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What we know and need to know about factors that protect youth from problems:
A review of previous reviews

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is twofold: 1) To review previous research reviews concerning which factors that have been identified as protecting youth from externalizing and internalizing problem behavior, and 2) To suggest key areas of focus for future research. From the 30 identified reviews, it is clear that there is a quite extensive list of factors that can be considered protective for youth. However, from this review of reviews, it is also clear that many important questions remain unanswered. We list a number of areas within the field that deserve further attention in future research.

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1. Background and purpose

Pronounced externalizing (e.g., aggression and delinquency) and internalizing problem behaviors (e.g., anxiety and depression) (Durlak, 1998) that develop early in life are associated with a relatively high risk for long-lasting psychosocial problems (e.g., Crews et al., 2007). Therefore, it is essential to better understand what protects youth from these problems.

Some youth develop well despite the presence of risk, a phenomenon known as resilience (e.g., Kaplan, 2005; Masten, 2001). The central role for research in this area is to identify the protective factors that explain why some youth cope effectively with risk. Such knowledge is essential for developing more effective practice aiming toward helping youth at risk. There are two purposes with this paper. First, we want to review previous reviews concerning which factors that have been identified in research as protecting youth from externalizing and internalizing problem behaviors. Given the bulk of original/primary studies on the topic, previous reviews of protective factors rather than original studies are reviewed in this article. Second, based on the literature review, we will draw conclusions concerning key areas of focus for future research.

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2. Method (Search process)

A comprehensive search for relevant reviews was conducted. Reviews were sought in all relevant databases (see Table 1). Two categories of search terms were required in keywords, title or abstract: *resilien* OR protect**, and *review OR meta** to identify eligible reviews and meta-analyses. All 8,105 resulting titles and abstracts were screened through to find articles or chapters that 1) were reviews or meta-analyses about protective factors and/or resilience, 2) focused on factors that protect youth from externalizing and internalizing problem behavior. This process resulted in 48 relevant reviews. Asking researchers in the current research field to recommend relevant reviews resulted in another 9 papers. The reference lists in these reviews were read to identify additional relevant materials that fulfilled our criteria. This resulted in 5 more reviews to be read in full text. Thus, a total of 62 reviews were obtained and read in full text to enable a decision whether the review was relevant and eligible for inclusion in the present review or not. If in doubt, an independent person (last author of the present article) read the review and conferred with the original reader (first author of the present article) to reach a decision. As a result of this process, 30 reviews were finally included in the present review (see Table 1). All included articles are narrative reviews. No meta-analyses were found.

Table 1: Where reviews were searched for and how many that finally were included in the present review.

Database/source	Abstracts found	Full text read	Reviews included
Applied Social Sciences Index and Abstracts (ASSIA)	604	5	**1**
Campbell Collaboration Register of Interventions and Policy Evaluation (C2-RIPE)	1	0	**0**
Criminal Justice Abstracts	380	1	**0**
ERIC	231	4	**0**
NCJRS Abstract Database	26	2	**0**
PubMed	614	5	**3**
PsycINFO	3,601	22	**12**
Social Services Abstracts	424	3	**0**
SocINDEX	1,830	5	**3**
Sociological Abstracts	394	1	**0**
The Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews	0	0	**0**
Recommendations from researchers		9	**6**
From reference lists		5	**5**
Total	8,105	62	**30**

Note. The 30 included reviews are numbered from 1-30 in the reference list.

3. What we know and need to know – What the reviews show and what future research needs to focus on

Protective factors for externalizing and internalizing problem behavior in youth according to the 30 included reviews are listed along with a short definition/description in Table 2. We chose to categorize the protective factors into three categories; *individual* (e.g., temperament and intelligence), *family* (e.g., close relationships with caregiver and high socioeconomic status), and *environment outside the family* (e.g., neighborhood quality and pro-social peers).

<u>Table 2: Protective factors for externalizing and internalizing problem behavior in youth.</u>

Individual	Family	Environment outside the family
Female gender[1, 2, 17, 29] "Being female may be protective..." (Bassarth, 2001, p. 613). **Easy temperament**[2, 5, 6, 9, 10, 11, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 25, 26, 27, 28, 30] "Low reactivity and high sociability that elicits positive responses from adult" (Kitano, Lewis & Roeper, 2005, p. 3). **Positive social orientation**[1, 19, 27] "…the absence of antisocial attitudes and cognitive biases, such as interpreting social cues" (Bassarth, 2001, p.13). **Effective emotional/self regulation**[9, 11, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 30] "…control over own attention, emotions, and behavior" (Karapetian et al., 2005, p.240). **High or average intelligence and cognitive ability**[1, 2, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 30] "Average or above average intellectual development" (Kitano, Lewis, & Roeper, 2005, p. 3). **Effective problem solving**[6, 9, 11, 21, 22, 23, 24, 26, 28] "…often measured by traditional IQ-test predicts good adaption under adversity" (Masten & O'Dougherty Wright, 2010, p. 26) **Good coping skills**[1, 9, 10, 19, 27, 30] "Ability to endure stress, hardship, or trauma without mental decompensation" (Bassarth, 2001, p. 613). **Internal locus of control**[2, 5, 7, 11, 16, 27, 30] "High faith in one's own control over the environment" (Luthar & Zigler, 1991, p.15). **Positive outlook of life**[6, 9, 18, 19, 20, 21, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28] "Hopefulness, belief that life has a meaning, faith." (Masten & Powell, 2003, p. 13). **Motivation**[18, 19, 24] "…a process that influences the direction, vigor and persistence of behavior" (Passer & Smith, 2004, p. 441). **Sense of humour**[11, 15, 23, 24, 27] "Finding humour even in difficult circumstances." (Luthar, 2006, p. 779). **Self efficacy**[4, 9, 11, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27,] "…taking initiative in one's own life and believing in one's own effectiveness" (Karapetian, et al., 2005, p. 239). **High self esteem**[7, 9, 11, 20, 26, 27] "Positive feelings concerning oneself" (Passer & Smith, 2004, p. 441). **Positive school attitude**[5, 7, 9, 11, 16, 18, 19, 20, 25, 27] "Positive school experience, either academic or non academic" (Luthar & Zigler, 1991, p. 16).	**Adequate nurturance and shelter**[7, 28, 30] "Focused nurturing during the first year of life and little prolonged separation from primary caretaker" (Rak & Patterson, 1996, p. 369). **Secure attachment**[5, 9, 11, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 28, 30] "A pattern of attachment in which an infant readily separate from parent, seek proximity when stressed, and uses the parent as a safe base for exploration" (Bee & Boyd, 2002, p. 128). **At least one good relation with a parent or other adult**[4, 7, 9, 11, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28] "Children with at least one warm, loving parent or surrogate caregiver (grandparent, foster parent) who provides firm limits and boundaries" (Karapetian et al., 2005, p. 240). **Good parent-child relationship**[2, 4, 5, 18, 19, 20, 21, 24, 26, 30] Presence of parents that can provide both material recourses such as nutrition and more abstracts resources such as love, nurturance and sense of safety and security (Masten, 2001). **Authoritative parenting**[9, 11, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 25, 26, 30] "A style of parenting that is high in nurturance, maturity demands, control, and communication" (Bee & Boyd, 1999, p. 186). **Supportive parents**[11, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 27] The parent is involved in the child's education and school (Masten, 2007). **Parental monitoring**[11, 30] "… knowledge that parents have about their children's activities outside the home…" (Kerr & Stattin, 2000, p.1081). **Routines in the family**[11, 19, 21, 25, 28] "Family has a 'quiet time' each evening when everyone talks or plays quietly, and working parents come home from work at the same time every day." (Luthar, 2006, p. 761). **Positive family climate**[21, 26, 27] "Positive family climate with low discord between parents" (Masten, Culti, & Herbers, 2009, p. 19). **High Socio-Economic Status (SES)**[5, 18, 20, 21, 26, 27] The parents have high education and socioeconomic advantages (O' Dougherty Wright & Masten, 2005). **Pro-social siblings**[5, 11, 24, 26, 28] "To have siblings who can step in when the primary caretakers not consistently are present" (Rak & Petterson, 1996, p. 369).	**Network of pro-social adults**[1, 4, 5, 7, 9, 11, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28] "…role models outside family as potential buffers for vulnerable children…. teachers, school counselors, and supervisors of after school programs, coaches, mental health workers, workers in the community centers… " (Rak & Patterson, 1996, p. 369). **Pro-social peers**[2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 9, 11, 17, 16, 19, 21, 22, 24, 25, 27] Friendships that provide support systems which can foster emotional, social, and educational adjustment (Karapetian et al., 2005). **Well organized neighborhood**[1, 9, 11, 18, 19, 21, 25, 26, 28, 30] "Environment and social structure that promotes resilience" (Karapetian et al., 2005, p. 241). **Use of rituals and norms**[19, 22] Cultural rituals, routines, norms, traditions, values, standards, and laws. (Masten, 2007; Masten & Obradovic, 2006). **Belief in a religion or a spiritual system**[2, 7, 9, 11, 17, 18, 19, 20, 22, 24, 26] "…attachment to spiritual figures, prayer or mediation" (Masten, 2007, p. 926). **Early intervention**[9, 11] Early intervention programs for children who do not get support from primary caregivers (Luthar, 2006). **Economic family support**[1, 5, 9,] "Economic opportunities for families" (Karapetian, et al., 2005, p. 241). **Adequate health service**[9, 21, 24, 25, 26] "Good public health care" (O' Dougherty Wright, & Masten, 2005, p. 24). **Positive school environment**[4, 11, 19, 21, 22, 24, 25, 26, 30] "Opportunities for mastery and relationships with pro-social adults and peers" (Masten, 2007, p. 926). **After school activities**[1, 9, 11, 19, 20, 21, 25, 26, 28, 30] "…involvement in extracurricular activities such as art, dance, music, drama, special interest clubs, and sporting activities" (Karapetian, et al., 2005, p. 241).

Note. The superscript numbers after each protective factor refer to in which reviews the protective factor has been identified. All reviews are correspondingly numbered in the reference list. Important to note is that there to a quite large extent is an overlap between reviews with regard to primary studies included (i.e., reviews use largely the same primary studies). Some of the reviews with great overlap in primary studies were included in this review because they include different protective factors and present different information (e.g., which protective factors that are important in different ages, or protective factors in different cultures). Several of the 30 included reviews provide lists of protective factors, but do not refer to original studies that empirically support the impact of each factor. If information about the original study is lacking in the review's description of a protective factor, the protective factor has been excluded from the present review.

As seen in Table 2, reviews show that research has identified quite many and a variety of protective factors in the three categories. The order of the factors in Table 2 does not indicate any kind of rank order in terms of power/strength or importance. Such a ranking of factors was not possible to conduct based on the reviews included. Some protective factors (e.g., Easy temperament, Secure Attachment, and Pro-social peers) are put forth in many reviews. However, this does not necessarily indicate that these factors are stronger or more important than other factors. Thus, it is not clear from this review of previous reviews whether some protective factors are more important than others. Nevertheless, this kind of information would be essential for practice, in that interventions could be tailored to target the most potent protective factors. Hence, differences in level of protection of different factors are an important area for future research.

Reviews show that for the individual youth, having or being exposed to several protective factors is generally better than having or being exposed to a few. Youth with a bulk of protective factors generally seem to be doing better and have fewer behavioral problems, compared to youth with fewer protective factors (Howard, Dryden, & Johnson, 1999; Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000). Still, evident from the 30 reviews is that we, to a large extent, lack knowledge about especially favorable combinations of protective factors, and how protective factors may interact. In a related vein, it seems as if some protective factors can evoke other protective factors. For example, if a youth has a positive relationship with a teacher, this may contribute to a positive school attitude and the establishment of relationships with pro-social peers. This is sometimes referred to as the "cascade effect" (Luthar, Sawyer, & Brown, 2006). To look closer into under what circumstances, for whom, and through which protective factors such a positive cascade effect can be initialized, constitute an essential topic for future research.

Boys and girls seem to in some extent differ in their resistance to risk. Girls generally seem to be more protected against risks, as compared to boys. For example, boys tend to exhibit more behavioral and emotional problems when they are exposed to problems in the family (Condly, 2006; Luthar, 2006). There are also studies indicating that some protective factors can differ in how important they are for boys and girls. For example, to have a positive relationship with an extended family may be more essential for girls than for boys. However, a positive family climate may be more important as a protective factor for boys than for girls (Vanderbilt-Adriance & Shaw, 2008). More research on gender and protective factors, that more extensively study whether there are for example gender-unique protective factors, is needed.

Protective factors may act differently for youth of different ages and developmental stages. Reviews suggest that protective factors differ in salience in various developmental periods (Masten & Coatworth, 1998). Infants are dependent of their caregivers and in need of nurturance and warmth to survive. With increasing age, other protective factors become more important, for example relationships with other adults, peers, and achievement in school (Durlak, 1998; Vanderbilt-Adriance & Shaw, 2008). Conversely, some protective factors, such as attachment to primary caregiver, seem to become less essential with increasing age. For example, separation from parents seem to be a greater risk for children between six months and four years of age, than for children that are older (Rutter, 1985). Furthermore, school-related factors such as positive school environment, positive school attitude, and after school activities, become relevant for school-aged children.

Different contexts or cultures may influence which protective factors that are the most influential. A protective factor in one context may not be as protective in another (Howard et al., 1999). For example, tt has been shown that belief in a religion is a more potent protective factor in some contexts than in others (Karapetian et al., 2005). Cultural factors can also be influential. Youth from different cultures respond differently to adversity or risk, and there are different ways of defining positive or adaptive development in different cultures. In some contexts or cultures, behaviors such as aggressiveness, selfishness, and passivity may be a requisite for survival and harm avoidance (Howard et al., 1999). For example, Masai infants with a high survival rate during a drought in Africa had a temperament that in most western cultures would be considered difficult (i.e., high reactivity and low sociability) whereas infants with low survival rates had a temperament that would be described as easy in western cultures (i.e., lower reactivity and higher sociability) (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998). Thus, a protective factor in one context or culture may not be a protective factor in another. Since societies are growing and becoming increasingly multicultural, the need to learn more about protective factors in different contexts and cultures increases (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000).

According to the included reviews, protective factors can be either general or more risk specific. One example of a general protective factor is having a positive relationship with – or being securely attached to – at least one parent (Masten, 2001; Vanderbilt-Adriance & Shaw, 2008). These kinds of general protective factors seem to buffer against several risk factors even within the family, such as psychological problems of a parent, parental depression,

and domestic violence (Luthar, 2006). However, it is not likely that all protective factors work in this manner and future research need to study which protective factors that work against which risks.

A complexity in this area is that factors that protect youth from one type of negative outcome may not protect them from all adversities. For example, easy temperament and supportive parents that provide the child with stimulating activities in the home seem to protect children in low SES families from cognitive problems, but not from externalizing behavior problems (Vanderbilt-Adriance & Shaw, 2008). Furthermore, there are indications that factors such as school attitudes may not be the most potent protective factors against the development of externalizing problem behavior. Instead, protective factors such as positive social orientation could be more central. Similarly, it could be important to focus on effective emotional/self regulation to avoid the development of internalizing problem behavior (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000). There is a need of more research and specific knowledge concerning these issues.

To complicate the picture further, some factors have been identified both as protective and as a risk. For example, high intelligence seems to protect youth at high risk of delinquency (Condly, 2006). However, other studies indicate that highly intelligent youth have more internalizing problem behavior compared to youth with lower intelligence, given that they are exposed to the same levels of risk (Condly, 2006; Vanderbilt-Adriance, 2008). More research is needed that investigates under which conditions factors can be both protective and a risk. This is essential knowledge when tailoring and implementing interventions, since one need to avoid building in circumstances under which protective factors can work as risks.

Research on protective factors can be, and has previously been, criticized for merely producing a list of protective factors rather than also trying to explain *why* the identified factors are protective (Luthar & Brown, 2007; Luthar, Sawyer, & Brown, 2006). Researchers should not be satisfied with answering the question "*What* protects youth"? In addition, the focus should be on answering questions such as "*How* and *why* do these protective factors protect youth"? Here, we believe that theory development is needed and qualitative studies can play an essential role in explaining the mechanisms and processes behind the various protective factors.

Also evident from the 30 included reviews is that most research on protective factors is cross-sectional and retrospective, which calls for designing and conducting prospective, longitudinal research (Luthar & Zigler, 1991; Vanderbilt-Adriance & Shaw, 2008). The only way to truly study the development of individuals, including understanding protective factors, is to conduct prospective longitudinal research.

4. Strengths and limitations with the previous and the present review

We have been dependent of what the authors of the 30 included reviews have decided to present. The authors' presentations of information in the reviews have varied in choices made of what to present and levels of detail. Some of the reviews have not provided sufficient information about the ages of youth, which risks that the youths have been exposed to in the original studies, and which specific outcomes that have been studied. One can assume that different original studies have focused on the importance of protective factors in the presence of different risks. However, the reviews have generally not been specific in presenting this kind of information. Thus, to a great extent it is not clear which risks or adversities that have been studied. It is also unclear which definition of positive development that has been utilized, that is, what has been achieved for the youth when the protective factor has been shown to be protective.

5. Conclusions

From the 30 included reviews, one can conclude that there is quite an extensive list of factors that can be protective for youth. However, it is also clear that many important questions remain unanswered. These are: *Are there differences in level of protection of different factors?*; *Are there especially favorable combinations of protective factors?*; *Are there gender-unique protective factors?*; *Which are the age-salient protective factors and how do they work at different ages?*; *Are there differences between contexts and cultures in which protective factors are salient?*; *Which protective factors work against which risks?*; *Under which conditions can factors work as both protective as well as risk factors?* and; *Which mechanisms and processes can explain why certain factors are protective factors?*

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