance abuse issues.

**Risk factors** are negative influences in the lives of individuals or communities. The more risk factors a community has the more likely the community will have substance abuse problems.

**Protective factors** are positive influences that can improve the lives of individuals or the safety of a community. They can also reduce a risk factor's impact. Another term used for protective factors is "assets." "Asset-based" approaches put the emphasis on the positive (protective), not the negative (risk), factors that contribute to outcomes. As with risk factors, research suggests that the greater the number of assets, the more likely are positive outcomes.

**What are the COMMUNITY LEVEL risk and protective factors?**

Our work together will focus on strategies we can use to change factors in the environment that will affect people at a community level. **Environmental factors** refer to the conditions in which each individual lives - their household, their neighborhood or town, and the larger community. These may include aspects of the social environment, including the norms and behaviors of their families, friends, and others in their community. It also involves aspects of the physical environment, including access to resources, exposure to hazards, etc. Here are a few examples of **community level risk and protective factors**:

| Risk Factors - We should be concerned about these!   | Protective Factors - We want to enhance these!   |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Alcohol and other drugs are readily available</li> <li>• Laws and ordinances are unclear or inconsistently enforced</li> <li>• Norms are unclear or encourage use</li> <li>• Residents feel little sense of "connection" to community</li> <li>• Neighborhood disorganization</li> <li>• Rapid changes in neighborhood populations</li> <li>• High unemployment</li> <li>• Residents at or below the poverty level</li> <li>• Extreme economic deprivation</li> <li>• Lack of strong social institutions</li> <li>• Lack of monitoring youths' activities</li> <li>• Misleading media or advertising</li> <li>• Pro-use messages</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Opportunities exist for community involvement</li> <li>• Community religious composition</li> <li>• Laws and ordinances are consistently enforced</li> <li>• Informal social control</li> <li>• Policies and norms encourage non-use</li> <li>• Community service opportunities available for youth</li> <li>• Resources (housing, healthcare, childcare, jobs, recreation, etc.) are available</li> <li>• Comprehensive risk focused programs available (ex. early childhood &amp; family support)</li> <li>• Widely supported community prevention efforts exist</li> </ul> |

Note: Not all risk and protective factors are created equal! Some have more influence than others. More on this on the next page.

# What are the Best Ways to Prevent or Reduce Substance Abuse Problems?

The Community Anti-Drug Coalition of America's National Coalition Institute has helped define **Seven Effective Strategies for Community Change**

- 1. Providing Information** – Educational presentations, workshops or seminars or other presentations of data (e.g., public announcements, brochures, dissemination, billboards, community meetings, forums, web-based communication).
- 2. Enhancing Skills** – Workshops, seminars or other activities designed to increase the skills of participants, members and staff needed to achieve population level outcomes (e.g., training, technical assistance, distance learning, strategic planning retreats, curricula development).
- 3. Providing Support** – Creating opportunities to support people to participate in activities that reduce risk or enhance protection (e.g., providing alternative activities, mentoring, referrals, support groups or clubs).
- 4. Enhancing Access/Reducing Barriers** – Improving systems and processes to increase the ease, ability and opportunity to utilize those systems and services (e.g., assuring healthcare, childcare, transportation, housing, justice, education, safety, special needs, cultural and language sensitivity).
- 5. Changing Consequences (Incentives/Disincentives)** – Increasing or decreasing the probability of a specific behavior that reduces risk or enhances protection by altering the consequences for performing that behavior (e.g., increasing public recognition for deserved behavior, individual and business rewards, taxes, citations, fines, revocations/loss of privileges).
- 6. Physical Design** – Changing the physical design or structure of the environment to reduce risk or enhance protection (e.g., parks, landscapes, signage, lighting, outlet density).
- 7. Modifying/Changing Policies** – Formal change in written procedures, by-laws, proclamations, rules or laws with written documentation and/or voting procedures (e.g., workplace initiatives, law enforcement procedures and practices, public policy actions, systems change within government, communities and organizations).

Evidence demonstrates that the communities that have achieved the best outcomes have used interventions that have hit all 7 categories above.

However, while prevention strategies focusing on raising public awareness and helping individuals make healthy choices is important, the most lasting behavioral change happens when interventions are focused on #'s 5, 6, and 7 to impact community systems, policies and local conditions.