Submission for Encyclopedia of Child Behavior and Development

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At Risk

Synonyms

In danger; in jeopardy, threatened, susceptible; exposed

Definition

The term at risk is used by educators, social service personnel, and others when referring to students who have a high probability of experiencing failure in school.

Description

Has been used to address potential failure, by definition may include students who perform poorly in school subjects. In general terms, there is a suggested notion that the child or adolescent is at risk of failing and will eventually drop out of school. It is also used to point out a set of factors in a family environment and in the individual’s attitudes and activities that are associated with (school or other risk environment) failure.

Risk Factors

Research shows that students’ economic status is associated with the likelihood of success in school. Whether measured directly by parents’ income or by characteristics such as parents’ occupations or the number of wage earners, students from low-income families are less likely to obtain high grades and test scores, less likely to graduate with their entering class, and more likely to experience behavior problems than are students from higher-income families.

Behavioral risk factors are behaviors and attitudes closely related to learning. Some examples of behavioral risk are poor attendance, lack of attentiveness in class, failure to complete coursework, poor relationships with teachers, feelings of alienation at school, and developing the outlook that schooling is not important to future successes.

Academic risk factors are deficient outcomes during a school career that can interfere with the chances of success in later grades of schooling. These might include accruing a history of poor grades, low test scores, standardized test scores, and/or failure of one or more grade levels.

Multiple or cumulative risk factors can greatly increase the likelihood for a child to drop out of school.

Effective Strategies for At Risk Students

Students who are at risk of school failure tend to see their teachers as having low interest in them as people. It is imperative that a student with other attendant risk factors for failure has at least one teacher or counselor who they feel cares about them as a person.
Although some critics of the at risk label cite isolation as a problem, a successful program has been shown to utilize low student-teacher ratios and separation of the at risk students from the rest of the student body. Programs that focus on basic academic and survival skills, such as attending to tasks, following directions, raising one’s hand to speak, and writing legibly are also known to be successful. At risk students need to be maximally engaged in an educational program that is carefully structured to meet their individual needs, and they must be taught by people who firmly believe that these children can and will succeed.

References

