

Risk Factors in young people for substance initiation, use, and drug-related death

Risk factors can increase the likelihood of negative outcomes. Protective factors can increase the likelihood of positive outcomes, or decrease the likelihood of negative outcomes. The relationship between risk and protective factors is not causal or predetermined, rather the possibility is more or less apparent dependent on the number and impact of risk and protective factors.

Risk and protective factors are present at different levels; they may be individual characteristics, influence of family, friends and other peers, community or wider environmental conditions. There are risk factors for substance use; elements in life that might make it more likely to use alcohol and drugs, or do so at an earlier age, or in a more harmful way. There are also protective factors; elements that will make it less likely people will use alcohol or drugs, delay onset of use, or use in a lower-risk way.

Planet Youth, the Icelandic Prevention Model, has achieved success in reducing substance use among young people in Iceland, by focusing on increasing protective factors, and reducing risk factors associated with substance use. Focusing on decreasing risk factors for substance use also has benefits for many other areas of a young person's life.

In 2021, NHS Highland, Highland Alcohol & Drugs Partnership (HADP) and University of the West of Scotland published a [Review of Drug Related Deaths \(2012-2019\) in Younger People in Highland](#).

Table 1 highlights:

- risk and protective factors, grouped by main areas of young people's lives, identified by Planet Youth,
- and risk factors identified by the Review report. The Risk factors for drug-related deaths are placed in the most appropriate aligning sections.

As shown, many of the risk factors for the drug-related deaths are also highlighted as risk factors in Planet Youth. Many of the young people in the review had multiple complex and related risks. Planet Youth has the ability, through the anonymised survey, to highlight risk factors for young people. Planet Youth is a primary prevention approach, which will achieve positive impact in all areas of young people's lives. Despite not being a targeted programme, there could be opportunities to further support the young people who are already experiencing risks, and better prevent harms for the young people most at risk.

Table 1:

PY Protective Factors	PY Risk Factors	YP DRD Risk Factors	GIRFEC Wellbeing Indicators: SHANARRI
Family: Quality family time	Lack of time spent as a family	Experience of care. Child taken into care	Safe. Nurtured. Included.
Parental support / caring and warmth	Challenges at home (parental separation, household mental illness, household alcohol use, household drug use, someone they live with serving time in prison or a young offenders institution) Abuse at home (verbal, emotional, physical, domestic)	Adverse Childhood Experiences; parental separation, parental substance use, parental mental illness, childhood abuse (verbal / physical / neglect / other) were specifically highlighted Poor mental health Serious ill health for themselves or close family Bereavement	Safe. Healthy. Nurtured. Included.
Parental monitoring / parents knowing where their children are, and who they're with	Parents not knowing their children's whereabouts or friends / peers		Safe.
Feeling safe at home	Feeling unsafe at home	Recent homelessness or housing problems Breakdown of a significant relationship 4+ addresses in a 5 year period	Safe.

Adult modelling of sensible behaviour	Modelling problematic substance use	Use to cope / numb difficult feelings / feel accepted	Safe. Healthy. Achieving. Nurtured.
Parents having clear rules / boundaries	Allowing alcohol use in the home		Safe. Healthy. Nurtured.
Parents disapproving of substance use	Parents supporting substance use	Early onset of drug / alcohol use Relapse of drug use	Safe. Healthy. Nurtured.
Peers: Friends that don't use substances	Overestimating substance use by peers		Achieving.
Friends that aren't involved in risky behaviour	Exposure to other risky behaviours	Unsafe sexual behaviour. Acquisitive crime. Contact with Justice Service	Safe. Healthy. Achieving. Nurtured.
Having pro-social attitudes / consideration for others	Anti-social behaviour	Being violent towards other people. Physically assaulted	Safe. Healthy. Achieving. Nurtured. Responsible. Included.
Increased positive interactions with peers	Feeling of having to do something to fit in		Safe. Healthy. Achieving. Nurtured. Responsible. Included.
School: Positive supportive relationships at school (with adults, and peers)	Being bullied or left out	'Behavioural issues' at school	Safe. Achieving. Nurtured. Respected. Included.
Motivation to learn, positive attitude towards school and studies	Finding schoolwork pointless	Learning difficulties in school	Safe. Healthy. Achieving. Nurtured. Responsible. Included.

Safety and attachment to school	Unexplained absenteeism / wanting to change schools	Poor school attendance. Exclusion from school	Safe. Healthy. Achieving. Nurtured. Responsible. Included.
Leisure: Meaningful use of time	Lack of meaningful use of time	Loss of a job. Financial Problems	Safe. Active. Responsible. Included.
Quality, range and accessibility of leisure activities	Late outside hours		Safe. Active. Responsible. Included.
Time spent engaging with positive structured, organised activities, like hobbies, recreation and sport	Unorganised leisure or hang out time	Struggle to initiate or keep contact with mental health and drug and alcohol services	Safe. Active. Responsible. Included.
Encouraging safer risk-taking behaviours through sport, competition, e-gaming etc	Not having a safe outlet to build their self- esteem and self-awareness		Safe. Active. Responsible. Included.
Supportive communities	Lack of community cohesion		Safe. Nurtured. Active. Responsible. Included.