

# Introduction to Strengths-Based Alternatives for Mitigating Risk Factors in Youth and Family Services

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The risk factors listed in the left-hand column below have been correlated with problematic and abusive behaviors (sexual and/or non-sexual) (Bonta & Andrews, 2017), which is why targeting these factors is an essential component in sex-offense-specific services. However, if services focus too much attention on risk factors (“what not to do” and “what is wrong with youth and families”) and focus too little attention on strengths and protective factors (“what to do” and “what is right with youth and families”), treatment engagement and effectiveness suffer.

When assessing and treating these risk factors in youth services (typically ages 12-18), it is important to be cognizant that the majority of risk research has been conducted on adults. In addition, youth who struggle with these risk factors are often exhibiting behaviors that are developmentally expected (e.g., identity formation, self-focused, impulsive, and vulnerable to risk taking). As youth developmentally/neurologically/emotionally mature into adulthood, there is significant enhancement in their capacity to manage these risk factors and respond in prosocial, emotionally regulated ways. Nonetheless, the following risk factors are often important areas of intervention in youth services.

The strengths-based factors listed in the right-hand column help keep youth and their families positively engaged while mitigating risk factors and promoting healthy, prosocial ways for getting needs met, which are all essential components for effective services (Powell, 2017; 2018).

Risk Factors	Strengths-Based Factors for Youth
<p><b>Problematic Associates and Peers</b> Associations with people involved in a problematic lifestyle and isolation from people leading prosocial lives.</p>	<p><b>Increase Prosocial Associates and Peers</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Assist youth in identifying and engaging with prosocial people, while also reducing their involvement with individuals exhibiting problematic acts.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Problematic Attitudes, Beliefs, and Values</b> Values, beliefs, and rationalizations that favor problematic actions.</p>	<p><b>Promote Prosocial Attitudes, Beliefs, and Values</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Assist youth in acquiring prosocial values and beliefs that lead to positive life outcomes free of legal consequences. These values/beliefs are often linked to cultural identity, religious identity, spirituality, and other prosocial belief systems.</li> <li>Increase youths’ insight into the negative outcomes of their problematic acts.</li> <li>Increase youths’ insight into the importance of having compassion and concern for others.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Problematic Personality Pattern</b> A behavioral pattern that is impulsive, aggressive, and/or disregards others.</p>	<p><b>Promote a Prosocial Personality Pattern</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Assist youth in developing prosocial personality attributes associated with healthy relationships and sexuality including emotional regulation, kindness, compassion, listening, open communication about hurt and sadness, assertiveness, and mutually respectful interpersonal interactions.</li> </ul>

<p><b>Problematic History</b> A history of meeting needs through problematic activity and other problematic behaviors.</p>	<p><b>Increase Insight into Problematic History and Opportunities to Meet Needs in Prosocial Ways</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assist youth in reflecting on their past problematic or illegal behaviors and the negative consequences, as well as reflecting on the benefits of leading a prosocial lifestyle.</li> <li>• Assist youth in building the capacity for a prosocial lifestyle that meets their needs without being destructive to themselves or others.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Problematic Family Relationships and Behaviors</b> Conflictual parent-child, spousal, and other interpersonal relationships; and problematic family behaviors including poor supervision, criminal activity, abuse, neglect, and/or other family instability.</p>	<p><b>Promote Positive Family Relationships and Parenting</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide a safe, stable, nurturing home life with good supervision and structure, and opportunities for prosocial activities.</li> <li>• Assist in developing mutually respectful, positive interactions in parent-child relationships, spousal relationships, and other relationships.</li> <li>• Assist youth in being streetwise about chronically problematic relationships and finding supportive relationships elsewhere.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Poor School/ Work Performance and Satisfaction</b> Low performance, low satisfaction, and impaired social interactions in school/work.</p>	<p><b>Promote Good School / Work Performance and Satisfaction</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assist youth in enhancing their performance and satisfaction in school and/or work through exploration of their interests, attributes, and life goals (approach goals); enhancing their social skills and connections; and tutoring and training on school subjects and job skills.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Substance Abuse Problems</b> Alcohol and/or drug use associated with problematic behaviors, relationships, and/or outcomes.</p>	<p><b>Promote a Substance Abuse-Free Lifestyle</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assist youth in acquiring strategies for abstaining from substance use that has contributed to problematic outcomes. Advocate for substance-abuse-free activities and protective factors.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Lack of Leisure and Recreational Activities</b> Low levels of involvement and/or satisfaction in prosocial leisure activities.</p>	<p><b>Promote Prosocial Leisure and Recreational Activities</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assist youth in developing and maintaining an interest and regular routine in prosocial leisure and recreational activities.</li> </ul>

References

Bonta, J., & Andrews, D. (2017). *The psychology of criminal conduct*. New York: Routledge.

Powell, K. M. (2018). The importance of a strengths-based approach in sex offense-specific services. *The Forum Newsletter-ATSA, Summer Vol. XXX, No. 3*

Powell, K. M. (2017). Engaging adolescents and families. In S. Righthand & W. Murphy (Eds.), *The safer society handbook of assessment and treatment of adolescents who have sexually offended* (pp. 215-250). Brandon, VT: Safer Society Press.

*The Juvenile Practice Committee and other ATSA working groups have created and continue to develop fact sheets and informational materials intended to help inform and guide best practices in working with children and adolescents who have engaged in abusive or problematic sexual behavior.*

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